

4. System/Environment Boundaries

Organisations are, similar to all social systems, operationally closed. This means that all operations – in particular decisions and communication – exist to reproduce that particular system and no other. Operations cannot leave or enter a system, but organisations can manage interaction with other systems in the environment; they are open, on an interactional level. Such interactions are regulated and controlled by the organisation, mostly through hierarchy (Luhmann 1997: 834). Only specific elements participate in environmental interactions and they also influence the system internally (Luhmann 1995a: 197-98). In Advice Company, such interactions are performed by certain functions that are specifically assigned to have contact with other systems in the environment.

Emil Røyrvik concluded, from his study on corporate managers, that such externally communicative functions are primarily concerned with regulating a company's "boundary conditions" (2013: 156). Self-evidently, not all members of an organisation are involved in such "organisational borderwork" (Faßauer and Geithner 2016: 94), but I will demonstrate in this chapter that, in Advice Company, several functions – situated at different levels of the organisational hierarchy – are concerned with such tasks. The most apparent of these are the client consultants, who manage the interaction with the client systems. However, HR employees also interact with the educational systems and manage the entry of new organisational members.

This chapter analyses my observations and interviews relating to performed and perceived boundaries between the organisation and its environment. Section 4.1 illustrates the way in which Advice Company stresses its structural limits, not only in physical, functional and territorial terms, but also in temporal and linguistic terms, as exhibited by the working practices of its employees. I commence with observations relating to physical access to the organisation and focus on the diverse processes through which differen-

tiation is produced at the reception of Advice Company's main office. Section 4.2 analyses the organisational environment, focusing on the systems that play a relevant role for Advice Company. Based on the ethnographic material, I draw further inferences about the interacting systems, their distinctive qualities and the way in which these interactions are managed within the organisation. I illustrate this with an example of boundary maintenance in conjunction with decision-making around the topic of organisational membership. I also analyse the processes of entering and leaving Advice Company and the conditions on which employees maintain membership. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the organisation's boundaries with the environment and the structural implications that arise from this set-up.

4.1. Passing gates: Access procedures

The main office of Advice Company in the city serves as the organisation's national headquarters. It is located in one of the newly developed business park areas in the city, where several larger national and multi-national offices are grouped in one of India's typical "urban high-tech spaces" (Maitra 2008: 263). The office building is therefore part of a larger office compound that hosts other MNC offices and production sites. Advice Company has approximately 450 employees at that location and, in total, an estimated 15,000 people (including those from other companies) pass through the gates of the business park each day. In the neighbourhood, several other office compounds display the names of other MNCs in the consulting industry. An estimated 100,000 workers travel in and out of the area every day, resulting in a challenging commute, as outlined in Section 4.1.3.

Entrance to the office compound is only possible via a road with heavy traffic. The massive entry gate for cars and buses is patrolled by security guards in uniform, who require each entering person to produce "the badge" – an employee ID card from one of the residing companies – before passing on to the next checkpoint. Pedestrians must pass through two smaller gates, each with two guards, who will not let them pass without "the badge". For persons who cannot produce such a badge, a small booth with a hectic queue in front of it issues visitor passes each day. Upon indicating which company one wants to visit, a paper printout carrying the visitor's name, a webcam photo and the name of the company one is visiting enables the visitor to pass the guards and enter through the gate. This process resembles procedures at

national borders, wherein direct access is granted to the country's passport holders and temporarily limited access is granted to outsiders, upon registration with legitimising parties from within.

While the road is loud, busy and – during the monsoon season – muddy and dirty, the world within the compound appears quite different: guards guide pedestrians along neatly paved walkways and a park-like square with benches. A fish pond welcomes all who enter the compound and a small food plaza hosts an expensive coffee shop and a popular American fast-food chain. One must walk 400 metres across the office compound, along a palm tree shadowed corridor, to reach the Advice Company office building. When the sliding doors open, a cool, air conditioned breeze provides instant relief from the hot humidity outside. Before one notices the wide reception area with beige, shiny floor tiles and a big counter at which another security guard is stationed, one perceives the marked difference of the interior climate. Across the reception hall stands another guard, who asks for a badge before allowing persons to enter the elevator area.

To call the elevator, one must indicate the required floor on a small panel. With a “beep”, a small screen indicates one of six elevators that takes the person to the desired floor without them pressing any further buttons. First-time visitors are immediately marked by their confused stance in front of the panel or their search for buttons to press in the elevator. When stepping out of the elevator, the temperature drops by another five degrees. On the right side, a sign indicates the washrooms; upon turning to the left, one steps into the reception area – a 40 square metre windowless room with the same shiny beige tiles as used on the ground floor. The area is dominated by a massive welcome desk that nearly spans the full length of the room, behind which a watchman in uniform and a female receptionist in an Indian *kurta* or *salwar kameez* sit. The rest of the room features television screens, a water dispenser and comfortable chairs. To enter the office area, one must cross the room along the reception desk, literally passing the two gatekeepers, in order to reach a 1.5-metre wide door of frosted glass. To unlock it, one must swipe his or her badge against a small panel and, following a single “beep” sound, pull the door open. The walls carry Advice Company's logo and the video screens show trailers about Advice Company's services and display quotes from clients. Visitors are asked whom they want to see and are told to take a seat.

On the first day of my fieldwork I was also asked to take a seat as it would take a while for the HR representative to pick me up from reception. Meanwhile, a young man offered me a coffee in a small china cup, and I used the

opportunity to observe the reception more closely: Each time one of the elevators arrived, a group of people would pour from around the corner, either into the reception area or towards the washrooms. The washrooms served, as I later learned, as a transformation space following the commute into the office. The majority of the people who reached the reception area had a badge carrying their photo and name on a lanyard keychain with Advice Company's logo. They would greet their two reception colleagues, go straight to the frosted entry door, swipe their badge in front of the small control panel and walk into the office area. Even when the first person in a group had unlocked the door and held it open for his or her colleagues, subsequent persons would swipe their badge; the beep sound could be heard several times, legitimising each person's passage through the door.

Others had badges without a photo or a name; these badges had the word "Consultant" written on them. Persons with these badges would stop at the reception desk and write into a blue book lying on the counter. Following this, they would proceed to the frosted door, swipe their card and enter. On my first day, a group of three people came from the elevators with a pass that had been printed at the entry booth of the compound (similar to the one I had obtained in order to pass through the pedestrian gate from the street). These persons approached the woman at reception and stated the name of the person they wished to see, just as I did. The receptionist picked up the phone and called the colleague. The man in uniform opened a drawer behind him to fetch three badges with "Visitor" printed on them. He passed them over the counter to the three persons and asked them to sign in to the blue book. He also offered them coffee. A few minutes later, the frosted door opened and two persons with names on their badges entered the reception area. Handshakes were exchanged and introductions made, as not everybody seemed to know each other, and the group moved amidst laughs and lively conversation through the frosted door into the office.

Two females appeared, both with a photo badge in their hands. But instead of going straight to the door they stopped at the desk and wrote into the book without any intervention from the watchman. Only at this moment did I realise that there were two books – a blue and a black one. This time it was the black book that the two ladies wrote in. They were each handed a "Consultant" badge and then they proceeded on their own through the door. A young man with a big box came to the reception and talked to the watchman, who checked the box, picked up the phone and said a few sentences. Then he stood up and accompanied the man with the box through the glass door. Both

returned shortly after and the man disappeared around the corner towards the elevators.

The reception phone rang and, after a short conversation, the woman at reception nodded at me with a smile. This motivated me to get up from my chair. I was asked to sign in to the blue book. The column headings indicated that I should enter my name, company, visit purpose, person visiting, phone number and entering date and time. As I filled in this information, I was handed a badge with “Consultant” on it. I used a few idle moments to look at the black book that the two ladies had signed in to and realised that it had fewer columns to fill out: only name, office location, date and person visiting. I was later told that the black book was for employees from different office locations. But before I was able to think more about the two books, the frosted door opened. I was greeted by the HR colleague whom I was assigned to for the first few days. We exchanged a few polite words and entered through the door. Here, the beige tiles were replaced by a dark grey carpet and we walked along a 15-metre long hallway into the open office area.

My observation of physical entry procedures at the office’s reception provided insight into Advice Company’s production of differentiation to the environment, as well as other systems that the company regarded as relevant. The ethnographic material allowed me to analyse the demarcation of organisational boundaries and the multi-layered structure of the organisational context. The next pages will provide a more detailed interpretation of office access. The various levels of organisational membership will be identified and introduced, and this discussion will be followed by reflections on the temporal and linguistic organisational boundaries.

4.1.1. Producing differentiation along the three gates

The massive security protected entry gates depict an explicit territorial differentiation between the office and the street. This system differentiation occurs with respect to the management of the compound and the maintenance of the walkways. While the compound itself is not a social system – just as the residing companies are not sub-systems of the compound – it nevertheless contributes to the differentiation strategies and entry procedures that facilitate Advice Company’s system-environment differentiation. For this reason, I discuss the entry procedures here, in detail. The first distinction between individuals with or without a badge is executed at the entrance of the office compound. Here, it is irrelevant which of the residing companies issues the

badge, as any relevant badge is equally qualified to grant its holder access, whether or not it displays a name and a photo. The word “Consultant” together with the logo of an appropriate company on the badge suffices, at this first gate, to enable the badge holder to pass from the street into the office compound. This shows that no differentiations are made with regards to the type of association with an organisation. Whether the badge is of the individualised or generic type, access to the office compound is given, both to members and to associates of residing organisations, who are able to produce this general symbol of organisational membership. My Advice Company badge indicated, on the backside, that the badge was the property of Advice Company and, if found, must be returned to the organisation.

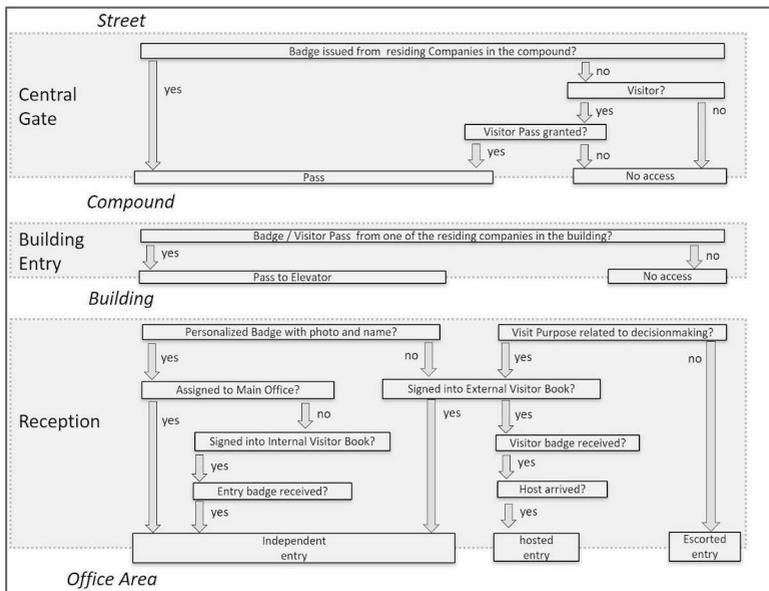
In contrast to the badge holders, members of other systems in the organisational environment are allowed temporary access to the premises with a visitor pass, which is printed on paper. This pass must be returned to the guards when the visitor leaves. Irrespective of the nature of interaction with Advice Company, which might be a client meeting, a delivery of ordered goods or a job interview, any non-badge holding individual is classified as a visitor. Persons who are unable to qualify their interaction with one of the residing organisations are not allowed to enter the compound.

Especially during the first weeks of my research I perceived this boundary as extremely salient. Entering the calm and well-groomed compound from what seemed to me an irritatingly loud, chaotic and crowded street felt a bit like arriving at a safe harbour after an adventurous journey. Only gradually, that notion changed to the point that I felt comfortable enough after a month to regularly stop in the morning at the small stall selling green coconuts to enjoy a first treat of the day, while observing the entertaining street scenery. It took another month for me to learn to appreciate the various street food snacks offered in great variety in front of the gates to the compound, which the colleagues I accompanied introduced me to as an alternative lunch or pre-dinner option. As I rushed in and out of the compound in the beginning, the perception of the gate area as a clear-cut dichotomy between chaos and order gradually decreased in salience, and the street area in front of the gates became a place for me to hang out before and after office hours, or even during the day on *chai* breaks.

At the second checkpoint, right at the entrance to the office building, the display of a badge from one of the building’s organisations or a visitor pass with an appropriate company name must be produced for a person to gain access to the elevator calling panel. I only became aware of the fact that entry

into the office building constituted a further differentiation several months into the fieldwork. In my daily, semi-automated coming-to-office routine, I once mistakenly entered the neighbouring office building, which looked identical but was 50 metres up the palm tree corridor. I did not even make it to the second step towards the sliding doors when the watchman stepped out of the hall and pointed me determinedly towards the next building's entry. The colour of my lanyard keychain was different to that of the employees of the company residing in that building. Therefore, he had evidently been able to identify me as a non-member from far away.

Figure 3: Map of entry procedures to the main office



In contrast to the first two gates, the office reception of Advice Company performs significantly more sophisticated procedures of distinction, representing a number of the organisation's decisions to produce system-environment differentiation through the use of multi-dimensional access procedures. Figure 3 provides a logical illustration of the access sequence with the relevant decision parameters. The grey blocks represent the three gates: the central gate must be passed from the street into the compound; the second gate

occurs upon reaching the office building; and the third gate is found at the organisation's reception. The logical process illustrates the decision tree upon which differentiation is produced at each gate and shows the granularity of decision processes at the reception. Based on these decision processes, I will describe in the next section the various groups that are marked by distinct decision processes at the reception and can therefore be regarded as relevant for further analysis.

4.1.2. Differentiation at the reception: Members and other groups

This section illustrates Advice Company's differentiation strategies relating to entrance into the office, as observed at the reception. The entry procedures at the main office contribute to the organisation's system-environment differentiation and reveal the relevant types of organisational membership. Similarly, members of interacting systems in Advice Company's environment are provided access on the basis of their relevance to the organisation.

Entry for organisational members

Individuals carrying a badge with a photo and a name are permanent employees of Advice Company. This means that they have been selected as members of the organisation and are bound to Advice Company as official employees, by contract. They are "on payroll" and eligible for social benefits such as health insurance for themselves and their family. The process of gaining organisational membership is discussed in more detail in Section 4.3. If an employee's primary work location is the main office, he or she does not need to sign in upon arriving and can enter the office directly by swiping his or her badge in front of the control panel at the frosted glass door. The control panel has the primary purpose of unlocking the door, and a similar panel is installed on the other side of the door to unlock it for those who wish to leave the office area. The panel is connected to a software that registers the entry and exit events of each badge. Employees are instructed to swipe their badge each time they pass through the door, for security reasons: in the event of a fire or any other emergency, this practice enables rescue teams to have an indication of who might still be trapped inside the office area. Therefore, when passing through the door, each individual swipes his or her badge, producing the beep sound. This is also done when employees go to the washrooms next to the elevators, instead of using the ones located within the office area, or when they sneak out for a quick cigarette break. This act of swiping the badge marks the or-

ganisation's territorial borders and is performed an estimated thousand times per day. While this check-in/check-out procedure is both a visible production of system-environment distinction and furthermore accentuated by the audible signal of the "beep", it also illustrates the organisational understanding of the distinction between workspace and non-workspace.

Compared to other means of entering, this mode of access into the office area clearly stresses the status of full membership to the organisation. This status, which allows persons the simplest, most direct entry, is only granted once an individual passes the elaborate decision process that grants him or her membership. This full membership status is furthermore highlighted by the fact that it is a *sine qua non conditio* to serve as a host and bring visitors into the office.

Employees based at other office locations of Advice Company must sign in to the employee visitor book. These employees receive a badge to open the door and then are able to move freely in the office area. This act of internal differentiation reinforces the already established boundaries with the environment. It enables a setting of reduced complexity (Luhmann 1995a: 189), as symbolised by the employee visitor book, which requires significantly less information than the book that non-members are required to fill in. At the same time, it reinforces the boundary with the environment by executing and therefore highlighting an internal sign-in procedure, in contrast to external sign-in procedures (ibid.: 193).

"Visitors" with a badge: The temps

Those with a "Consultant" badge are required to perform another mode of entry. These individuals must, on the one hand, sign in to the blue book each day like a visitor; but on the other hand, they are able to pass the frosted glass door on their own and enter the office space independently, similar to employees. Such colleagues are predominantly on temporary third party contracts and therefore not official employees. The hybrid nature of their roles, resembling a liminal status of not belonging to the organisation yet involving tasks that are similar to those who are full members, has been demonstrated in other organisations (e.g. Garsten 1999) and can be illustrated by this mode of gaining access to the main office. The badge allows these persons entry into the compound and the office building, similar to permanent employees. At the Advice Company reception, however, their status as an organisation-external element of the workforce is reproduced by the sign-in process every morning.

For the duration of the research, I received such a “Consultant” badge; hence, the sign-in procedure was part of my daily routine. I would often meet a colleague on the walk to the office and start a conversation with him or her, but this conversation would be abruptly stalled as soon as we reached the reception. While I would stop to pick up the pen and sign in to the blue book, the colleague would walk on towards the glass door and our conversation would come to a sudden end.

Priority visitors: Clients

In the description of the reception scene I recounted my observation of a group of three people who were handed “Visitor” badges and asked to sign in to the blue book for external visitors. These individuals were members of a different organisation and thus Advice Company clients. Such external visitors are only allowed to enter the office when accompanied by a member of Advice Company who has been assigned to manage them within the environment. The visitors must indicate these persons as their hosts in the visitor’s book.

In spite of their position outside of the organisation, visitors are an important category with regards to their influence on the work conducted within it. They are kept waiting for minimum periods and are even quoted in the video clips played in the reception area.

Low-interaction visitors: Service and support staff

In the case of the young man who delivered a box of leaflets, the purpose of his visit was not connected to decision-making – the central constituting operation of the organisation. Therefore, he was not asked to sign in to the visitor book or hand over a badge. Instead, he was accompanied by the watch guard. Once he delivered his package, he disappeared again. This is an example of an interaction of the organisation with its environment, which supplies a necessary service to the organisation without having a direct impact on its structure.

4.1.3. Territoriality: A merely symbolic value?

Luhmann classifies territoriality as a type of “meaning-constituted boundary” with only minor importance for modern organisations, asserting that territories have a mere symbolic meaning (Luhmann 1995a: 194). As I illustrated above, the frosted glass door symbolises the entrance into the centre of the

organisation: guarded by two gatekeepers and elaborate entry procedures, it constitutes a strong demarcation of the organisation from its environment. Furthermore, each act of entering into that space becomes part of the discourse on the organisational boundary. The differentiation strategies that are expressed through the entry procedures at the reception recur inside the office space through the display of distinct badges for temporary contractors and the constant supervision of clients by their hosts (or the parcel delivery man, by the watchman).

Chapter 5 addresses the corporation's three offices in the city and their relationship in the context of the broader organisational structure. With respect to the negotiation of organisational boundaries through territoriality, the set-up of Advice Company's street office – the smallest of the three locations – builds an ostensive case. Located in a two-storey, windowless brick house of approximately 150 square metres on each level, the office is characterised by a strict division between the ground floor and the upper level. The air conditioned ground floor features two office spaces with desk bays, computers and other office equipment, such as printers, phones and office chairs. The upstairs area is of comparable size, yet is equipped fundamentally differently: the rooms are vested with 40-centimetre wide plain tables, which are set up along the walls, and white plastic chairs. Three phones and a printer serve as equipment, and there is a tiny room for meetings. The area does not provide individualised workspaces and the air is hot and humid, as there is no air conditioning. The ground floor hosts the office for Advice Company's employees, whereas the upstairs rooms are the work environments for the "freelancers". Freelancers are recruited on a project basis to collect data required for a client project. I discuss their role in Section 4.2.2; at this point, I would like to use the street office as an example of a clear demarcation of territory, in connection with organisational boundaries.

The "freelancers" are not formal members of the organisation. However, this fact is not emphasised through the use of different badges (as freelancers do not receive a badge) or sign-in procedures, as practised at the main office for temporary employees and visitors. Instead, the distinction is marked by the allocated space, which is unmistakably distinct from the space occupied by internal employees. The organisational boundary is furthermore established by the convention that freelancers do not enter the ground floor office area. Rather, when Advice Company employees want to talk with one of the freelancers, they go upstairs rather than asking the freelancer to come down.

This aspect of the office as a territory that distinguishes the organisation from its environment can also be illustrated by the daily physical and temporal efforts required by the individuals to overcome the border between their home and the organisational space. Commuting is a central topic of casual conversation in the office. Whenever I engaged in a conversation with a new interlocutor, often the first questions asked would be: “Where are you put up?” and “How long did it take you to travel into the office?” “By which means of transportation?” Notably, geographical distance to the office in kilometres was not of high informative value in my answers, as the evaluation of commuting was based on the availability of public transport connections or the proximity of one’s home to major motorways that one could take to reach the office.

When I arrived for the pilot study I was convinced that I had made a smart choice to stay in a hostel “only” 10 kilometres away from the main office location. The first morning, I learnt that the road leading to the office was a central connection between the eastern and western parts of the city. As no train service covered that area, the road seemed to be perpetually congested. It took me more than an hour to travel that 10 kilometre stretch, and I quickly learned that this put me on the lower end of the commuting time range experienced by my colleagues. Right at the beginning I was told that commuting times usually varied from 60 to 90 minutes, but could easily reach two hours at peak traffic times or during heavy monsoon days. Not all employees, however, commuted for several hours each day. Those who could afford it or were flexible¹ would move to one of the neighbourhoods in close vicinity to the office. As a consequence of my commuting experience during the pilot study, this was my strategy, too.

Lamentations about the commute were very common, as the employees travelling by overcrowded buses or trains described it as a physically exertive act, and those coming by motorbike or car classified it as mentally stressful. Ruchika told me that she had a car at home but preferred to take a rickshaw each day for 90 minutes, as she did not feel comfortable driving in what she referred to as “chaotic and sometimes aggressive traffic during rush hours”, despite having tried several times. Anyone who has experienced the traffic in India’s mega-cities during peak times will probably relate to her sentiments.

Not only driving, but also commuting by train was described to me as unpleasant. While the benefit of trains was the mostly predictable duration

1 Often singles or couples who had migrated to the city from other parts of the country and therefore had no obligation to live in their family households.

of travel, Ananya from the city office stressed the physical effort it required to stand tightly pressed against others in a sweaty crowd: “It’s an involuntary full body massage!” Others mentioned the extreme caution and aloofness needed to avoid fights on trains and the tracks, especially in the evenings, when all of the commuters would be tired after a long day. When leaving the office, the ladies were not the only ones to gear up for their commute with more robust shoes and modest dress: several men would also switch their shoes and glasses for travelling. Even when taking a comparably comfortable rickshaw, ladies would wear a scarf tightly fixed around their head with only a small gap revealing their eyes. The reason for this habit, I was told, was to prevent inhalation of the polluted dust on the street, which stuck tightly to sweaty skin; it also prevented the face from tanning due to exposure to sunlight.

The notion of the commute as a border between work and home is also symbolised in the transformation processes that occur in the washrooms right next to the elevators before one proceeds towards the reception. Women take small pouches of vanity sets from their handbags or backpacks to wash off the street’s dust, redo their eye make-up and hairstyle and apply deodorant. Some change their shoes and others put on a *dupatta* (scarf that matches their outfit) to complete their dress. During monsoon season, sometimes even an entire outfit must be changed because it has got completely drenched. Such an experience once led me to carry a spare set of clothes with me to the office.

While the commute to the office is an evergreen topic of conversation, it becomes a serious concern for employees during the peak of the monsoon season. When streets are flooded from several days of constant, heavy rain, the traffic situation aggravates to even longer traffic jams and more unpredictable road conditions, and this leads more people to turn to public transport. The high demand results in rickshaw drivers becoming more selective of the customers they accept for a journey. Waiting an hour for a rickshaw driver willing to provide a ride to a relatively close (i.e. unprofitable) destination is a common situation during these weeks. Those who depend on train services are faced with the prospect that trains might encounter technical issues that will leave them stalled for several hours. The organisation recognises the commute as a serious obstacle, and this is reflected in office-wide emails that are sent on days with exceptionally heavy rain forecasted. These communications prompt people to leave the office early, “preferably by 4.00pm”, and allow all employees to work from home the next day.

Both the commuting as well as the split office structure suggests that territoriality has not only a symbolic value in relation to organisational bound-

aries, but also a structural value. The Advice Company employees perceive the commute as an activity requiring substantial resources. Reversely, the organisation marks – through its email communications – its awareness of the potentially hazardous travel home from the office during the monsoon season, and even suspends its territorial focus for the next day by offering all employees permission to work from home. Similarly, the separation of the city office into an internal space and an exchange area for freelancers goes beyond symbolic meaning, enabling a structural frame for cross-system collaboration (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4). Therefore, I argue that – in this case – territoriality fulfils significantly more than a symbolic function for the demarcation of organisational boundaries with the environment.

4.1.4. Temporal boundaries

Organisations not only differentiate themselves from the environment in terms of membership and territorial boundaries, but also through time dimensions. Luhmann speaks of the emergence of a system-immanent time that must also fit the time of the environment (Luhmann 1995a: 185). While this idea is particularly important for analysing how the organisation translates input from the environment (i.e. from clients) into its own context and how time is used to produce internal differentiation (see Chapter 9), time dimensions can also be analysed in the context of their effect on organisational boundaries.

When I heard that some colleagues occasionally came to the office on the weekend, I realised that I had taken my own perceptions of temporal boundaries in a work environment for granted. At the next opportunity, I sought approval to come to the office on the weekends, as well. The office life on Saturdays resembled that of early morning or late evening weekdays, with only the watchman as a gatekeeper at the reception, the canteen closed and around 50 to 80 people working at the desks. Sundays, however, felt significantly different: the frosted glass door would stand fixed wide open and the air conditioning would be switched off. The watchman would not wear his usual uniform, but a stylish casual outfit with a flat cap. I would not have to sign in to the visitor's book, which was on all other days obligatory. Several cleaning personnel would be busy vacuuming the carpet and wiping off the desks, which would produce a comparably loud and unsettled environment. I visited the office on about 10 Sundays and never saw more than a dozen colleagues. Those who came to the office on a Sunday would also be dressed

very casually, some even in board shorts and flip flops – an absolutely inappropriate and impossible attire during the week.

The activities of the cleaning team and the dress of the watchman emphasised that this was “not really a work environment”, as one of my HR contacts remarked when I requested permission to come to the office on this day. The location was not able to serve the organisational members for their work tasks on Sundays. Rather, the office would be in a state of resetting and preparation for the new week to come, with several cleaning and maintenance activities being performed. Sunday marked the temporal boundary that the organisation had set up to distinguish workdays from work-free days. Despite the fact that several employees apparently worked in the office on Sundays, their extremely casual dress accounted for that notion.

4.1.5. Linguistic boundaries

When walking through the main office, one notices the broad range of languages spoken. As the colleagues of Advice Company originate from all across India, local languages such as Bengali and Tamil can be heard, as well as English and Hindi, which serve as the two *linguae francae* in this context. But while Hindi is associated with the verbal internal office conversation, all written communication and any communication with clients is strictly conducted in English. This emphasises not only the more formal mode of communication but also the perception of the organisational boundary.

In contrast to the office communication, conversations at lunch time were occasionally difficult for me to follow. While at the beginning of the lunch hour conversations would mostly be held in Hindi, the conversations would often drift – depending on the composition of the group – towards Marathi or other languages. In the beginning I perceived this as irritating, but I came to realise that this practice showed that the use of more local languages marked a situation as “private”, in contrast to the use of English or Hindi, which marked official work, as pre-determined by the organisation. The switch between languages furthermore demarcated the boundary (as perceived by the employees) between work settings (which were thought to be of interest to me and my research project) and non-work situations (which were assumed to be uninteresting to me).

4.2. Differentiated environment: Clients, freelancers, universities, contractors

Drawing on my observations of the access procedures at the reception of Advice Company's main office and the organisation's manifestations of territoriality, I illustrated in the previous section how the organisation produces system-environment differentiation and (re-)enforces its boundaries. This section focuses on the organisation's environment – in particular, systems that are of direct relevance to Advice Company: its clients, its freelancers and universities. Contractors can be regarded as a fourth system, yet they occupy an opaque state. They are positioned in not only a perceived liminal state towards full organisational membership (as suggested in Section 4.1.2), but also a “betwixt-and-between” position, between the organisation and its environment (Garsten 1999: 604). Continuing to apply the theoretical framework of Luhmann, I will structure the analysis by questioning which elements in Advice Company interact with the environment. I will then analyse the transactional openness of the system, how the organisational boundaries are constantly negotiated through communication, how the input from the environment is interpreted or translated into the organisation and how the environmental systems influence organisational functioning, and/or vice versa.

4.2.1. Clients

Clients are members of other business organisations who purchase the services of Advice Company. They constitute the most influential system in the organisation's environment. Clients' decisions to spend monetary resources on Advice Company products – mostly in the form of projects – constitute the key input for the system, triggering a range of decision chains. Consequently, “the client” is the central focus of decision processes in the organisation. While basically all elements of Advice Company are directly or indirectly involved in client projects, and “client centricity” is an often-used buzz word in the office, only a few functions in the organisation interact with clients directly. Such direct interaction with clients is performed exclusively by specific roles within Advice Company, namely top managers and client consultants. These roles function as a specialised membrane to manage interaction with these environmental systems, and are the most visible roles in connection with the organisational “boundary work” (Holtgrewe 2003: 64). But belonging to the client consulting team is not the only requirement for managing client rela-

tionships. The right to interact with clients is subject to organisational control, and the level of interaction – from emails up to active participation in presentation meetings – is related to both one's position in the hierarchy and one's tenure in the organisation. This produces a distinctive internal differentiation of individual client consulting teams and provides a good example of how the organisation's decisions in relation to the demarcation of boundaries with the environment relate to internal structures.

The status associated with client interaction is suggested by the words of Kashish. He had joined the client consulting team only a few weeks before I accompanied him for the first time. When I asked him to describe his work to me, he answered: "The work I am doing now is only the operational part. But my actual job is the client side, so once I have learned enough I will be talking to the client, maybe in a month or so." Kashish's response implies a difference in status between "only operational work" and client interaction, with the former deemed an activity of lower value. The statement of his manager Bright on the same question mirrors this understanding from the opposite perspective of the team's internal hierarchy: "whenever there's a client interaction I am involved, but the operational part [...], I don't deal too much with this. My job is to deal with the client, so any major communication with the client."

Kashish understood that before he could interact with clients he would have to gain experience with the internal processes. In this way, he connected seniority to the right to engage in interactions with client systems in the environment. Both Kashish and Bright's statements position "operational work" at the extreme lower end of the consulting team's value system. These operational tasks refer to Advice Company's internal communication with colleagues in project coordination teams or, in crisis situations, even project execution teams. They denominate the opposition of client-centric operations and are associated with the value ground reality in the context of project execution. In the course of this book, I will show that these opposing values play an important role in the organisational system. In Kashish and Bright's client consulting team, information was clearly selected by orientating on client centrality. Although Kashish was a novice to the team, he had already applied the same selection mechanism as Bright, which suggests that the guiding difference of a social system shapes communication and not individuals.

Kashish and Bright's focus on client interaction stresses not only the desirability of the task, but also the internal observation of a strictly organisation-controlled boundary with the client. This is also reflected in Bright's notion that he, in his role as a manager, had to review and control the emails

sent to the client: “We want to ensure that everything that goes to the client comes through me for review.” Such self-determined organisational mechanisms controlled interaction with the environment and highlighted the self-observation of the organisational boundary with the environment. Furthermore, the consulting team colleagues were very aware that that the selected information would be subject to a selection of understanding by a different system. Aniket, an experienced consultant, had very clear views on how the information should be shaped (i.e. selected) from the internal version to that of the client’s system:

When communicating to the client, don’t ever tell him you have issues on our side. There has always to be a different explanation to it. I would tell of issues with conversion rates being too low, or inflate small issues with the client’s base data to be the key reason of delay. For example, we always have issue with the work teams in Chennai, so when we can, we try to get around being too dependent on them, but obviously without saying to the client that this is due to the internal issues in that city team. Of course we have to find other useful explanations that make sense to them. So when there are two comparable options we try to make them not selecting the issue-areas... because they wouldn’t understand and get it all wrong.

Aniket’s last remark, in particular, shows that his strategies of using specific utterances were concerned with information selection in a social system and not predominantly with achieving a competitively favourable position in front of the client. Similarly, the input in the form of project briefings received by the client representatives was subject to translation work performed by the translation specialists on the client consulting team. Their role required them to “understand the clients’ needs”, as Bright explained; they needed to be able to select an understanding of the client that would be compatible with the system’s language, in order to deliver satisfactory projects. The ethnographic case studies presented in Chapter 10 address such translation chains and working misunderstandings in the context of client projects.

Understanding the “client’s needs” through a client-centric orientation is a skill that is explicitly advocated by organisational leaders, for example during “town hall meetings”. All employees in the main office are invited (or requested) to attend these events. At a “town hall” meeting, representatives of India’s senior management team or executive board members from abroad stand on a small stage in the main office and present on topics that are relevant to the organisation. Their voices are transmitted via an audio system to

the entire office area. Usually, “client” is by far the most frequently used word in these presentations. Only once, at the end of my research, did I attempt to quantify this observation: During a speech given by a senior manager from the US I counted how often he used the word “client”. The talk centred on the topic of how he had previously, during his early years as a client consultant, played a personal game to “never say no to a client” and how this had made him successful. During his 12-minute talk, the word “client” was broadcasted 34 times through the speakers over the heads of the 450 employees across the office floor.

This central value client centricity is also implicitly present as a key trait of employees’ “most remarkable projects”. This topic featured in one of the standard questions I asked all of my interlocutors in the interviews. In particular, younger colleagues with limited work experience would choose to talk about a successful project and a few others would opt to describe a particularly disastrous client project that they vividly remembered. About two-thirds of my interlocutors, however, described a successful project within Advice Company that they had been involved in. These projects were remarkably similar in their plot of the interlocutor’s intense effort in either a project in crisis status doomed to fail or a particularly challenging project requiring tricky solutions, which was ultimately fulfilled to the client’s satisfaction.

Most remarkable project... hm... that was one I got directly after I joined the new team. Some escalations had happened and the client was really upset with us and our service. And then I was asked to take over. My achievement was to get the account [i.e. the client] really back on board again, up to the point that when they hear that I am on a project they relax, because they know all will be fine and taken care of. (Sakshi, Client Consultant)

I got a lot of client appreciation, although I don’t have client interaction. But in [the] last one and a half years I got three projects where I actually received client appreciation. Often it’s clients saying that “Your project coordination team has done a good job”. They [the clients] do not know me, but still it’s indirect appreciation. (Hitesh, Project Coordinator)

...and when I presented the project report to the client, he praised it, saying that we have changed the way presentations are being done, so I take a lot of pride in that. (Bright, Client Consultant)

Getting positive feedback from a client for the good work one has done is proof of one's ability to "understand the client's needs" and fulfil the role of translator according to the organisation's expectations. Stories of particularly challenging projects that were mastered under the most averse conditions and resulted in happy clients are told and re-told among colleagues at team outings or prolonged lunch breaks, akin to tales of heroic deeds. Successful mastery of a challenging project associated with positive client feedback finds its most solid manifestation in the form of client awards. Awards can be objects such as trophy cups or laminated paper certificates carrying the client's logo and a description of the award (e.g. "2nd place most innovative project"). These awards are usually placed on desks, in open display. Internally, Advice Company also awards client-centric behaviour. Such awards are handed over as laminated certificates, together with a bank voucher of a few thousand rupees (approximately 15–60 euros), depending on the level of the award (bronze, silver or gold). This award system is an example of the structural coupling of the organisation with the client systems in its environment.

Furthermore, being close to a client and getting appreciation from this external system influences more than simply one's status inside the organisation. "Moving to the client side" is an often-used phrase referring to the career aspiration of gaining a position in a client's organisation. This is a career target voiced predominantly by employees who interact with clients – those who are already as close as possible to a client as a member of Advice Company can be.

Employees' desire to gain a role with client interaction reveals the organisation's client-centric orientation: those who lack contact with clients strive for jobs in functions associated with client interaction. The client system therefore strongly influences the career aspirations of Advice Company employees, and, through client appreciation (i.e. via an external system), internal status is gained. As I will show in Chapter 9, this client-centric orientation is connected with the corresponding value that aligns the organisational structure with cross-departmental work processes on client projects, along the client centrality paradigm. As a consequence of the client-centric orientation, the client system receives such a high status that it constitutes a threat to the organisational membership decisions of Advice Company's employees. The desire to "move to the client side" (i.e. to work in the client's organisation as an employee) is an example of how the environment influences the organisation to the extent that membership can change. Two and a half years after I completed my fieldwork in June 2014, several Advice Company employees had

moved to roles within client organisations. During a skype call with Kashish two years after I completed my fieldwork, he told me he was happy to have “managed the switch to the client side”. Sakshi used to be a consultant at Advice Company and is now an employee of a former client of hers, and Raveena, from the same consulting team, also works at a client’s organisation.

4.2.2. Freelancers

Although I did not see freelancers during my observation at the reception of the main office, I heard about them on the first day of my fieldwork. Freelancers are external to the organisation, yet they significantly contribute to Advice Company’s project development process through the completion of work tasks such as data collection, which subsequent processes build on up to the final project delivery. Freelancers are paid on the basis of the work packages and data they deliver and their position outside of the organisation is clearly marked by their different, less equipped office rooms in the street office, in conjunction with the fact that they are not provided with an email address or an Advice Company badge. The vast majority of the freelancers have other jobs beyond the work they do for Advice Company. Due to the unpredictability of incoming projects, they are taken on and off jobs. Therefore, Advice Company’s employees assume that some freelancers work in parallel on projects with competing organisations.

Similar to my interaction with clients, my direct interaction with freelancers was limited. I accompanied employees who had the specialist function of managing interactions between Advice Company and the freelancers. These colleagues held specific roles within the project execution department concerned with organising freelancer teams. I participated in their meetings, observed casual updates between the employees and the freelancers and reviewed interlocutors’ email communication history with freelancers on a project. Employees in this function had often started as freelancers, themselves, before becoming members of Advice Company. Therefore, one of my interlocutors organised an opportunity for me to accompany two freelancers for a day to experience “that part of the ground reality”, as one of my interlocutors expressed it.

In contrast to client centrality remains ground reality as a term less explicitly tangible. This is partially rooted in its subordinate position in the organisation’s discourse but also in the reason that I decided to subsume the different unlabelled notions of counter-currents to client centrality under the term

ground reality. Therefore differs the meaning of ground reality in relation to the context. The most explicit use of the term I encountered in the context of work with and from the freelancers. Here ground reality referred on the one hand to the data the freelancers deliver and the conditions under which they are produced. On the other hand ground reality was used to describe a distinct and less predictable mode of operation. In this case it encompassed the freelancers-teams and their team managers within Advice Company as a source of disturbance for the client centric processes. An example for this notion became salient during a lunch chat with project coordinator Sheeba and a colleague from the finance department who had joined us spontaneously. As I had not met her before I started to ask the colleague about her job and her current work. I did not get far, as Sheeba cut across my questions with a playfully exaggerated envy in her voice: “She is lucky, she doesn’t have to deal with the ground reality, so her world is fine!”

Having to deal with the ground reality therefore required distinct skills. While the client consultants are experts in translating clients’ strategic needs into projects, a similar translation is necessary for information to be processed by freelancers and vice versa. For compatibility with the “ground reality”, information about projects must be reduced to the minimum and limited to the absolute basics required to perform the respective work task. The need to select information and a message for freelancers is commonly acknowledged within the organisation, often with the connotation of simplification – or reduction, in Bruno Latour’s terms (see Chapter 10, Section 10.4 for a discussion of projects, translation chains and the “ground reality”). I will show, however, that the translation processes from freelancers in the environment to Advice Company employees are at least equally relevant, although this fact is overseen by the organisation’s dominant discourse of client centrality.

The structural set-up of the street office also depicts the functional need to manage communication processes with freelancers. As illustrated above, the organisation manages its interactions with client systems in the environment via the specialised function of client consultants. Much as the main office provides a space for client interaction, the upper level of the street office serves as a zone in which Advice Company controls the exchange between the organisation and freelancers. The employees who manage the interaction with freelancers use a small room on the upper level for briefing meetings and spontaneously go upstairs to informally check on their freelance team’s current situation and any potential issues they may have encountered. Detached from individual communication, the upper level facilitates exchange in the

most literal sense: the freelancers are equipped with laptops for their work and send the data they collected during the day through the organisation's network and get the most current updates on their work packages in return.

Such exchange zones facilitate the interaction between different systems and are often part of contemporary corporate offices. These zones are office "conference centres" and provide a number of meeting rooms with less restricted access than the rest of the office building, where employees' desks are located. In these zones, meetings are held with members of environmental systems, such as clients, suppliers and partners. These areas also commonly provide an Internet connection that can be used by guests, giving them access to email but not to the organisation's internal network. Advice Company's main office also features a large, well equipped meeting room in the corridor that leads to the desk area.

The function of such conference centres is indeed congruent with the function of Advice Company's upper level freelancer zone, which has the purpose of facilitating system-environment interaction and manifesting boundaries. However, the corporate conference centres and the freelancers' zone are, however, located on opposite ends of the prestige continuum. Conference centres boast state-of-the-art technical equipment, stylish design furniture, generous spaciousness and often a tray of coffee and biscuits. The freelancers' space in the upper level of the street office, in contrast, is vested considerably more simply than Advice Company's workspaces in the main office: it was notably geared up for the practical aspect of system-environment interaction rather than image concerns. Correspondingly, the set-up of the street office is seen by the freelancer communication specialists within Advice Company as the most suitable location for inter-system interaction:

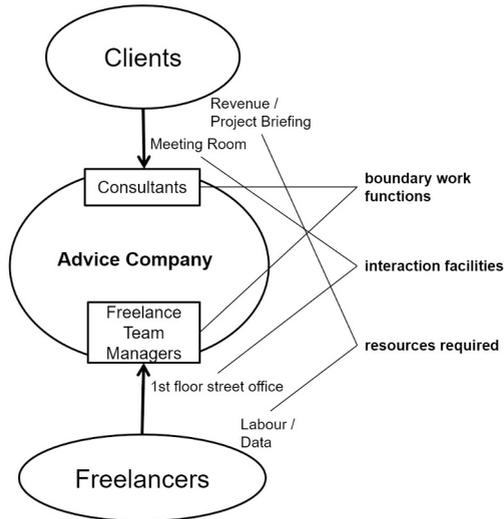
You know, here in that more simple environment it is just very easy for the freelancers to come in and catch up. I can't imagine them do[ing] this when they have to stand in line to at the entry gate [to get a visitor's pass] and wear a badge every time they come to the main office. Here is such a big in and out of people in the course of the day, that always doing registration and these things would create a big issue. (Payul, Freelance Work Coordinator)

The main office would not work, it is too far out for the freelancers, difficult to reach. They would have to spend at least 20 rupees per day on travelling, that is too much. (Rohan, Freelance Team Manager)

These quotes refer first to the benefit of the office being located in an area they consider a “suburban setting” next to a train station. The second aspect of the street office that employees believe makes it a particularly suitable setting for cross-system interaction is the physical space that is not marked as an official area of Advice Company, and thus does not require complex access procedures. The upstairs freelancer zone stands in contrast to the downstairs area of the Advice Company work environment. This territoriality, as well as the perception of freelancers as outsiders to the organisation, was explicitly marked in a situation when a young man (who I later learned belonged to a freelancer team) was folding a few cables into a box in the downstairs area. Suddenly, one of the team managers rose from his desk, walked over to the young man and asked him what he was doing. The young man pointed to the box and said he had packed the cables for a project, just as he had done the week before. At that moment, the manager raised his voice and scolded the young man for touching Advice Company’s property without asking permission. Just because the young man had been given permission the previous week did not suggest that he would be granted the same now. The uncontrolled activity of the young man and the exhibited agency without prior permission within the territorial office area of Advice Company constituted – in the manager’s perspective – a border infringement. Through the manager’s communication, he re-established the organisational boundary with the freelancer’s system (as represented by the young man), both in territory as well as in freedom of action.

The freelancers comprise a system in Advice Company’s environment that is clearly demarcated through the fact that neither badges nor official email addresses are provided. Furthermore, a specific functional role within Advice Company is assigned to the boundary work with this system, and employees within this function serve to manage the relationship in the organisation’s favour. Despite holding positions outside of the organisational boundaries, the freelancers are involved in the project development process and Advice Company is dependent on their labour services and the data they provide in order to maintain itself. The split-level set-up of the street office reproduces these system interdependencies and recognises the need for structures that foster interaction with the environment. It is interesting, in this respect, that both the intersystem dependencies and the organisational structures and functions that manage the relationship with the freelancer system are similar to those employed for the client system. Nonetheless, the two systems are located on opposite extremes of the status scale (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Structural similarities: Clients vs. freelancers



4.2.3. Universities

While interaction with clients and freelancers is central to the company's core activity (the planning and execution of client projects), interaction with the higher education system serves to ensure sufficient membership candidates with the traits desired by the organisation. Similar to Advice Company's interaction with clients and freelancers, the organisation's interaction with the educational system is also performed by specific members of the organisation – in this case, those in the HR department. The basis of this interaction is a recruiting partnership between Advice Company and particular universities, which allows Advice Company to conduct membership selection events on campus. The universities, in return, market these events as attractive opportunities for prospective students.

The higher education system in India comprises a large network of over 600 universities and 33,000 colleges, both public and private. The latter have risen from virtually none in the 1980s to 90 in 2011, in response to increasing demand for higher education (Tilak 2013: 6). Along the same line, degrees and

courses have increasingly accommodated the demands of prospective (and paying) students, resulting in more IT-related undergraduate courses, such as electrical engineering and computer science, and more postgraduate courses in management studies. In parallel, enrolment in humanities and social sciences programmes has decreased (ibid.: 8). There is little literature available on the way in which business organisations have influenced and shaped India's higher education system. An employee of Advice Company with whom I talked about the higher education sector voiced the opinion that due to broad differences in educational quality across the country, "campus recruitment" is necessary for channelling opportunities for entry into the organisation.

The campus recruitment events function as follows: When students are approaching graduation, organisations with an established partnership with the university organise recruitment events on campus and use these events to hire new employees. Prior to coming on campus, the organisations announce the types of job on offer, including salary ranges and number of placements available. At the Advice Company event, the HR colleagues (who serve as representatives of the organisation) give a brief introduction to the organisation and the job on offer to the students. Then the interested students take the company's standardised written entry test; those who pass are shortlisted and subjected to two rounds of interviews. At the end of the day, either the new recruits are directly offered a job or a few candidates are invited to one of Advice Company's offices for further job interviews. Hence, a major part of the recruiting process occurs on university premises and is performed by members of Advice Company with the aim of selecting members of the university who have chosen Advice Company as a potential employer from a number of other companies also present at the campus event. On these recruitment days, the focus is changing organisational membership. However, while it seems that this day is primarily one on which decisions are taken, it merely represents the culmination of a chain of decisions from different directions, coming together.

First, the decision of Advice Company to establish a particular campus recruitment partnership is based on the university's ranking. Second, Advice Company decides which job(s) – and therefore which entry-level salary – will be offered to graduates of that university, and this is again dependent on both the university ranking and the current needs of the organisation. A few weeks prior to the campus event, Advice Company decides how many job placements for each role they will offer and announce this number on campus. Only a few of the top 10 universities are involved in the executive trainee programme

for future leaders of Advice Company, while graduates of universities at the next level have the opportunity to secure consultant roles and students from lower-ranking institutions (ranking between 50 to 110) have the chance of becoming support analysts or project coordinators. Graduates from even lower-ranking universities can become coordinator assistants or be hired on temporary contracts. In this way, the environment strongly shapes the way in which employees join the organisation. This external hierarchy also finds its reflection inside the organisation, where employees proudly mention the names of their alma maters. If I did not react with the appropriate sound of admiration when my interlocutors spoke of their graduating institutions, they would often point out that theirs had been a premium institution. On several occasions, I was informed about the top institutions for higher education in India and how difficult it was to gain admission to them.

Some of the employees described to me how – even years before they had filed an application for Advice Company – their aim of becoming a member of the organisation drove their decisions. The business schools in India charge significant tuition fees and administer various admission tests. Based on the number of university applications a person files and his or her test outcomes, he or she might be offered placement at a number of business schools. Universities are expected to state the expected starting income package and the placement rate of their graduates, together with the companies their graduates are employed with. From this information, potential students make a return-on-investment calculation before they enrol. In many cases, the hiring partnership with Advice Company constitutes a major decision parameter for the students who want to work in Advice Company's industry, as access to the organisation is deemed more achievable through campus recruitment events (see also Garsten and Nyqvist 2013: 10). Since university ranking influences the particular jobs and salaries offered by Advice Company, potential students also take this into account – as do universities, who adjust their tuition fees accordingly. This illustrates the interdependency between Advice Company and the higher education institutions in the organisation's environment.

4.2.4. **Betwixt and between: Contractors**

When individuals on a temporary contract enter the main office, their position as oppositional to that of permanent employees is marked by their different badge and act of signing in to the visitor book each morning. While contractors largely support teams by performing administrative and documen-

tation work, in some teams they also perform tasks that are identical to those performed by permanent employees. However, contractors are not assigned to jobs that involve direct client or freelancer interaction; hence, they do not represent the organisation to the environment. Also, when interacting internally, their email address reveals their status through the word “consultant” before Advice Company’s name: name@consultant.advice-company.com.

I had an opportunity to discuss the potentially conflicting situation of the contractors in more depth when Parul told me to make sure I would be around for her farewell cake-cutting ceremony in a week’s time. I had accompanied her for several days and we had often met for after-lunch walks in the car park of the office building. From our conversations, I knew that she had been at Advice Company as a temporary employee with the “Consultant” badge for more than three years, and that her journey had been a layaway from one contract extension to the next, on an annual or even 8-month basis. Parul had often voiced her desire to be taken “on payroll” with her manager and had even been given the prospect of future employment a year ago. But as it became clear that the only option that would be offered to her was yet another temporary contract, she decided to apply for a job in another organisation. When I met her for a last interview three days before she left, the first thing she mentioned was how much she had appreciated the work environment at Advice Company. Parul explicitly expressed her feeling of attachment to a group of colleagues, whom she saw as close friends and whom she would not have considered leaving if it had not been necessary, in her opinion, to “play those politics”. She had informed several managers that she would be more than happy to return to the organisation if an opportunity for a job on payroll arose. She said that she liked her job, but also that she saw herself in a client consulting role in the near future. She had sufficient experience and therefore needed to get out of her temporary contractor status. For Parul, being a contractor meant not only a major loss of benefits (such as paid health insurance), but also a lack of appreciation, with poor prospects for career advancement. Parul told me that she earned half of what her permanently employed colleagues earned for the same work. Furthermore, she had not received any incremental raise in her payment package for the past year and a half, although she felt she had worked “harder and longer than many others in this organisation”. In the department in which she had worked for the past 15 months, several new hires had joined the team, all as regular employees. Witnessing others achieve the status she had desired for three years had been simply too much for her.

Parul saw herself as a contractor insofar as she had temporary employment status, constituting a “transitory” situation that she hoped would lead to a permanent position in the organisation (Garsten 1999: 603). This hope was kept alive by several extensions of her contract and examples of colleagues with a similar contract status who had made it on payroll as permanent employees. She felt she had performed her job with at least the same commitment and ambition as her permanently employed colleagues. Despite not having the secure status of a permanent role and full membership to the organisation, she was convinced she had shown full responsibility for the tasks that had been assigned to her, often working way beyond official office hours. The lack of a “structural bond created by a regular employment position”, while temporary employees are at the same time “drawn into extended circles of loyalty”, makes “temporary employees share some of the inter-structural and ambiguous characteristics of liminality” (ibid.: 602), in Victor Turner’s sense of “betwixt and between” social structures (Turner 1964). While Turner’s concept of liminality assumes the individual as the central entity, the application of Luhmann’s Systems Theory provides an additional view of the contractor’s role. As systems consist of communication and not persons, individuals cannot be positioned inside or outside a system. Thus, individual contractors do not belong to Advice Company, but their communications do. Their daily communications with Advice Company employees in various functions are aspects of the social system organisation. Yet the description of these types of membership communicate the contractor role as one that is external to the organisation. This contradicting circumstance might provide an alternative model for understanding the conflicting situation, as perceived by Parul and other contractors. The next section deals with organisational membership – only seemingly a more clearly defined category.

4.3. Organisational membership

Thus far, Chapter 4 has carved out the way in which Advice Company demarcates its boundaries with the environment, first with respect to the differentiation strategies in access procedures at the main office and, second, with respect to interactions with other systems in the environment. This section deals with organisational membership. Starting with a review of the various routes to becoming an Advice Company employee, I will then examine the way in which the rules of maintaining membership are communicated in the “new

joiners' training" programme and, finally, discuss the "good" and "bad" ways of leaving the organisation, which are closely connected to re-entry options.

4.3.1. How to become an employee

There are several pathways to becoming an Advice Company employee, all of which are partially dependent on the status or skills required for a given job opportunity. But all of the established options have one aspect in common: they each refer to previously established connections with Advice Company, whether through an official organisational context or an informal social system.

The campus recruitment process (as described in Section 4.2.3) represents the most frequent route taken to secure employment in entry-level jobs, and this process stems from established partnerships between Advice Company and universities. The other common method for joining the organisation is via referral – an established praxis for recruiting employees into more senior positions. Those who do not join the organisation via campus recruitment usually have a (sometimes distant) relative, friend or neighbour working for Advice Company who is able to inform them of available positions within the organisation. The Advice Company employee passes the résumé of the interested acquaintance to colleagues in the organisation who manage organisational membership (i.e. those in the HR department). If the résumé is evaluated positively, the person is invited to take the company's standardised entry test; if this is passed successfully, the test is followed by recruitment interviews.

In addition to my asking my interlocutors about their path to employment in the interviews, I also observed the early stages of the rather informal referral process. When I accompanied Amjad in the city office, he was called on his mobile by a distant cousin whom he had met in person only a few times. The cousin was about to complete her studies and was interested in an entry-level job with Advice Company; she wondered if he could help her with this. Amjad asked the young woman about her interests in the business field, any previous work experience and when she would be able to begin work. He gave her his email address and asked her to send him her résumé. He told her that either he would get back to her or she would be contacted by someone else in the organisation. The entire call took fewer than five minutes. As soon as he was off the phone, he walked to a colleague whose team had an open position and talked with her about the potential applicant. They quickly agreed that he

would forward the résumé to her as soon as he received it and that she would take care of the next steps.

Referrals also describe cases in which a senior manager joins Advice Company and brings a number of employees from the previous organisation with him or her. Whether the referral is initiated on the basis of family ties, a fellow student or a previous co-worker, there are two prerequisites for this mechanism to function. First, both the referring and the referred parties must be members of the same social system in the Advice Company environment. Second, the referring individual must hold a position in the organisation that enables him or her to learn about open positions and establish a communication channel between the referred party and the relevant function in the organisation.

Finally, a person may join the organisation as a permanent member from a temporary contract or freelancer position. This route is also based on an existing relationship with the organisation. The option of re-entering as a former employee is not unusual, yet it is associated with a certain ambivalence, as discussed in the final section of this chapter (4.3.4). My interlocutors considered Advice Company not only the most prestigious organisation in its sector of the professional services industry, but also a gateway to attractive jobs in other companies. Advice Company employment was therefore often described as a stepping stone once an employee had “served” at least one year. Thus, becoming a member of the “Advice Company family” was rated as quite attractive and desirable. The elaborate entry procedures for non-employees mirror this self-observation of the organisational system, as does the multi-stage employee selection process. Once a contract is signed, a new employee takes part in extensive on-boarding activities through several induction sessions and a two-day training programme, which is the focus of the following section.

4.3.2. Access training: Learning the rules

In an attempt to understand how the organisation communicated its common values and rules of conduct, a good starting point was for me to attend the training for new employees. The “Discover Advice Company” training, as it was officially called, was held every few months, depending on the number of new joiners. It was organised by the HR department, whose members played several active roles in the agenda over the two days. All employees who had

joined since the previous training were invited to the training from all three offices across the city, irrespective of their job function.

I was glad to also receive an invitation for the Discover Advice Company training via email in my second week of fieldwork. The invitation contained a detailed programme of the activity sessions and presentations. The location for the training was the largest meeting room in the main office, with space for 40 people. About 25 new joiners were already sitting in the room when the first speaker entered and began the introductory session. The speaker mentioned that he had been with the company for eight years and that he held a senior management position, and he asked the attendees to individually announce their name, department and length of time at the company. Most of the departments' names, which were presented in acronyms, did not inform me of much at that early point of my research; nor did they inform most of the attendees around me, as I learned during the coffee break. Instead, the senior manager hosting this first session accompanied each person's statement with a comment such as: "very important for us", "rising team" or "have lots [of] challenging projects on their plate these days".

At the end of the introduction round, three young men entered the room and apologised for being late, claiming to have been based at a different office and to have underestimated the time it would take them to get here. With a smile, the manager asked them to tell a joke, sing or dance in front of the group as punishment for being late. The men laughed and sat down, but the manager made it clear that he was serious, and urged at least one of the three to give a short performance. Complete silence flooded the room and I noted wide-eyed looks expressing a mixture of bewilderment and anguish exchanged between the participants.

After a few seemingly endless seconds, one of the three men slowly rose from his chair, swallowed, took a big breath and sang a short classical song in Hindi with a firm, almost professionally trained voice. The other participants cheered and the young lady sitting next to me leaned over to say: "I'm so glad it didn't hit me, I would have fainted in front of all." During the applause, the atmosphere became more relaxed, yet it did not ease up completely for the entire session. During his talk, the manager continuously called upon attendees at random to answer questions about certain aspects of the organisation's business strategy. While some were able to respond confidently, others clearly felt uncomfortable, biting their pen or fingernails subconsciously when they did not know the answer. Feeling much more like a participant than an observer, I spent the rest of the talk fully concentrated on what I would an-

swer if he called on me. To my relief, I was spared and after 45 minutes, the next speaker entered the room. This woman was from the HR team, and she led us through a cheerful getting-to-know-each-other game, after which we enjoyed a coffee break.

The other speakers at the training session were managers of different departments of Advice Company. But unlike the first manager, these managers primarily spoke without posing questions to the audience. While the length of their membership to the organisation varied from a few years to a decade, their presentations were remarkably similar. Most talks began by highlighting the speakers' many years in the company, contrasting this to the situation of the new joiners around them. An introduction to the specific purpose and traits of their departments would follow, before the focus would shift to the general characteristics of Advice Company and the relationship to the client. Advice Company was described as a "premium consulting company", giving "more meaning to the answers [to] clients' strategic questions than competitors". The last speaker on the first day claimed that "we deliver solutions that are simple for the clients to understand and have their ROI [return on investment] in mind", and "we have this certain arrogance that the best solutions just come at a premium". These talks provided insight into the organisation's self-description. The audience was comprised of new organisational members, who had yet to learn the organisational structures and the rules of conduct within it. By opening their speeches by highlighting their many years of organisational membership in conjunction with their senior positions, and contrasting this with the situation of the new starters at the bottom of the hierarchy, the managers emphasised the value of tradition. They highlighted that internal status and decision-making power could only be gained from time and experience within the organisation, as opposed to various career steps made via changes between organisations. The importance of tradition was iterated in later months through a celebration of the organisation's anniversary, which again stressed the image of a "premium" consulting service provider in differentiation to competitors, justifying Advice Company's higher service charges.

The new employees were also made aware of the magnitude of the organisation they now belonged to, which operated in more than 100 countries. The messages given in the speeches included: "we are huge", "you are now part of a big global team" and "we can reach all across the globe, you are not small, only India, we are global". Other guidance that was frequently given during those two days included calls for "boundaryless behaviour" in the office and

“shar[ing] information openly and freely across the organisation”. I will return to these points in Chapter 6, when analysing internal differentiation and boundaries. The quest for “boundaryless” behaviour, however, implied a perceived existence of internal boundaries that needed to be overcome through conscious effort; indeed, my interlocutors perceived these boundaries to exist. Based on these circumstances, I will discuss in Chapter 9 how these boundaries play a role in Advice Company’s project-related planning processes.

The organisation’s strong orientation towards client systems was characterised by the prompt to “live client centricity”, though this instruction was never clearly defined. Case studies were presented to emphasise that “it is in the end all about what the client wants” and that it was important to “understand the needs of the client”. These case studies had the same narrative structure as my interlocutors’ narratives of their most remarkable projects in the interviews: they related to very complex project mandates and hinged on dramatic stories about how the projects seemed too large to realise in too little time, and how the initial reaction had been to push back on the client’s demands but how the projects were ultimately realised and turned into major successes for Advice Company, the respective departments and – of course – the happy clients. The clear essence of these case studies was subsumed in slogans such as: “You don’t say no. We don’t say no. Advice Company doesn’t say no.” Here – again – the continuous emphasis on client centricity as a guiding principle suggests that practices exist which are running against it without mentioning them explicitly.

In the course of my fieldwork I came across many similar narratives negotiating the meaning of client centricity, both in personal interviews and casual conversations, as well as in town hall meetings and project stories that described examples of client centricity and the perceived impossibility of saying “no”. However, during the introduction training at the beginning of my fieldwork, I was only slowly starting to suspect the relevance of client centricity as the superior value in the organisation’s selection processes – and of an opposing counter-current to it. I did not foresee at that time that the opacity of client centricity was potentially the most productive working misunderstanding in this organisation. I will show, throughout this book, that the lack of clarity about the precise meaning of client centricity made the value particularly productive for the successful operation of the organisation.

I got a first glimpse of this during the lunch break on the second day of training. I had only just sat down at a canteen table with a few other participants when Kashish, who was also attending the training and was part

of the team I was accompanying in those weeks, approached me. He leaned over and told me in a low voice that everybody from the team would be going to a nearby restaurant for the farewell lunch of a colleague who was leaving the organisation the following day. Kashish had been sent to look for me and to convince me to come along. On the one hand, I beamed with delight that my participation in that team event had been considered relevant enough for Kashish to be sent across the entire office area to fetch me and for the opportunity to see the team interact outside of the office premises; on the other hand, I was a bit reluctant to join, as we would certainly be late for the beginning of the next scheduled presentation of the training. The public avengement of the latecomers was still present in my memories, and I was not keen to sing a song in front of all of the participants. When I raised my concern to Kashish, he smiled and said, “Don’t worry, we will be fine” – so I went along with the team to a long, interesting and delicious lunch event.

When we returned to the office after a good two hours of great food and lively conversation, I stood in front of the meeting room with Kashish and hesitated to enter. I must have given him a worried look, as he mumbled before opening the door: “Don’t say anything, just look serious and take your seat in the room, I will take care of it.” So we entered and received a very sharp “You’re late!” comment from the manager holding the presentation. Kashish responded to my astonishment: “Sorry, but there was a very urgent high-priority client deliverable that had to be dealt with.” Without another word, he sat down. The manager briefly nodded and continued with his talk. A few moments later, I glanced over at Kashish, who returned my look with one lifted eyebrow and a subtle hint of a smile. Obviously he had understood very quickly how to successfully play on “client centricity” in this organisation – he had learned “the ‘office talk’, the rules of the organisation” (Krause-Jensen 2013: 44). In contrast to the three young men who had arrived late the day before, Kashish had explained the delay in a way the organisation could process; therefore, we got away with it.

4.3.3. Maintaining membership: The grade-based ranking system

The final session of the training was held by a senior HR representative, who played a professionally produced 5-minute video clip featuring the well-known top managers of the organisation welcoming the new joiners. He then explained how the new joiners could ensure that they stayed in the organisation, referring to the performance measurement scale along

which each employee would receive a rating by his or her manager once per year. This ranking would be based on objectives that would be agreed at the beginning of each financial year between the employee and the manager, and would be given on a scale from 1 (worst) to 4 (best). This rating would not only determine the amount of the annual bonus payment, but also enable or disable promotions, which could only be granted to those receiving a rating of 4. The HR representative furthermore stated:

Employees rated only with level 1 are asked to move out of the system immediately as well as the lower level 2 performers. They are obviously not living up to our values. Only level 3 and 4 performers are to be retained in the organisation, and only with a rating of level 4 you can apply for a different department or for the mobility programme once you have been for at least two years in your initial department.

The mobility programme would allow employees to gain placement in one of Advice Company's overseas offices. This grade-based system illustrates the organisation's perception of objective and quantitatively measured conditioned membership, mirroring the joining process by requiring a graded entry test as a pre-condition for invitation to an interview. However, the "annual performance review" frequently raised several – often bitter – discussions about differing perceptions over the right, "justified" grade between a team member and his or her manager. But no matter how controversial a certain grade might be, all subsequent decisions built on this grade; for this reason, an insufficient grade could lead to a denied application for placement in a different department or promotion.

4.3.4. Leaving and re-entry

Similar to the various routes of becoming a member of the organisation, several paths lead out of it. On the basis of the grading concept discussed above, one reason an employee might leave the organisation is that he or she will "have been asked to leave". This is the "organisational euphemism" (Krause-Jensen 2013: 51) for being fired due to poor performance. This pathway, which is primarily based on the organisation's decision to discontinue a specific employee's membership, was almost impossible for me to gain insight to. Unlike employees who left the organisation on the basis of other decision routes, those who were asked to leave did not return and were rarely mentioned to me as individual cases. They existed as a threatening category that one might

have “heard of”. Another pathway to exit with a similarly low likelihood of return is taken by young female employees who decide to drop out of the workforce after marriage or motherhood in order to focus on the needs of their family. The extent to which these decisions are driven by individual selection or extrinsic decisions from the family environment vary from case to case; thus, an assessment of this pathway is not included in this work.²

The other two pathways for discontinuing organisational membership are based on employees’ selection decisions to accept an attractive job offer from a competitor or a client or to continue one’s studies. “Putting down the papers” (as the employees call the process of resigning) for a better paying job and/or a career jump is common. This decision is often combined with the hope that one’s career will be boosted. A common strategy associated with this step is to re-enter Advice Company after a few years at a higher job level than one would have been able to achieve by remaining in the company for that time. This type of “career plan” is not supported by the top management, as an executive board member said: “I don’t want my staff to think there is a shortcut to a career.” Nonetheless, I accompanied a number of colleagues who had taken this route. Similarly, I also came across examples of people “who jumped the queue” through this method.

This trend can be connected to the phenomenon that employees who leave the organisation often remain in contact with their former colleagues via organisation-independent communication channels such as Facebook or the team’s WhatsApp group. Ex-colleagues frequently take part in their previous team’s after-hour activities, meet their previous colleagues for coffee and attend the weddings of their former teammates. During the pilot study in March 2013, I accompanied a young man who, by the time I began official fieldwork four months later, had left the organisation. At that point, his former colleagues knew about his professional life at a competitor’s organisation and his honeymoon trip. His name was still mentioned at the team morning coffees. When I accompanied the colleagues of that particular team to a teammate’s wedding reception, I was therefore not surprised to meet the young man again. Similarly, he had been informed of my return to Advice Company for fieldwork and the several activities I had attended with his former colleagues. We went together on stage as a group to pay respect to the bridal

2 See, for example, Desai, M. et al. (2011) for a study on the overall satisfaction of working women in India; and Srinivasan et al. (2013), who evaluated the influence of marital and parental status on the career persistence of women software professionals in India.

couple and the ex-colleague stood amongst us when we got our official (and obligatory) group picture taken. Also, when we later posed for less formal pictures and had dinner, he remained with the group and there was no difference between him and the current team members. He was still a member of the group of “groom’s workmates”.

The client consultant whose farewell lunch I “escaped” to with Kashish during the new joiners training, also remained in touch after her exit from the organisation. I met her several times for an after-work coffee together with another ex-colleague of hers. Her ties with her former teammates remained quite active, as she had started to share a flat with a former teammate a few months after leaving. Even eight months after her exit from the organisation, she showed me several online conversations she had recently had with her former managers at Advice Company. Through all of these channels, she had remained well informed of the team situation and the latest Advice Company gossip. Professionally, she worked in the environment of Advice Company as a competitor, and thus battled with her former teammates for clients’ projects. While she remained in contact with her former colleagues, she had not returned to Advice Company as she had initially intended; instead, she had moved to the client side. Despite being a strategy not approved by management, returning to the company after a taking a job elsewhere seemed common. When I accompanied client consultant Gopal, who had just re-entered the organisation after an absence of 18 months, he expressed a feeling of having an obligation to return:

When I resigned, it was clear between my manager and me that I [was] only leaving under the condition to be back here the moment he need[ed] me. While I stayed in touch with the teammates on casual stuff, I did not even speak a single word with him [the manager] during these months. But then I saw his name on the display of my mobile when he called. I picked up and just asked by when he want[ed] me to be back, that was it.

Staff turnover in business organisations in India has been broadly covered in research (Khandelwal 2009). However, the strategy of leaving an organisation with the intention of later re-entering seems to have been less explored. Individuals who have left Advice Company to work for a competitor and later re-entered Advice Company at a higher position are critically labelled by management as those intending to take a “shortcut to their career”. In contrast to those who re-enter from a competing organisation, “good” returners are those who leave the organisation to continue their studies (e.g. by pursuing an MBA

or PhD) and return at a higher job level because they have earned a more advanced degree. While the perception of re-entry under these circumstances is different, the communication pathways are similar to those described above. In either case, ex-employees make their re-entry to Advice Company via their ties with former teammates. So, despite having left the organisation, their communication with the organisation remains active and the social sub-system continues to function. This makes re-entry realistic, should an opportunity or a perceived obligation to return arise. Gopal captured this notion of a social system emerging beyond the organisational boundaries in the paradoxical phrase: “We might be gone, but still there.”

4.4. Concluding remarks: Operative closure and openness to the environment

Luhmann’s proposition of self-referentially closed systems with interactional openness to the environment “contradicts the classical opposition of closed and open systems” (Luhmann 1995a: 37). In Luhmann’s understanding, a system must be operationally closed in order to interact with the environment, otherwise the system-environment difference will cease to exist. This makes the idea of a system boundary with permeable qualities misleading. A system boundary cannot be understood as firmly established and then becoming pervious, but must be understood as a social construct that exists through its communication. When the boundary is not communicated, it disappears. The communication hence acts to define a system’s boundary and what is deemed pertinent to it.

I have illustrated how Advice Company’s boundaries are, on the one hand, sharply communicated through sophisticated acts of differentiation via elaborate access procedures, outgoing communication control to clients, multi-level recruitment procedures and strict rules of organisational membership. But on the other hand, the boundaries are furthermore maintained through daily interaction with the environment, such as that with freelancers, who are provided a dedicated working area in the street office. This space denotes openness to the environment, yet clearly communicates organisational boundaries.

In contrast to these dividing lines stands the relationship with contractors, who work alongside permanent employees in identical job profiles; therefore, their work clearly belongs to the social system of Advice Company.

When employees and contractors communicate on project-related topics, the organisational boundary is not communicated and hence does not exist: employees and contractors comprise a social system. Only in situations such as contract renewal or the daily sign-in procedure is the boundary communicated and therefore brought to existence. Second, the established campus recruitment partnerships with universities enable Advice Company to conduct recruitment sessions on campus; in return, universities market this partnership as a selling point for their programmes. This relationship can be viewed as a structural coupling of interdependent systems. Universities and Advice Company collaborate effectively on the basis of well-established conventions, along which boundaries emerge (or not). I have also described how employees who voluntarily leave Advice Company maintain – over months and years – frequent multi-channel communication with their former colleagues. While this phenomenon might be inevitable in any highly specialised business community, it shows that ex-employees remain a part of a social system that has been initiated in the context of Advice Company. Similarly, continued participation in after-office activities, wedding receptions and the like demonstrates the way in which employees communicate with each other (or with ex-colleagues) outside of the direct work context and illustrates that social sub-systems can emerge beyond the organisational boundaries from which they originate.

The cases presented in this chapter have illustrated how the conventional understanding of organisational boundaries can be challenged by the application of Luhmann's theoretical propositions. At the same time, I have shown how the organisation establishes its differentiation to the environment. With this differentiation as a foundation, further environmental differentiation is carried out through, for example, strategies of aggregation for relevant systems in the environment (Luhmann 1995a: 187). Advice Company differentiates its environment into clients, freelancers, universities and contractors. Generally cleaning personnel, office equipment providers, landlords and other supplying systems would have to be included here. But they are not concerned directly with the business process and are therefore insignificant for this work. The following chapter analyses the internal differentiation of Advice Company by looking more closely at the three offices and their respective relationships to the organisational structure. While a first glance might suggest a clear picture of these relationships, I will present a number of contradictions that will distort attempts at an easy answer.