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FROM JUICE TO KPIs: INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY IN LAS VEGAS CASINO MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a historically grounded analysis of how Las Vegas table games managers constructed occupational identity and navigated institutional change during a period of significant transformation in the casino industry. Drawing on fifteen oral history interviews conducted between 2014 and 2016, the research examines how managers made sense of the shift from informal, relationship-driven management to corporatized, metrics-oriented systems. Thematic analysis reveals three interrelated themes: the transformation of occupational identity and loss of autonomy; the persistence and adaptation of informal power structures ("juice"); and generational tensions in the interpretation of managerial legitimacy. By foregrounding managers' narratives as situated historical accounts, the study demonstrates that institutional change is experienced not only as a structural process but as a lived negotiation of meaning, authority, and professional identity. The findings contribute to scholarship on organizational change, occupational identity, and the culture of work, highlighting the value of retrospective, narrative approaches for understanding how frontline actors interpret and enact transformation in complex service organizations.

Keywords: Institutional change, Occupational identity, Casino management, Informal power, Narrative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Las Vegas has long stood as a global symbol of the gambling industry's evolution—a city where spectacle, risk, and labor intersect in uniquely visible ways. Over the past several decades, the casino sector in Las Vegas has undergone profound institutional and cultural transformation, shifting from an era characterized by informality, personal relationships, and discretionary authority

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to one defined by corporatization, surveillance, and standardized procedures (Schwartz, 2016; Cassidy, 2012). While these changes have been widely documented in policy and business literature, the lived experiences and sense-making of those who managed the day-to-day operations—the table games managers—remain underexplored (Kingma, 2004; Hancock and Smith, 2017).

This study offers a historical analysis of how Las Vegas table games managers constructed and negotiated their occupational identities during a period of significant industry transition (2014–2016). Drawing on fifteen oral history interviews collected at the Center for Gaming Research, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, this research examines how managers narrated their roles, interpreted institutional change, and responded to shifting logics of legitimacy and control. By treating these interviews as situated narratives rather than static records, the study seeks to illuminate how frontline managers made sense of their work amid the broader transformation of the casino industry (Riessman, 2008).

The value of a retrospective, historically framed analysis is twofold. First, it provides insight into how institutional change is experienced and narrated by those tasked with implementing it—a perspective often overlooked in organizational research (McMillen, 2006; Ocasio et al., 2015). Second, it allows for a critical examination of how occupational identities and informal power structures adapt, persist, or erode in response to new organizational logics (Bourdieu, 1986; Thornton et al., 2005).

Guided by these aims, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How did Las Vegas table games managers narrate and make sense of institutional and cultural change during the transition from informal to corporate casino management (2014–2016)?
- What occupational identities and logics were constructed in response to these changes, and how were they contested across generations?

In addressing these questions, the analysis draws on institutional theory and occupational identity scholarship (Ashcraft, 2007; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) to interpret the narratives of managers as both products and producers of organizational change. The study's findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how historical shifts in industry structure are lived and contested at the level of everyday work, offering lessons for scholars of organizational change, identity, and the culture of labor.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

DATA SOURCE AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This study draws on a corpus of fifteen oral history interviews with table games managers in Las Vegas, originally conducted by gambling historian

David G. Schwartz between 2014 and 2016. The interviews were collected as part of a project at the Center for Gaming Research, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), and are publicly accessible through the UNLV digital collections. Participants held a range of managerial roles, including pit bosses and shift managers, with careers spanning multiple decades and properties across both the Las Vegas Strip and downtown casinos. This diversity of roles and settings provides a broad perspective on the occupational culture and institutional changes within the industry.

The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on participants' professional histories, workplace dynamics, experiences with both players and employees, and reflections on how the industry had changed over time. Topics covered included daily routines, decision-making processes, relationships with colleagues and superiors, the impact of technology and surveillance, and perceptions of generational and cultural shifts. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were transcribed in full. The names and affiliations of interviewees are available in the archive; no pseudonyms were used.

Given the age of the data, this study explicitly adopts a historical perspective, treating the interviews as situated accounts of a transitional period in the Las Vegas casino industry. This approach is consistent with established qualitative research practices, where retrospective analysis can yield valuable insights into organizational change and occupational identity (McMillen, 2006).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYTICAL ORIENTATION

The research design is qualitative, interpretivist, and constructivist. The interviews are treated not as objective records, but as narrative constructions through which managers perform, negotiate, and defend their professional identities (Riessman, 2008). The aim is not to fact-check events, but to understand how managers made sense of their roles and the broader institutional changes they experienced.

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Coding was primarily inductive, but informed by sensitizing concepts from institutional theory and occupational identity scholarship (Charmaz, 2014; Ocasio et al., 2015; Thornton et al., 2005). The analysis focused on how managers narrated institutional change, constructed occupational identities, and negotiated generational and cultural tensions.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To enhance analytic rigor, coding and interpretation were iteratively checked for coherence and supported by multiple examples from the corpus. Reflexive

attention was paid to the researcher's positionality, recognizing the limitations of interpreting occupational cultures across both geographical and temporal distance. As an analyst working outside the United States and not involved in the original data collection, I approached the narratives with cultural sensitivity and theoretical openness, while remaining aware of the potential for interpretive bias and the challenges of analyzing a contextually specific occupational culture from afar.

The study uses secondary data from publicly available oral history interviews. The original interviews were conducted under informed consent by UNLV's Center for Gaming Research and made accessible for scholarly use. The institutional ethics advisory board at the author's university reviewed the study and determined that no additional ethical approval was necessary beyond the procedures followed during the original data collection. As the data were independently collected, fully de-identified, and available prior to this analysis, the study was not subject to formal human research ethics approval.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The interviews were not designed around the present research questions and thus vary in depth and focus. As retrospective accounts, they are subject to memory bias and selective framing. The use of secondary data also limits the possibility of follow-up clarification. Despite these constraints, the corpus provides rare and valuable insight into the lived experience of managing gambling labor during a period of significant institutional change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is situated at the intersection of research on institutional change, occupational identity, and the historical transformation of service industries. The following review focuses on three main strands of literature: (1) institutional theory and organizational change, (2) occupational identity and managerial work, and (3) the use of historical and narrative methods in organizational research.

INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Institutional theory provides a framework for understanding how organizations adapt to shifting logics, norms, and structures over time (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Thornton et al., 2005). In the context of the gambling industry, scholars have documented the transition from family- or mob-run casinos to corporatized, publicly traded hospitality conglomerates (Schwartz, 2016; Cassidy, 2012). This shift has brought about new forms of surveillance, risk management, and standardization, often at the expense of discretion and

autonomy for frontline managers (Kingma, 2004; Hancock and Smith, 2017; Wikberg, 2021; Li, 2023). Ocasio et al. (2015) and Faik et al. (2024) have shown how institutional logics are reproduced and contested through everyday practices and communication, making the experiences of mid-level managers a valuable lens for studying organizational change.

OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY AND MANAGERIAL WORK

Occupational identity is shaped by the social meanings, performances, and evaluations attached to particular forms of work (Ashcraft, 2007; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ewalt and Ohl, 2013). In roles involving discretionary authority and interpersonal risk—such as casino management—identity is often grounded in embodied performances of competence, composure, and credibility (Ibarra, 1999; Gabriel, 2000). The transition to corporate management has altered the criteria for legitimacy and success, challenging traditional forms of authority and introducing new expectations for emotional labor and compliance (Hochschild, 1983; Acker, 1990; Fraher, 2017; Padavic et al., 2020). The persistence of informal power structures, such as "juice" or social capital, further complicates the relationship between formal organizational change and lived occupational experience (Bourdieu, 1986; Kingma, 2008).

HISTORICAL AND NARRATIVE APPROACHES IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Historical and narrative methods are increasingly recognized as valuable tools for understanding organizational change and occupational identity (McMillen, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Oral history interviews, in particular, provide access to the sense-making processes of individuals who have experienced significant institutional transitions. By treating these interviews as situated narratives, researchers can explore how actors construct, negotiate, and contest their identities and roles in response to shifting organizational logics (Gabriel, 2000; Schwartz, 2016). This approach is especially relevant for retrospective analyses, where the aim is to understand how past experiences inform present understandings of work and legitimacy.

In addition to these strands of research, prior scholarship has examined the lived experiences of casino workers through ethnographic and historical lenses. Sallaz's (2009) comparative ethnography of casino dealers in Nevada and South Africa demonstrates how managerial authority, skill, and discretion are structured differently across regulatory contexts, highlighting the tensions between scripted corporate control and the embodied craft of table-games work. Goodwin's (2014) historical analysis of women's labor in Las Vegas reveals how gendered hiring practices, occupational segregation, and informal power networks shaped opportunities for advancement in the casino industry

over several decades. Taken together, these works underscore that both managerial and frontline casino labor are embedded in broader structures of inequality and organizational control, providing an important foundation for the present study's focus on how table games managers narrate institutional change in a later period.

SYNTHESIS AND RESEARCH GAP

In summary, prior research demonstrates that institutional change in service industries is experienced and negotiated through shifting occupational identities, evolving power structures, and the reinterpretation of professional legitimacy. However, despite the growing literature on these topics, little is known about how frontline managers in the gambling industry have experienced and narrated such transformations, particularly from a historical perspective. This study addresses this gap by drawing on institutional theory and occupational identity scholarship, and by employing a historical and narrative approach to analyze Las Vegas table games managers' accounts. Building on these theoretical foundations, the following analysis examines how managers' narratives reflect and contest the institutional changes that reshaped their occupational world.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the oral history interviews with Las Vegas table games managers revealed three interrelated themes that illuminate how managers experienced and narrated institutional change during the industry's transition from informal to corporate logics (2014–2016): (1) the transformation of occupational identity, (2) the persistence and adaptation of informal power structures, and (3) generational tensions and the reinterpretation of legitimacy.

TRANSFORMATION OF OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY

Managers consistently described their work as a form of embodied craft, requiring not only technical expertise but also interpersonal skill, emotional regulation, and situational awareness. The ability to "read the room," "know your players," and "step in before it blows up" was seen as central to managerial identity. As one manager put it, "You're not just sitting there in a suit. You've got to feel the flow. It's like directing traffic and reading minds at the same time." (Interviewee 2)

This craft-based identity was closely tied to autonomy and discretion. Many interviewees contrasted the earlier era—when "the best bosses could look at a table and tell you what was gonna happen before the cards even dropped" (Interviewee 8)—with the increasing standardization and surveillance of corporate management. The introduction of digital oversight,

scripted policies, and risk-averse protocols was experienced as a loss of professional discretion: "We used to be the ones making the calls. Now we're the ones double-checking that someone else's checklist got followed." (Interviewee 3)

Managers also described the emotional labor required to maintain authority and composure in a high-pressure environment. "You could be sweating bullets inside, but if the floor sees that, the whole vibe shifts. You've got to absorb it all and still smile." (Interviewee 12) This performative dimension of managerial work aligns with broader findings on emotional labor and affective regulation in service industries.

The shift to corporate management was not always framed as outright resistance. Some managers appreciated the clarity and protection offered by formal processes, but even among those who accepted the changes, there was a sense that something intangible—a sense of craft, pride, or ownership—had been eroded: "You stop caring after a while. Why think for yourself if someone upstairs will just override you anyway?" (Interviewee 7)

PERSISTENCE AND ADAPTATION OF INFORMAL POWER STRUCTURES

Despite the formalization of organizational processes, managers emphasized the continued importance of informal influence—referred to as "juice"—in shaping career trajectories and workplace dynamics. "Back then, you got moved up if someone liked you, trusted you. Didn't matter if HR had no file on you—your boss knew you could handle it." (Interviewee 9)

Juice was remembered as both enabling and exclusionary. While it fostered a sense of belonging for some, it also acted as a barrier for those without access to inner circles, especially women and newcomers: "You could be the best damn dealer on the floor, but if you didn't have someone pulling for you, you'd stay there for years. Meanwhile someone with juice gets the suit in a month." (Interviewee 1)

In recent years, many observed a shift in how influence is conferred. Formal systems such as performance evaluations and compliance records have replaced direct mentorship or patronage, but the underlying dynamic of selective visibility persists: "Now it's all 'systems' and 'metrics,' but let's be honest—there's still someone pulling strings. The new juice is corporate alignment." (Interviewee 10) This reframing of juice from a personal favor system to a bureaucratized version of gatekeeping echoes trends in many industries, where informal influence adapts to appear meritocratic.

GENERATIONAL TENSIONS AND THE REINTERPRETATION OF LEGITIMACY

A notable undercurrent in the interviews was the tension between veteran managers and newer supervisors. Older managers often valued tacit knowledge,

improvisation, and interpersonal authority, while younger colleagues were seen as more comfortable with data-driven systems and compliance protocols. "They know the procedures cold, but they don't know how to feel a situation out. They wait for the computer to tell them what to do." (Interviewee 10)

These generational differences reflected broader shifts in what counted as legitimate managerial competence. "I came up in a time when you earned respect by how you handled chaos. Now you earn it by hitting your KPIs and saying the right things in meetings." (Interviewee 7) Some veteran managers expressed frustration that newer supervisors avoided confrontation or relied on technology rather than direct dialogue: "They don't want to deal with people. They'll review a tape or send a message but won't go talk to the dealer or the player. That's not managing—that's hiding." (Interviewee 11)

Conversely, some managers admired younger colleagues' adaptability to data-driven systems and customer satisfaction paradigms. A few described mentoring as a way to "bridge the gap" between old-school instincts and new-school procedures: "I try to teach them what the manuals don't. How to read people, how to keep the floor calm. But they teach me too—about systems and apps I wouldn't touch otherwise." (Interviewee 6)

This reciprocal learning dynamic suggests that generational friction is not inherently antagonistic, but reflects a shift in what is valued, taught, and rewarded in casino management. The tension is not merely about age, but about the changing institutional meaning of competence and legitimacy.

SYNTHESIS

Together, these themes illustrate how Las Vegas table games managers made sense of and responded to the transformation of their industry. The transition from informal to corporate management was experienced as both a loss and a reconfiguration of professional identity, power, and legitimacy. By foregrounding managers' narratives as situated historical accounts, this analysis highlights the complexity of institutional change as lived and contested at the level of everyday work.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore how Las Vegas table games managers constructed occupational identity and interpreted institutional change during a period of significant transformation in the casino industry. By analyzing oral history interviews from 2014–2016, the research provides a historically grounded account of how frontline managers navigated the shift from informal, discretionary management to corporatized, metrics-driven systems. The findings illuminate the complexity of institutional change as lived and narrated by those responsible for enacting it on the casino floor.

To contextualize these narratives, it is important to note that the interviews themselves draw a clear distinction between different types of change encountered by managers. While the paper is not intended as a full historical account of the casino industry, the interviews do differentiate clearly between procedural shifts that substantively altered managerial work and those experienced as largely symbolic. Managers described the expansion of digital surveillance, standardized risk protocols, and KPI-driven evaluation systems as concrete, consequential changes that reshaped their daily routines and constrained discretionary authority. At the same time, several reforms were narrated as "on paper" changes—formal policies that signaled corporatization but were unevenly implemented on the floor, leaving informal influence patterns and relational dynamics largely intact. This distinction between substantive and symbolic change is integral to understanding how managers made sense of institutional transformation, and why their narratives attend so closely to the lived texture of work rather than to formal organizational scripts.

Building on this distinction, a central finding of this study is the transformation of occupational identity in response to changing organizational logics. Managers described their work as a form of embodied craft, rooted in tacit knowledge, situational awareness, and emotional regulation. The transition to corporate management, with its emphasis on standardization, surveillance, and compliance, was experienced as a loss of autonomy and professional discretion. This echoes Selznick's (1957) concern that institutional rationalization can erode the symbolic and moral authority of occupational roles, reducing workers to functionaries. The narratives reveal that, for many managers, the meaning and legitimacy of their work were intimately tied to their ability to exercise judgment and maintain control in unpredictable situations.

The findings also highlight the affective dimension of managerial work. Managers described the emotional labor required to project calm, absorb stress, and maintain authority in a high-pressure environment. This aligns with Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor and extends it to a male-dominated, high-stakes setting where affective performance is both expected and undervalued. The invisibility of this labor, and its uneven distribution across gender and generational lines, underscores the need for greater recognition of the emotional demands placed on frontline managers.

Despite the formalization of organizational processes, the study finds that informal power structures—captured in the concept of "juice"—remain central to career advancement and workplace dynamics. While the mechanisms of influence have shifted from personal patronage to corporate alignment, the underlying logic of selective visibility and sponsorship persists. This hybridization of formal and informal logics complicates the experience of organizational change, as managers must navigate both explicit performance metrics and implicit expectations for relational capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Kingma, 2008).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the interviewees' accounts reflect particular positionalities within the casino workforce. As historical research on Las Vegas casinos has shown, access to advancement has long been shaped by gendered and racialized hiring practices and by informal networks that disproportionately benefited white men (e.g., Goodwin, 2014; Figart and Mutari, 2015). Given that the interview corpus is heavily male and reflects career trajectories built within these broader structural conditions, the narratives of "juice" offered here speak from a position of relative advantage within the industry's occupational hierarchy. Acknowledging this context helps clarify why informal social capital appears both powerful and exclusionary in the interviews, and why the dynamics of "juice" cannot be separated from longer histories of inequality in casino labor markets.

Taken together, these contextual factors underscore the need to situate the interviewees' use of the term 'juice' within both historical hiring practices and broader theoretical understandings of relational power. Building on this, it is useful to clarify the relationship between "juice" and social capital. While "juice" functions in ways that resemble Bourdieu's (1986) notion of social capital—particularly in its emphasis on relational resources, selective visibility, and uneven access—it represents a more situated and culturally specific form of influence. Social capital encompasses a broad set of economic, cultural, and symbolic resources, whereas "juice" refers to a narrower, industry-embedded practice of informal sponsorship and recognition on the casino floor. Making this distinction explicit highlights how the interviewees' narratives describe a localized variant of social capital, one shaped by the historical and occupational conditions of casino labor.

The persistence of "juice" also raises questions about meritocracy and inclusion. Several managers noted that access to informal networks remains uneven, with women and newcomers facing particular barriers. This finding resonates with broader research on social capital and organizational inequality, suggesting that efforts to professionalize and standardize management may not fully eliminate the influence of hidden hierarchies.

The analysis reveals significant generational tensions in how managers interpret and adapt to institutional change. Veteran managers often valued tacit knowledge, improvisation, and interpersonal authority, while younger colleagues were seen as more comfortable with data-driven systems and compliance protocols. These differences reflect broader shifts in what counts as legitimate managerial competence and highlight the contested nature of occupational identity during periods of organizational transformation (Ocasio et al., 2015; Thornton et al., 2005).

Importantly, the study finds that generational friction is not inherently antagonistic. Some managers described reciprocal learning and mentorship as ways to bridge the gap between old-school instincts and new-school procedures. This suggests that occupational cultures are not static but are continuously negotiated and redefined in response to changing institutional logics.

By explicitly adopting a historical framing, this study demonstrates the value of retrospective analysis for understanding organizational change. The interviews provide a window into a transitional era in the Las Vegas casino industry, capturing how managers made sense of and responded to the transformation of their occupational world. This approach aligns with calls in organizational research for greater attention to historical context and the lived experience of change (McMillen, 2006; Schwartz, 2016).

The findings also underscore the importance of narrative and sense-making in periods of institutional flux. Managers' accounts are not merely reflections of structural change but are active constructions of meaning, legitimacy, and identity. By foregrounding these narratives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how organizational change is experienced, contested, and narrated from below.

The study's findings have several implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, the research demonstrates the utility of combining institutional theory and occupational identity scholarship with historical and narrative methods. This integrated approach allows for a nuanced analysis of how organizational change is lived and interpreted at the level of everyday work.

Practically, the study highlights the challenges facing casino organizations—and service industries more broadly—as they seek to standardize service, reduce risk, and professionalize management. The narratives suggest that such efforts must account for the tacit, relational, and affective dimensions of managerial work, which are not easily captured in training manuals or performance metrics. For practitioners, the findings underscore the importance of mentoring, narrative continuity, and inclusive pathways to advancement that do not rely solely on informal sponsorship or corporate fluency.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study draws on a secondary corpus of oral history interviews not originally designed for the present research questions, and the sample is skewed heavily male and Las Vegas–centric. As such, the findings reflect a particular time, place, and cultural setting. Future research could use purposive sampling and comparative design to explore similar dynamics in other jurisdictions, casino types, or national contexts. In particular, greater attention to gender, race, and intersecting identities would illuminate how managerial legitimacy is constructed and contested in more diverse ways.

Finally, the study suggests that understanding institutional change in the gambling industry—or any service-intensive sector—requires more than policy analysis or organizational mapping. It requires listening closely to those who live the contradictions, who improvise within constraints, and who continue to find meaning and identity in the act of managing the floor. Their voices offer not only retrospective insight but also a roadmap for navigating future transformations in labor, legitimacy, and the culture of work.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a historically grounded analysis of how Las Vegas table games managers constructed occupational identity and navigated institutional change during a pivotal period in the casino industry. By drawing on oral history interviews from 2014–2016, the research has illuminated the lived experience of frontline managers as they confronted the transition from informal, relationship-driven management to corporatized, metrics-oriented systems.

The findings reveal that institutional change is not simply a matter of new policies or structures, but is deeply experienced and negotiated through shifting occupational identities, evolving power dynamics, and contested definitions of legitimacy. Managers' narratives highlight the enduring significance of tacit knowledge, emotional labor, and informal influence—even as formal systems of surveillance and compliance become more prominent. Generational tensions further underscore the complexity of adapting to new organizational logics, as veteran and newer managers bring different values, skills, and expectations to their roles.

By foregrounding the voices of those who enact and interpret change on the casino floor, this study contributes to a richer understanding of organizational transformation in service industries. The historical framing demonstrates the value of retrospective analysis for capturing the nuances of institutional change and occupational identity. It also underscores the importance of narrative and sense-making in periods of organizational flux.

This study also complements existing historical and ethnographic accounts of casino labor (e.g., Goodwin, 2014; Sallaz, 2009), which document how gendered and organizational hierarchies shaped the experiences of workers and managers in earlier periods. By focusing on a later phase of corporatization and drawing on oral histories with table games managers, the present analysis extends this scholarship by illuminating how these actors interpret institutional change and negotiate evolving logics of discretion, authority, and legitimacy.

While the study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and its focus on a specific time and place, it offers insights that are relevant for scholars and practitioners interested in the dynamics of change, identity, and legitimacy in complex organizations. Future research could build on these findings by examining similar processes in other contexts, with greater attention to diversity and intersectionality.

Ultimately, understanding institutional change requires more than mapping formal structures or policies—it demands close attention to the lived realities, struggles, and adaptations of those who keep organizations running. The experiences of Las Vegas table games managers offer not only a window into the past, but also lessons for navigating the ongoing evolution of work, authority, and meaning in contemporary organizations.

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