Accounting without Accounting: Informational Proxies and the Construction of Organisational Discourses
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PURPOSE - An effective management accounting information system, as well as the accounting discourse related to it, can support, facilitate, enable, and constrain diverse business discourses. This paper examines the discursive and organisational effects of an organisation accounting upon absent accounting artefacts, i.e. accounting without accounting. Situated within the discursive literature, this paper examines the construction of competing articulations of the organisation by focusing on what accounting does or does not do within an organisation. In particular, the paper acknowledges the fundamental importance of the accounting discourse in supporting, facilitating, enabling, and constraining competing organisational discourses, as it illustrates how the absence of accounting centralises power within the organisation.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH - From a rhetorical, discursive perspective, we develop an in-depth qualitative case study in a manufacturing organisation where management accounting information systems has been abandoned for approximately two years. Interpretive research approaches, from a post-structural perspective, provided the base for the structure of the research. We studied how other organisational discourses (such as entrepreneurship and growth), which are traditionally constructed with reference to accounting and other artefacts, continued to be produced and sustained. The non-use and non-availability of management accounting information created a vacuum that needed to be filled. The lack of discursive counterpoints and counter-evidence provided by management accounting information systems created a vacuum of information, allowing powerful, proxy discourses to prevail in the organisation, increasing risks to business management.

FINDINGS - The absence of management accounting information systems to support an accounting discourse requires that contingent discourses ‘fill in the discursive gap’. Despite appearances, they are no substitute for the accounting discourse. Thus, over time, the entrepreneurial, growth and partners’ discourses lose credibility, without the corresponding use of management accounting information and its associated discourse.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS - As a result of the findings in practical terms, it is important to think that organisations may not take into account the power of the accounting information that they could use for their own benefit. In other words, accounting can be part of the organisational strategy or, in the case where such information is lacking, accounting can be the weak part of that strategy. Although it is expected when it is disclosed, it is possible to step back and reflect on it.
ORIGINALITY/VALUE - There are at least two main contributions from the case study and the findings presented in this paper: first, they provide a new perspective for studying management accounting information systems, as a specific organisational discourse among other discourses that shape people relationship within the organisation as an examination of accounting without accounting. Secondly, this discussion reinforces the relevance of accounting discourse for other organisational discourses, supporting, facilitating, enabling, and constraining them, by demonstrating the effects of its absence.

KEYWORDS: management accounting, business discourses, rhetoric analysis, discourse theory.

ARTICLE CLASSIFICATION: Case study.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Organisations are complex networks of interconnected discourses. Sets of complementary and conflicting discursive articulations operate within an organisation, including growth, entrepreneurship, strategy, management, production and sales. We concentrate on the construction of these discursive articulations, particularly the use of discursive artefacts. Traditionally, management accounting artefacts support, facilitate, enable, and constrain competing and conflicting organisational discourses (Chapman, 1998; Puxty, 1993; Hines, 1988; Morgan, 1988). We situate this paper within literatures concerning accounting generally, and management accounting and management control specifically. This includes literature recognising (1) the discursive effects of how accounting is used (e.g. Arrington and Francis, 1989; Cooper and Sherer, 1984; Hines, 1988, 1989, 1991; Mitchell et al., 1998; Morgan, 1988; Puxty, 1993), literature illustrating that (2) accounting operates to sustain diverse organisational discourses (e.g. Ahrens and Chapman, 2004; Covaleski et al., 2003; Knights and Collinson, 1987; Major and Hopper, 2005), and literature acknowledging (3) the ‘linguistic turn’ in accounting (e.g. Arnold et al., 1994; Macintosh, 2002; Macintosh et al., 2000). While the focus of these literatures considers the direct impact of the use of management accounting information systems (MAIS) within an organisation (a ‘positive, what is’ focus), this study addresses the organisational impact and consequent managerial dynamics of the absence of MAIS (in illustrating what does this ‘absence’ do, it is crucial that we stress that there was MAIS previously in the studied organisation); we illustrate that, in the absence of the discursive artefacts of MAIS, managerial intuition becomes increasingly important, which has the effect of centralising power in the organisation, and the organisation conjures up informational proxies to replace the management information traditionally provided by accounting.
artefacts. These intuitions and informational proxies prove to be unsatisfactory, short-term oriented, and difficult to defend, due to the historical pervasive culture of accounting (Morgan, 1988).

This paper progresses as follows: the second section positions the paper with respect to accounting and discursive literatures, including accounting and MAIS’ role as discursive mechanisms, discourse theory as a specific form of discourse, and then ‘the ontic’ and rhetoric as specific tools of discourse analysis. The third section introduces our organisational case study and illustrates our post-structurally informed methodology for the identification and recording of organisational discourses. The fourth section illustrates the variety of organisational discourses developed in the absence of MAIS. This section depicts the discourses of the partners’ beliefs (intuition, trust and confidence), entrepreneurship (competitive advantage, growth, ‘life project’, and focus on results [which focused on non-accounting artefacts]), and accounting. In this section, we seek to understand the construction of organisational discourses that previously were and traditionally are supported by accounting information, specifically addressing the impact of the absence of MAIS in the construction of organisational discourses. This analysis addresses the rhetorical processes by which the organisation produces ‘alternative’ artefacts to support various organisational discourses, as many organisational discourses were sustained, maintained or supported by accounting information (Chapman, 1998). The fifth section analyses the implications of these alternative discourses and of the absence of MAIS. In this we develop our two main contributions: first, that due to the historicity of accounting, this organisation is still ‘accounting’ even without formal accounting – this is an examination of what accounting ‘does’ within organisations; and second, that crucial organisational discourses traditionally grounded in and supported by MAIS continue to exist and function within the company; for us, the inventiveness of the company in sustaining these discourses is interesting but also risky. The effect of these discursive shifts is a shift in the power dynamic within the organisation, centralised around the two partners. We turn now to situate the paper within accounting literatures, particularly focusing on accounting and MAIS.

2 ACCOUNTING AND DISCOURSE

Following a movement to a constructionist inquiry, accounting literature increasingly recognises the inherent social, political and cultural contestability of accounting. For instance, as Hines (1988, 1989) and Morgan (1988) illustrate, this suggests that accounting and organisational discourses can be ‘reconstructed’, ‘reinterpreted’ and ‘rearticulated’ based on diverse social, political, and cultural positions. This is central to our discussion in examining how accounting artefacts operate within the organisation, and that accounting is perceived to have a central role in organisational discursive articulations:
Accounting practice is no longer seen as a neutral, benign technology reporting the facts of organisational life. Rather accounting practice is interested, problematic, and shapes the context in which it operates (Stewart, 1995, p. 151).

(See also Ahrens and Chapman, 2004; Chua, 1986; Covaleski et al., 2003; Knights and Collinson, 1987; Llewellyn and Milne, 2007; Macintosh et al., 2000; Major and Hopper, 2005; Mitchell et al., 1998; and Puxty, 1993).

In this sense, accounting is powerful; accountants have power to construct reality (Hines, 1988; Morgan, 1988), as discussed in the literature on the linguistic turn and accounting (e.g. Arnold et al., 1994; Wittgenstein, 1974; Macintosh, 2002; Macintosh et al., 2000; De Loo and Lowe, 2011). Morgan argues:

Accountants often see themselves as engaged in an objective, value-free, technical enterprise, representing reality ‘as is’. But in fact, they are subjective ‘constructors of reality’: presenting and representing the situations in limited and one-sided ways. They are not just technicians practising a technical craft. They are part of a much broader process of reality construction, producing partial and rather one-sided views of reality, exactly as an artist is obliged to produce a partial view of the reality he or she wishes to represent (1988, p. 477).

The role of accountants is to work around ‘rules’ in an articulatory manner (Napier and Noke, 1992), which raises a tension underpinning the logic of accounting: the quest for objectivity vis-à-vis the partial and one-sided representation that constitutes accounting. This illustrates the inherent contestability of accounting information and the space for competing and complementary organisational discourses to develop out of the same accounting information. Accountings are contestable, indeterminate and limited (Miller and Napier, 1993).

This is a familiar argument within accounting literature (Meyer, 1986; Chapman, 1998; Roberts, 2009; Messner, 2009). The partial nature of accounting (Morgan, 1988; Hines, 1988) is crucial to its ambiguity and indeterminacy. This makes it politically powerful as it is able to rhetorically construct and re-construct meaning. As we will argue, our focus is on what accounting does within the organisation (at the ontic level), rather than the more traditional epistemological nature of accounting inquiry: what is ‘accounting’ and what ‘accounts’ are (we refer to this as the ‘social logic’ of accounting; Mol and Law, 2004). Meyer (1986) argues that the employment and use of accounting is a form of rationalisation that is incomplete and not self-evident. For our discourse theory, post-structural position, this incompleteness suggests its partiality, and this openness is the root of an ontology of antagonism: “[a]ntagonism is the ‘constitutive outside’ that accompanies the affirmation of all identity” (Laclau, 1990, p. 183). Moreover,

… antagonism constitutes the limits of every objectivity, which is revealed as partial and precarious objectification. If language is a system of differences, antagonism is the failure of difference: in that sense, it situates itself within the limits of language and can only exist as the disruption of it – that is, as metaphor…Antagonism escapes the possibility of being apprehended through language, since language only exists as an attempt to fix that which
antagonism subverts. Antagonism, far from being an objective relation, is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are shown – in the sense in which Wittgenstein used to say that what cannot be said can be shown (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 125) (emphasis in the original).

Chapman (1998) argues, similarly, about the role of accounting in the construction of organisational networks: the indeterminate nature of accounting enables a variety of networks to employ accounting in different ways as it is always in a process of evolution and development. Roberts (2009) and Messner (2009) both consider the role of accounting in accountability and argue that the indeterminacy and ambiguity of accounting suggest that there are limits to the quest for transparency, control and accountability.\(^1\) These are vital lessons for us: accounting, in that sense, thrives politically, rhetorically and antagonistically due to being indeterminate and ambiguous; there is always space for another articulation or account (Chua, 1986; Catlett, 1960; Puxty, 1993).

This discussion invokes an important ontological argument for us concerning what ‘is’ accounting (our focus is on what accounting ‘does’, but there is a risk that this review might be read as presupposing the existence of accounting). While the literature above emphasises the empowering ability of accounting, our objective is not to reify accounting within the organisation (Miller and Napier, 1993; Hopwood, 1987). There is nothing ‘natural’ (in the ‘natural law’ sense of the idea) about accounting (Hines, 1988). We draw on Hopwood (1987) to support the contention that accounting does not exist \emph{a priori} and more importantly, the use of accounting, or for that matter, the non-use of accounting, has a tendency to result in the opposite of what was intended.

Central to such a view of accounting is the possibility of there being an equivocal relationship between the aims in the name of which the craft is advanced and its actual organisational consequences...Not least because the generality of the accounting rhetoric can have difficulty interfacing with the detail, the complexity, the diversity and the specificity of organisational action, some of the anticipated consequences of a particular accounting intervention may not be realised...Moreover, a whole domain of the unanticipated can realise itself as accounting intersects with other organisational practices and processes, as it actively creates a new sphere of organisational visibility, objectivity and potential significance, and as, in the process of so doing, it engenders resistances to the strategies and interventions which it seeks to further. As all the case analyses have illustrated, the consequences of accounting interventions in the organisation can disturb, disrupt and displace the organisational arena that was presumed in their formulation, thereby having the power to transform rather than merely modify, the processes of organisational change (Hopwood, 1987, pp. 229-230).

For Hopwood (1987), the absence of accounting provides its ontological ability to ‘exist’ on within the organisation: accounting could be transformative, but that transformative potential has the ability to ‘impinge’ upon transformation and results in something quite unintended. This, in combination with Messner (2009), is crucial to our theorisation of accounting without accounting.

\(^1\) We return to Messner (2009) in our discussion. In particular, Messner’s discussion on pages 925-930 is particularly important. What we argue is that due to the organisation previously using MAIS to inform their operations, and a number of organisational discourses were maintained through this accounting information, this historicity of accounting within the organisation haunts the organisation. We will argue that in having previously accounted, the decision (abandonment) of accounting is still a form of accounting.
Our work develops Messner’s (2009) contribution to the theorisation of accountability in two directions. First, the logic of accountability is conceived as a relationship between the self and the addressee (Messner, 2009, p. 927). Thus in conceiving the nature of accountability, Messner argues that by choosing not to give an account to the addressee, this constitutes the giving of an account. For us, in arguing for accounting without accounting, our work is not the mere substitution of accounting for accountability – in the management accounting context, there is no real ‘addressee’, as there is no similar demand imperative: management accounting information (MAI) and MAIS are choices. Perhaps in a financial accounting context, the logic of the market, regulation or legal requirements (such as rules for listed entities) creates a demand imperative for accounting information in the same sense as the addressee for accountability. However, for management, management accounting, traditionally, is the provision of information that meets the needs of management and other users, but is demanded by management. Either this constitutes a space where there is no demand imperative or it creates a space where the constitution of the demand for the account changes the nature of the ‘addressee’, we would argue, in a significant manner. Secondly, there is a further point in developing Messner (2009). Messner discusses nothing of the nature of the account, simply noting that the decision not to give an account constitutes an account. Our contribution is different by focusing on what accounting does or does not do in the organisation. Given the tradition, in our case study, of MAI, this historicity and acculturation, in the Morgan (1988) and Hines (1988) tradition, impacts on what is meant by accounting without accounting. Our specific case study illustrates how the previous accounting history impacted upon the type of information that the entity sought in replacing their abandoned MAIS: in this sense, they continued to account without accounting. Furthermore, this history and culture of MAI might constitute the demand imperative for the account, and this would equally develop Messner’s (2009) theorisation by illustrating that the culture of accounting creates its own demand imperative (in a self-sustaining manner).

Thus, as a traditionally important organisational artefact, MAIS contributes to the development of organisational discourses. However, we hold an important constraint about accounting: it cannot be a true representation of the underlying economic reality due to its metaphorical, partial and stylised nature. As Morgan states:

…accountants try to represent organisations and their activities in terms of numbers. This is metaphorical. And like all use of metaphor, it gives but a partial and incomplete representation of the reality to which the numbers relate. The numerical view…ignores those aspects of organisational reality that are not quantifiable in this way (1988, p. 480).

Accounting is loosely based in reality, in the sense that it should reflect ‘real’ events. However, the ability to trace or identify that origin is immensely complex, if not impossible (Spence and Carter,
2011; cf. Macintosh et al., 2000; also see Freud, 1900, while discussing condensation and displacement). Thus, accounting does represent something – accounting information is not ‘mere’ interpretation – but in a partial and impoverished fashion (Spence and Carter, 2011, p. 310).

Hence, despite accepting that information is important, accounting information (or any information for that matter), in and of itself, does not solve problems but provides the base for managers to interpret and ‘understand’ what is happening in the organisation, to recognise opportunities, and to identify problems: “...accounting and information systems simply are not ‘solutions’ to the ‘problems’ of managing the human organisations” (Mirvis and Lawler III, 1983, p. 178). In that sense, MAIS are something that have the potential to support, facilitate, enable, and constrain managerial activities. This reflects the earlier literature referred to about indeterminacy, ambiguity and accounting: accounting is employable in a range of situations, but there is no such thing as the complete account or the correct employment or interpretation of that information (Meyer, 1986; Messner, 2009). Equally, as Hopwood (1987) argues, there can be distance between the potential for support and facilitation and the impact of MAIS once implemented within the organisation.

Existing accounting research demonstrates, at the social logic level (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), the rules, practices, concepts, categories, and sedimented practices of accounting, generally, and management accounting, specifically (Ahrens and Chapman, 2004; Covaleski et al., 2003; Knights and Collinson, 1987; Major and Hopper, 2005). These strongly contextualised readings of the social landscape of accounting illustrate the supporting, facilitating, enabling, and constraining roles of MAI: but they are accounting-centric. Ahrens and Chapman (2004), for instance, identify how restaurant management use management accounting to enable the achievement of efficiency and flexibility, through the ability of accounting to be used creatively in support of different organisational objectives, while Knights and Collison (1987) argue that financial accounting operates as a psychological disciplining technology in a factory, by establishing behavioural expectations and thus providing a mechanism for control and punishment. Covaleski et al. (2003) and Major and Hopper (2005) acknowledge the social and institutional creation of the meaning of cost in a regulatory context. In this work, two ideas emerge: accounting names a space that needs to be institutionally filled (accounting is nothing in and of itself); moreover, accounting is organisationally, situationally, and politically specific. However, these discussions are accounting-centric and accounting-focused, concentrating on how accounting operates in and structures the organisation, as it constitutes a focus on what is accounting. For us, we want to move beyond this so as to examine what accounting does in the organisation: in fact, it is precisely the lack of accounting that is the focus of this paper. The lack is the interest, as much accounting literature focuses positively on the role of accounting (Ahrens and Chapman, 2004; Covaleski et al., 2003; Knights...
This organisation differs, and thus, we focus on the way an organisation develops surrogate organisational discourses as the accounting artefacts which traditionally sustain organisational discourses are missing. How the organisation sustains these discourses is our focus, and this reflects the capacity of discourses themselves to be creatively and inventively maintained.

Our focus is deeper. We wish to emphasise the totality of the discursive process and the influence of MAIS (or its absence) in this process. We achieve this through a Laclau and Mouffe-informed discourse theory approach in accounting (in line with Birkin, 1996, 2000; Boland Jr, 1996; Boyce, 2002, 2004; Cooper, 1995; Everett, 2003; Gallhofer and Haslam, 2003; Jönsson and Macintosh, 1997; Lehman and Okcabol, 2005; Macintosh and Shearer, 2000; Macintosh, 2004; Mattessich, 2003; McPhail, 1999; Mouck, 1995; Neu and Simmons, 1996; Neu and Taylor, 1996; Neu et al., 2001; Solomon and Darby, 2005; Sotto, 1997; Unerman and Bennett, 2004). To characterise our theoretical contribution, we explain our understanding of discourse, and then, by recognising the accounting linguistic turn literature, we position our contribution with respect to the rhetorical nature of accounting. To begin, Laclau and Mouffe explain their conceptualisation of discourse:

This totality which includes within itself the linguistic and the non-linguistic, is what we call discourse...Every social configuration is meaningful...it establishes a system of relations with other objects, and these relations are not given by the mere referential materiality of the objects, but are, rather, socially constructed. The systematic set of relations is what we call discourse (1987, p. 82) (emphasis in the original).

Thus, to understand discourse is to understand context. Importantly, however, this does not reduce everything to discourse or deny the existence of objects:

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expressions of the wrath of God’, depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that objects exist externally to thought, but rather different assertions that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive conditions of emergence (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 108).

From this post-structuralist ontology of the socially-discursive constitution of reality, we do not deny the organisational reality, comprising the organisation’s daily operations and transactions. The firm and its performance do exist. However, as discourses are partial, no discourse is able to fully represent the organisational reality: social positions, political persuasions, cultural backgrounds, language and interests, for example, influence and distort these discursive depictions (Spence and Carter, 2011; Messner, 2009). Consequently, competing articulations of organisational reality are enacted within the organisation; these abstractions emphasise particular aspects of that reality based on certain social, political and cultural interests. No definitive discursive articulation of the
organisation exists: each attempt at representation is merely ‘an attempt’; each attempt is partial; each attempt is not neutral; and each attempt is rhetorical.

This invokes the linguistic turn, which goes beyond the ‘factual’, ‘objective’ presentation of accounting to see the products of accounting – its figures, numbers, reports, judgments, and statements – as text [in this sense, for instance, accountants are the authors of the text, auditors the critics, and users the readers (Macintosh et al., 2000, p. 23); Hines’ (1998) presentation of a discourse between ‘master’ and ‘apprentice’ in learning the craft of accounting reinforces this idea of accounting as a linguistic, rhetorical process]. This constitutes a shift from traditional accounting focusing on its informational characteristics to accounting as a narrative (Macintosh, 2002, p. 23; Czarniawska, 2000; McCloskey, 1985, 1990); this invokes the shift that we are interested in, from studying accounting as ‘what it is’ to studying accounting for ‘what it does’ (Mol and Law, 2004).

Moreover, the post-structuralist critique concentrates on understanding how language and language games work to produce meaning, rather than the structural linguistic focus on the reflection of meaning (Arnold et al., 1994; Macintosh, 2002; Macintosh et al., 2000). This paper examines attempts by organisational discourses (including entrepreneurial, growth, and accounting discourses) to represent the ‘reality’ of the economic activities of a particular enterprise. In particular, this paper examines what happens when ‘traditional’ discursive artefacts – accounting artefacts – were abandoned by the organisation.

In the construction of diverse organisational discourses, accounting operates in a complex manner, with multi-various discursive articulations and artefacts supporting, facilitating, enabling, and constraining other organisational discourses (Hopwood, 1987; Meyer, 1986; Chapman, 1998; Roberts, 2009; Messner, 2009; Gill, 2009; Carter, 2011). For example, subjects interacting around the budget construct particular discourses, but equally, the budget becomes a discursive artefact which supports, facilitates, enables, and constrains other organisational discourses. MAIS, as a discursive articulation and with its associated artefacts, constitutes a significant part of discursive articulations within the organisation, most commonly regarding planning, control, and decision-making (Puxty, 1993). What we study, then, is how other organisational discourses (such as entrepreneurship and growth) – traditionally constructed with reference to accounting and other discursive artefacts – continued to be produced and sustained through invoking surrogate proxies.

At this juncture, it is important to recognise certain elements of our case. The notion of the ‘absence’ of accounting derives from a situation where accounting information was previously present. Thus, as the empirical analysis argues, the absence of accounting is partly defined by its previous presence. This interferes with and affects how the organisation constructs its discourses:
we argue that this historicity of accounting haunts the organisation, and forms a crucial moment of dislocation (Messner, 2009). Our empirical analysis identifies instances where management reflect on the absence of accounting, opine for its return, and lay blame for its absence (see part four below). Accounting did influence many of these organisational discourses (including competitive advantage, growth, and results), and thus, in the construction of alternative discourses, the influence of accounting is still there – albeit in its absence. This mirrors Messner (2009): the call to accountability is opaque in nature, as we, as ‘accounters’, are unable to fully account for our actions. *The presence of the need for accountability infects the organisation; the presence of a previous need for accounting continues to infect the organisation.* In our case, the actors’ constructions of alternative discourses are affected by the symbolic representation of a previous accounting. It is not that accounting is always present and exists *a priori*, but that as this organisation previously had such measures, these alternative discourses constitute active attempts to replace and stand in the place of accounting (this is developed further in the latter part of the empirical discussion in part four). Hopwood (1987) supports the contention that the absence of accounting provides the basis for its ability to continue to exist within the organisation. Thus, in not using accounting, the organisation continues to account: organisational discourses are referenced by their absence of accounting.

Accounting and MAIS as discursive artefacts inherit a set of characteristics from accounting as an information system: it is not comprehensive nor does the information alone provide the ‘right’ answer. Hence, its construction is inherently contestable, whilst MAIS constitutes a codified and rhetorical representation of organisational reality (Meyer, 1986; Chapman, 1998; Roberts, 2009; Messner, 2009; Quattrone, 2009). As an example of inter-subjective objectivity, the *effects* of accounting are *real* in that articulatory practices based on accounting artefacts support, facilitate, enable, and constrain diverse organisational discourses. Thus, the discursive articulations of accounting artefacts appear ‘*normalised*’ and ‘*objective*’, because the underlying contestability and interpretation are hidden from view upon its communication. In this paper, though, we examine a situation where these ‘normalised’ and ‘objective’ discursive articulations are missing from the organisation. As such, it is precisely the lack of MAIS that is the focus of this paper, given that the accounting is often presented as being crucial in how an organisation develops (to support, facilitate, enable and constrain) other organisational discourses (Ahrens and Chapman, 2004; Covaleski et al., 2003; Hines, 1988, 1989; Knights and Collinson, 1987; Llewellyn and Milne, 2007; Major and Hopper, 2005; Mitchell et al., 1998; Morgan, 1988; Puxty, 1993). In this, this paper analyses competing discourses about an organisation and, as such, it is an analysis of rhetoric.
This paper recognises the strong rhetorical tradition in accounting (for instance; Arrington and Francis, 1993; Arrington and Schweiker, 1992; Gallhofer et al., 2001; Hines, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1996; Lehman and Tinker, 1987; Lehman, 1992; McCloskey, 1985, 1990; Mouck, 1992; Nelson, 1993; Okcabol and Tinker, 1990; Reiter, 1998; Shearer and Arrington, 1993; Tinker and Neimark, 1988; Williams, 1989). However, much of the focus of rhetorical analysis is at the epistemological level (Arrington, 2004; Quattrone, 2000), explaining ‘how’ accounting constructs, persuades and silences. We adopt an ontological inquiry: what accounting means or, better still, what accounting ‘does’? By focusing on ontology and the ontic, this study moves through the bounded nature of epistemological, interdisciplinary inquiry (Hviding, 2003). Rhetoric operates ontologically as hegemonic interventions. Thus, discourses and discursive artefacts operate as different rhetorical tropes – ways of expressing, construing and capturing meaning. For instance, MAIS can operate metonymically: by which a “particular group takes up demands articulated by contiguous groups…or extends one set of demands into adjacent spheres” (Griggs and Howarth, 2006, p. 11). In this sense, the ‘budget’ may represent strategic direction or an instrument of discipline and control. Equally, MAIS can operate metaphorically: the “creation of meaningful totalities via the disarticulation and replacement of previously existing formation” (Griggs and Howarth, 2006, p. 11). The Balanced Scorecard, for example, represents the totality of the organisation, through different organisational dimensions; it represents a metaphor for the whole organisation. In all of this, social meanings are contextual, relational and contingent, invoking the ontic (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Heidegger, 1962).

The ‘ontic’ describes physical or factual existence, which is complementary to the nature or properties of that being (ontology). This philosophical turn allows the differentiation between the ontic, as an adjective referring to ‘real being’, and ontology, which attempts to distil essences or structures from Being (Heidegger, 1962). For rhetorical analysis, ontic meaning is crucial. Ontological analysis presupposes the ontic, explicitly analysing the moments of ontic existence, and for rhetorical analysis, this is where ontic moments acquire (or are attributed) meaning: ontic existence requires explanation, not expansion or combination. In summary, a post-structuralist-informed approach to discursive, rhetorical analysis is concerned with meanings, operating at the ontic level, and with the analysis of objects as specified by ontological presuppositions.

Equally, there are criticisms of the rationality and rhetorical effects of the positivist paradigm within accounting (Arrington and Francis, 1989, 1993; Arrington and Puxty, 1991; Arrington and Schweiker, 1992; Chambers, 1993; Christenson, 1983; Chua, 1986; Deegan, 2006; Sterling, 1990; Williams, 1989). Their general characteristics are the exposure of rhetorical strategies employed to achieve a semblance of rationality and reasonableness within argumentation and highlighting the hidden social and political consequences of such strategies in accounting.
We are cautious here in our theorisation. Given the post-structural ontological position that we suggest, first, accounting does not exist \textit{a priori}. The ‘object’ of accounting, or for that matter, an organisation discourse, is not an object because of its \textit{a priori} existence – in this sense, what the object is; but rather it is an object for what it does and how it operates within the organisation. This is a new form of ‘tentative’ discourse-driven objectivity. This is a shift from what ‘is’ accounting and what accounts ‘are’ (in the positivist sense), towards an understanding of contextually what accounting ‘does’ (Mol and Law, 2004).\(^3\) In a set of polemical questions addressed to modern medicine and the ‘clinic’ more generally, Mol and Law argue:

\begin{quote}
We all \textit{have} and \textit{are} a body. But there is a way out of this dichotomous twosome. As part of our daily practices, \textit{we also do (our) bodies}. In practice we enact them. If the body we \textit{have} is the one known by pathologists after our death, while the body we \textit{are} is the one we know ourselves by being self-aware, then what about the body we \textit{do}? What can be found out and said about it? Is it possible to inquire into the body we \textit{do}? And what are the consequences if action is privileged over knowledge? (2004, p. 45; italics in the original).
\end{quote}

This organisation, as an organism (Morgan, 1988), ‘lived’ with accounting, and now it lives \textit{without} accounting; the organisation enacted particular discourses through drawing on accounting information, but now the organisation enacts these discourses by drawing on other ‘useful’ information. In this sense, this new objectification focuses on what these informational proxies do in the organisation. Mol and Law develop the role of discourse here:

\begin{quote}
At this point ethnographic \textit{recounting} is a more promising technique: it can produce rich stories of lived bodies in which medicine figures as a part of daily life. But smooth narratives that seek to bring coherence will miss the point. If the tragic aspects of living-in-tension and intervening-for-the-best are to be described, jagged story-lines are needed. And they should be told by a variety of narrators whose voices may be drawn together and/or clash...The overall aim of a multi-voiced form of investigative story telling need not necessarily be to come to a conclusion. Its strength might very well be in the way it opens questions up (2004, pp. 58-59) (emphasis in the original).
\end{quote}

In this passage, Mol and Law emphasise that the benefit of this new form of objectification is not the development of “smooth narratives that seek to bring coherence”, but rather, the recognition of conflict, partiality, and the need for multiple voices. This is the spirit, one would suggest, of Laclau and Mouffé’s discourse theory:

\begin{quote}
…the discourse analyst’s starting point is not the mapping of pre-constituted, positively-defined, theoretical categories (rational self-interested ends, structural functions, competing lobbying interests, juridico-political forms of economic relations, typologies of democracies, forms of identities, etc) onto the socio-political landscape, and then invoking tools from corresponding idioms to conduct an analysis...When dislocation and failure become ontologically foundational, the idioms with which we describe and analyse political phenomena change modality...Discourse theory’s anti-essentialist stance is thus maintained by adopting an ontology of lack, this being a direct consequence of taking seriously the constitutive nature of discourse in human practices (Glynos, 1999, p. 5).
\end{quote}

\(^3\) We are indebted to one of our reviewers for introducing us to the fascinating work of Mol and Law (2004) on hypoglycemia, as well as Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) on rhetoric as a legitimizing strategy.
We see similarity with Quattrone’s (2009) work on the role of rhetoric and memory in accounting. The movement from what accounting is and what accounts are to the focus on what accounting does constitutes an examination of the material dimension of accounting: in post-structural language, the material dimension constitutes conditions of possibilities. In examining what accounting ontologically ‘does’ within an organisation, this is a measure of what ‘counts’ as knowledge. In a situation where accounting artefacts are absent, what ‘counts’ as knowledge changes: in our case, the information proxies that ‘act’ within the organisation to sustain and construct organisational discourse.

Finally, in this section, we position our theorised approach to discourse theory within its contribution to and development of alternative theorisations of discourse within the accounting literature. Laclau and Mouffe theorise an inclusive ‘discourse’ where all social configurations are meaningful and discursively constructed. This develops existing accounting discursive analyses in two ways:

First, in relation to Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis, which defines “discourse – language use in speech and in writing – as a form of ‘social practice’ ” (Fairclough, 1995; Gallhofer et al., 2001; Owen et al., 2001): Laclau and Mouffe’s inclusive ‘discourse’ challenges the narrowness of Fairclough’s definition of discourse, as the sophisticated linguistic focus on speech and writing is a limited aspect of discourse and ignores the broader social context. The under-theorised social theory limits the scope of the discursive inquiry and increases the likelihood that the researcher is caught within the problem of the double hermeneutic (Oakes and Berry, 2009).

Second, in relation to Foucault’s discourse within archaeology: Foucault institutes a series of strategies through which to understand discursive structures (see Chapman et al., 2009; Hopwood, 1987). In particular, Foucault talks of formation rules covering objects, subjects, concepts, and strategies within the archive (2003, p. 409). These rules operate as a judgment mechanism for the truth/falsity of serious speech acts: to make a serious speech act, the statement must conform to the rules. Foucault argues that “…a proposition must fulfil complex and heavy requirements to be able to belong to the grouping of a discipline, before it can be called true or false” (1970, p. 60). But Foucault fails to account for changes in the archives, as it fails to account for speech acts that fall outside the rules. Within the archive, there is no theorisation of external speech acts, but logically, Foucault requires the external as he expects archives to shift over time, given genealogy. Thus, Foucault’s discourse is unclear: if discourse is powerful and totalising, then how do critics of
discourse emerge?[4] Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory critiques Foucault’s discourse as artificial by providing a comprehensive approach to discourse including both the linguistic and non-linguistic, as well as theorising interventions and alternatives. In particular, the act of instituting social discourse creates ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ and is historically and materially contingent (Howarth et al., 2000, pp. 3-4).

Consequently, the theorised, discursive intervention into the social world that we apply in this paper develops accounting discourse by not artificially drawing boundaries around the discursive and the extra-discursive (beyond Fairclough) and by theorising the constitutive outside of discourse (beyond Foucault).

Thus, in summary, we have theoretically positioned the paper as a contribution to a number of important debates in the accounting literature. This paper is complex in its contribution, primarily for its new approach to the role of accounting: we concentrate on the effect of the absence of accounting, by examining what accounting ‘does’; this invokes the material dimension of accounting through a multi-voiced, ontologically-informed understanding of the conditions of possibility as what ‘counts’ (and how these articulations count) as knowledge within the organisation. We invoke Laclau and Mouffe’s approach to discourse due to its focus on discourse as totality and the focus on the ontic articulations of ‘meaningful reality’ that constitutes discourse.

Thus, in this ontic, rhetorical analysis, we focus on the construction of organisational discourses, traditionally supported by accounting artefacts and articulations, when the organisation has abandoned the production of internal accounting information. This paper addresses the specific gap in the literature: What does the absence of MAIS (in supporting, facilitating, enabling, and constraining) do in the construction of organisational discourses? Given this, the next section introduces our research approach, before discussing the specific elements of our case study.

3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This paper is grounded in post-structural ontology (Czarniawska, 2000). Consequently, in order to ‘understand’ the positions of our research subjects and consider the implications of power structures, we use interpretive, ethnographic tools to inform our post-structuralist intervention (Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Glynos, 1999; Mol and Law, 2004). This perspective, methodologically, helps us to understand the way managers and executives construct organisational discourses, and what MAIS or other artefacts do in rhetorically constructing organisational discourses as

[4] It is contended that Foucault’s late work on the role of the Cynics might provide explanation on how critics get outside of discourse. They are constitutively outside of discourse, in the since of the ‘other’ from Derrida (see, Foucault, 2012, and Derrida, 1984).
‘knowledge’. We situate this research within an organisation that, for a time (approximately two years) produced no internal MAI.[5]

This paper interrogates the construction and representation of discourses and narratives (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). In developing the contextual reading of our case study, we recognise that this is our ‘representation’ of the case study:

One has to point out, however, that polyphony in a text is but a textual strategy…‘The voices of the field’ do not speak for themselves; it is the author who makes them communicate on his or her conditions. Therefore it is more adequate to speak, in line with Bakhtin…about ‘variegated speech’ of the field, about leaving traces of different dialects, different idioms, and different vocabularies, rather than homogenizing them into a ‘scientific text’. Again, this textual strategy is not as drastically different from one authoritative story as it may seem. Even pasting together fragments of authentic narratives, taken straight from an interview protocol, decontextualises them but, in return, it also re-contextualises them…It is never a question of ‘authenticity’; it is always a question of creating an impression of authenticity, of recontextualisation that is interesting (‘novel’), credible and respectful (Czarniawska, 2000, p. 19).

We note, equally, the totalising warnings from Griggs and Howarth (2006) about ‘the search’ for the employment of rhetoric: “discourse theorists need to guard against charges of textual and linguistic reductionism, and they need to deal with rhetorical forms at the appropriate levels of abstraction” (p. 10). In developing our case research, we prioritised, as much as possible, contextualism and local solutions (Kakkuri-Knuuttila et al., 2008). Czarniawska emphasises that analysis:

...does not look for chains of causes and effects but for frequent (‘usual’) connections between various elements of a narrative. It does not search for laws, but for patterns and regularities, which do not reveal a deep structure – either of the world or of the mind – but which are affixed to a text by the writer and the reader alike (2000, p. 4).

And in recognising the need for multiple narratives, our overall aim is ‘multi-voice’ that emphasises that the narrative is incomplete and contestable (Mol and Law, 2004). Thus, in practice, this means that the researcher must be in the field so as to understand the context of the narrative. Thus, to ‘get in touch with the field’ (Ahrens and Chapman, 2006), we immersed ourselves in the organisation. For this, we watched, we contextualised, we listened to the histories, and we participated in meetings. And, we interviewed.

From the perspective of interaction between the researchers and the people at the studied organisation, we paid attention to the eight ‘metaphors’ depicted by Alvesson (2003): (i) local words, gestures, clothing; (ii) establishing a story line; (iii) identifying identity positions particularly in meetings; (iv) applications of cultural scripts and particular talk and jargon; (v)

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[5] They did produce limited external financial reporting, as they were considering the possibility of becoming public in the near future. Under Brazilian law nonetheless, as a privately-held company they were not compelled to publish such information.
impression management or image building in establishing rapport and trust so as to build ‘trust’; (vi) being conscious of politics and understanding the orientation of actors; (vii) careful consideration of the ambiguity of language and attention to metaphors, and (viii) recognising that discourse is a creative production between the interviewer and interviewee (De Loo and Lowe, 2011).

Thus, this contextualisation provides the discourse theory justification for reading through texts, in a deconstructive approach to the ‘re-interpretation’ and ‘representation’ of organisational discourses. Silverman (2000) argues that:

What does it mean to approach texts ‘for what they are’? … [D]iscourse analysis focuses on how different versions of the world are produced through the use of interpretive repertoires, claims to ‘stakes’ in an account, … and constructions of knowing subjects (p. 826).

Howarth and Torfing (2005) provide insight into the ‘legitimate and illegitimate’ employment of research methods for discursive analysis:

…a fully fledged analysis would have to describe and analyse the array of micro- and macro-practices – both ‘linguistic’ and ‘non-linguistic’ – that produced such divisions and conflicts, in which the textual analysis constitutes an internal component of the wider enterprise. In short, the narrow textual analysis of official documents…constitutes only one aspect of a fully fledged discursive analysis. It needs always to be supplemented with in-depth interviews, thick descriptions of practices and institutions, historical reconstructions of phenomena drawing on a range of empirical data, and so forth (p. 342).

Bourdieu (1992) argues that the analysis of talk (all empirical material) should extend beyond linguistic analysis, i.e. as if they were constructed in a linguistic, hermeneutically sealed universe. For Bourdieu, positioning involves explaining the position of the speaker and the construction of their discourses: concentrating on the ‘speech act’ results in researchers overlooking these details (May, 1997, p. 127).

In discourse, that which is said is only part of the story. What is not said, how it is said, non-vocal elements, setting, and context are equally important. Feminist interview techniques, for example, emphasise that interview analysis should focus not only on motivations and reasons, but also on social identities and their construction within the social settings in which people live and work (Smith, 1988). In discourse theory, the analytical focus moves beyond the performativity of the speech itself, to how discourses order a domain of reality with repercussions beyond those understood or intended by the actor or speaker. Such discourse can ‘silence’ certain voices by constructing channels of communications that authorise only certain persons to act or speak in particular ways (Wetherall and Potter, 1988).

The analytical task is a ‘reading’ of the empirical material, focusing on its symbols, and includes deconstruction, interpretation, and reconstruction (May, 1997, p. 173; Czarniawska, 2000). It is an
inherently flexible process, enabling the researcher to consider not how meaning is constructed, but how meanings are developed and employed, and thus consequently, what accounting and other informational proxies ‘do’ within the organisation. Of importance is the divorce between the author’s intended meaning (in performing the act or writing text) and the reader’s received meaning (in witnessing the act or reading text). Thus, any text is full of potential readings.

The company formally authorised the research, which guaranteed confidentiality for itself and its employees. Thus, specific organisational information will not be presented in the paper.

3.1 The company

This Brazilian company produces industrial components predominantly for the automobile industry:

- The company believes that it is growing, and anticipates publicly listing in the near-future. The company wants to transition from a small to a medium-sized company;
- Current changes within the company include changes to geographic location, strategies, technologies and introducing new managers;
- The company used to produce management accounting reports: since September 2009, the company abandoned the production of these reports. As is explained later in the paper, interviewees provided several, conflicting reasons for the abandonment of the MAI, including blaming a manager who failed to produce the report, internal team conflict, and simply just a matter of company priorities; and
- The company experienced disappointing external accounting results for the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 financial years: Despite this, the internal management discourse, focused on the partners, concentrates on a story of growth and success.

The company has more than 50 years of experience in the Brazilian market, mirroring the growth of the Brazilian automobile industry. Within the parts-supplying industry, there are significant barriers to entry due to the rigours of achieving and maintaining accreditation in the concentrated, oligopolistic Brazilian automobile industry. In addition, the industry values long-term relationships, so ‘new entrants’ struggle to gain traction, and so, in a traditional analysis, a structured, up-to-date MAI, with solid planning systems, would normally be expected to help to maintain long-term profitability through controlling costs and product margins. However, this is in the realm of ‘social logics’ and is a focus on ‘what is’ accounting: we are interested instead on what accounting and informational proxies do within the organisation.

In 2007, two investors purchased the company, adopting an aggressive modernisation and growth policy. Initially, a short-term strategy motivated the purchase and the new business strategy – they expected either to sell the company to a strategic investor or to float it – but there were significant changes to this position. For this company in particular, growth relates to its long-term survival.
The market liberalisation of the Brazilian automobile industry since 1990 stimulated growth opportunities, as did the production shift in the automobile industry from developed to developing countries. There is an expectation that new manufacturers will enter Brazil, expanding the company’s business potential. However, production-chain pressures are demanding, regarding completion, safety, and design.

Consequently, while the company perceives opportunities to grow, they recognise that they must enhance the organisation’s structure with investment in people, systems, and equipment. The extent of this investment is more than the company was prepared for both organisationally and financially. The two controlling partners participate in the daily management of the company, with approximately 280 employees. The two partners, calling themselves ‘directors,’ share the company presidency, with the management structure as depicted in Figure 1.

Recent organisational changes influencing discourses include:

- The purchase of a company in a new industrial segment, with a different production process from what the company was accustomed to.
- The company shifted the production facilities to the interior of the State.

![Figure 1. Organisational structure.](image)
• There were significant personnel changes such as new managers for operations, marketing, and sales (accounting never received a senior manager).

• The company is now in a challenging financial position, reporting large losses and high indebtedness.

Given this background, the next section discusses how we collected data within the organisation.

### 3.2 Data collection

In line with the case study, narrative approach, a variety of research methods were employed to collect empirical data, including:

(i) **Observation:**

We spent a significant period of time in the organisation understanding, in our eyes, the interactions of the people within it. In line with Czarniawska (2000) and Ahrens and Chapman (2006), we immersed ourselves in the organisation and we watched the organisation. This helped to contextualise the findings and served, to an extent, as a check on our interpretations.

(ii) **Interviews:**

Table 1 lists the schedule of interviewees: we focused our interviews on two groups within the organisation, including: (i) the partners; and (ii) senior managers, including managers, supervisors and analysts. This approach allowed us to capture multiple versions and interpretations of vision, power and commitment within the organisation. Given that this was an organisation in change, we interviewed respondents who worked within the previous management structure, when MAI was present, and then the new environment, when MAI was abandoned, as well as respondents who were employed after the abandonment of MAI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Time in the Organisation*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Partner 1 responsible for administration and purchases</td>
<td>Joined before 09/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Partner 2 responsible for marketing, production and logistics</td>
<td>Joined before 09/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>Joined before 09/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Treasurer</td>
<td>Joined before 09/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>Joined before 09/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>IT analyst</td>
<td>Joined before 09/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>Sales manager – area 1</td>
<td>Joined after 09/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>Sales manager – area 2</td>
<td>Joined after 09/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S9</td>
<td>HR coordinator</td>
<td>Joined after 09/2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>Accounting coordinator</td>
<td>Joined after 09/2009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* September 2009 is a crucial date as it was when the two partners purchased the company and begun to manage the day-to-day operations.
This again, allowed us to contextualise the experiences of members of the organisation.

The interviews were focused, unstructured in nature, which provided interviewees the opportunity to speak freely, enhancing the potential for richer, more informative material (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 652). Some interviews were recorded, while in others, researchers took written notes. Focused interviews encourage flexibility and meaning (Pahl, 1995, p. 197) conveying greater qualitative depth by allowing:

interviewees to talk about the subject in terms of their own frames of reference. By this, I mean drawing upon ideas and meanings with which they are familiar. This allows the meanings that individuals attribute to events and relationships to be understood on their own terms (May, 1997, p. 113).

(iii) Discourse analysis: Company Website

The website presents information about the company, particularly how the organisation presents itself to external users, its history, its mission, beliefs and values. The information focuses on the company’s historical evolution, product lines and information about the organisation’s productive capacity.

(iv) Documentary analysis: This included documents such as management reports and minutes from meetings until September 2009. Until September 2009, a detailed management accounting report was presented at monthly meetings highlighting results to managers and directors. Many interviewees emphasised that this was healthy and transparent, as financial income was disseminated. This reporting process stopped in September 2009. The management reports included monthly financial information such as an income statement and a balance sheet, and operational information such as billing and debt levels. Meeting agendas indicated themes such as operationalising the budget and setting production standards.

Discourse analysis acknowledges that text is a subjective discourse within the socially constructed understanding of reality (Derrida, 1976, p. 158). Thus:

Documents, as the sedimentations of social practices, have the potential to inform and structure the decisions which people make on a daily and longer-term basis; they also constitute particular readings of social events (May, 1997, pp. 157–8).

Thus, these documents provided valuable organisational information.

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6 We want to stress, then, that the disappearance of the management report and the monthly meeting were not motivated by a desire to hide information.
4 ANALYSING DATA - THE DISCOURSES

This combination of data collection methods, focusing on the ontological construction of discourses and of discursive artefacts provided a terrain of contestability over relevant organisational discourses. We discuss the construction of these discourses in turn. The analysis focused on identifying and understanding how discourses were sustained and constructed, when many of these discourses were previously constructed with reference to the MAI produced within the organisation. As an analysis of rhetoric, our intent was the identification of the rhetorical mechanisms used by the people in the organisation in attempts to hegemonise alternative discourses. Considering the ontological presuppositions acknowledged under Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, this intent means identifying the contestable nodal points raised by organisational members in order to construct and present a particular view about organisational performance over other alternative views. In line with Suddaby and Greenwood’s (2005) “theorisations of change”, we developed ‘theorisations of the organisation’ (or, the ‘organisational discourses’ as we call them), as rhetorically articulated by the people interviewed.

The analysis follows Howarth (2005): “A central aim of textual analysis in discourse theory is to locate and analyse the mechanisms by which meaning is produced, fixed, contested, and subverted within particular texts” (p. 341; cf. Silverman, 2000). In this sense, the analytical task is a ‘reading’ of the discourse in terms of its symbols, and includes deconstruction, interpretation, and reconstruction. This flexibility focused on what these meanings ‘do’ within the organisation. Hence, we analysed the discourse collected from the combination of research methods searching for such symbols; this was a qualitative search for specific meanings inherent within the signifiers presented by various organisational members.

More specifically, we followed this approach in order to ‘perform’ such meaning-searching: all the interview recordings, transcripts, field notes and organisational documents were listened and read many times in developing a draft list of recurrent signifiers as ‘candidates’ for discursive nodal points. Alongside this raw analysis, our first aim was to characterise their view (from the people within the company) about MAIS and about the process of abandoning a managerial approach based upon them; this process weakened the accounting discourse within the organisation. This starting point enabled us to have a better grounding in our search for alternative discourses.

The search for discursive surrogates started from the recurring signifiers and identified specific rhetorical mechanisms used by actors. We present below the organisational discourses that filled the gap opened by the absence of accounting through the nodal points and rhetorical artefacts isolated from their talk, texts and our observations of the organisation. This is also a narrative of legitimacy.
As Suddaby and Greenwood (2005, p. 36) suggest, these discourses must acquire legitimacy, primarily through rhetoric. These discourses did not emerge to “fill latent resource opportunities”, so to speak. Rather, these discourses were negotiated, contingent, and as such, emerged as legitimate discourses in place of the former discourse of accounting information.

Figure 2 depicts the organisational discourses identified in the research and illustrates the interrelationships between them: Partners’ Beliefs, Entrepreneurship, and Accounting.

The discourse of the partners’ beliefs derives from the company’s lifecycle stage (Lester et al., 2003; Miller and Friesen, 1984), in which the partners’ way of thinking permeates throughout the organisation. Characteristic of this is that the partners decide on business strategy and employ this discourse without negotiation. In analysing the partners’ discourse, we identify two core components: first, the partners’ focus on their mutual relationship of trust; and second, the importance of intuition in strategic and tactical decisions.

4.1 Intuition and trust

These two components were identified through isolating specific parts in the partners’ narratives: they often mentioned “trust” and “confidence”. Moreover, by stressing their personal dedication to the company, they would raise the “follow my example” rhetoric as a key to demand loyalty and commitment from managers and employees:

*Partner 2:* Everything I do is focused on results. I always *trust* the subordinates. The day I *don’t trust* them, they won’t work with me. Either they offer results or not.

*Partner 1:* Trust in people is fundamental...We don’t want to give anyone a chance to act with disloyalty. I stopped developing my legal consulting firm to dedicate myself 100%.

![Figure 2. The relationship between different organisational discourses.](image)
The trust relationship is important between the employees and owners, and it develops and changes as time passes. However, the notion of trust employed here is a top-down trust approach. The absence of accounting is crucial to the partners’ strategy here: accounting is contingent, and thus, negotiable. Thus, without accounting information, it is difficult to question the organisational direction: in the construction of organisational rhetoric, the development of organisational proxies rendered organisational direction less contestable than the previous accounting information. It is clear, for example, that this organisation has increased billing and that it became a surrogate for growth, but although contestable, accounting tends to demonstrate whether billing is growing the organisation’s bottom-line. Thus, the abandonment of accounting restates power relationships within the organisation and centralises power with the partners. As stated, the partners decide on business strategy and employ this discourse without negotiation. Accounting information might, in relation to trust, illustrate that the organisation is successful; alternatively, it could destroy trust in the partners if it were to illustrate the opposite. This becomes a convenient discourse for the partners. When Partner 2 blames a former employee for the loss of accounting information, the Partner invokes the idea that their ‘trust’ in the manager was broken: “The guy we trusted did not manage to produce the information but lost it”.

Besides trust, they ground their managerial style upon their own intuitive insights. The two partners share an office where they run daily organisational issues, either together or at least close to each other. This joint action combines talent and optimises time. Moreover, this physical arrangement helps their intuitive style of decision-making. They employ their “business intuition” – as they put it – to take strategic decisions, including long-term investments (e.g. the move from one city to another, the expansion of the business to new products in the same niche, the purchase of machinery), as well as executive hiring for the board. This was an interesting insight into their decision-making process, which might contradict traditional ideas of careful decision-making. There was no long-term viability analysis, no external assessments, but rather, the partners, made those decisions, they considered important in terms of meeting market demand, and as such, the decisions were joint and fast. The rhetoric of ‘business intuition’ is common in business administration, see Miller and Friesen’s explanation of the initial stages of the organisational lifecycle:

An intuitive rather than an analytical mode of decision-making prevails. For example the owner-manager makes almost all the key decisions, based in large part upon his intuitions about the situation…Also, a relatively small number of factors and opinions is taken into account in making decisions… (1984, p. 1170).

Trust and intuition, as rhetorical artefacts, were also employed by the two partners; notwithstanding whether it alludes to the development stage of the organisation, it supports the images that they
want to create within the organisation about its present performance and future opportunities. Whilst they believe in it – success! – and commit ‘strongly’ to the company (taking decisive strategic decisions), they demand everyone do the same.

Parallel to the partners’ beliefs discourse, the discourse of entrepreneurship creates and maintains the ‘team’ within the organisation. There are discursive constructions within the discourse of entrepreneurship: first, there is a focus on competitive advantage to solidify and improve market position; this links to the second overarching focus on growth; third, a ‘life project’ is sold to managers and employees to engender loyalty; and finally, there is a focus on results (which is not based on accounting artefacts, despite traditionally being constructed in reference to them).

4.2 Competitive advantage

The company’s flexible, vertical production stimulates client loyalty; as they argue, this flexibility and comprehensiveness constitutes a competitive advantage to the company. However, it is expensive to calibrate separately each production run. Other than assumptions and pointing to competitors, there are few informational proxies to support or monitor these claims. The ‘competitive advantage’ statement is difficult to demonstrate and traditionally MAIS would consider sales-mix and detailed costing information, as evidence of a competitive advantage. Thus, the discourse of competitive advantage is a perceived benefit: it is not demonstrated or even demonstrable.

Irrespective of the lack of information to support managerial claims to a competitive advantage, the rhetoric of ‘competitive advantage’ is present within the organisation; and not only among the partners, but also from the management body:

Manager 6: Some factors exist in the company which are unique in the market. Being able to attend to clients not only by manufacturing the part, but also by assembling it in different injectors, is very relevant in the market. Besides, we have physical space for new production areas. Our most direct competitors do not have these properties.

As part of the entrepreneurship discourse, the idea of a ‘competitive advantage’ held by the organisation represents an important component, for it helps support a ‘technical’ discourse in parallel with the ‘emotional’ discourse of the partners’ beliefs. Given, further, that there are significant barriers to entry in the industry, this might also reinforce a competitive advantage discourse. In this sense, the ‘competitive advantage’ component reinforces the growth discourse, as they mutually support and stimulate each other.
4.3 Growth

Growth is a fundamental discourse in the business and is non-negotiable in the partners’ beliefs discourse. Everything is done towards growth, without considering short-, medium-, or long-term financial implications:

Manager 5: Billing has increased a lot and the company doubled its billing in a short time period.

However, management literature cautions against unchecked growth, for monitoring and control are deemed vital. However, increased billing does not necessarily represent increased income (Rosanas and Velilla, 2005), and companies frequently fail due to unsustainable growth and improper information control (Hill et al., 1992; Reinstein and McMillan, 2004).

The optimistic rhetoric of ‘growth’ has structural motivations, which enables the company to bring in, motivate and maintain new, relevant professionals. In this sense, this component of the entrepreneurship discourse supports the next component, ‘the life project’ argument.

4.4 The life project

To engender long-term commitment to the organisation, it is important that managers and employees identify with the professional and long-term individual opportunities inherent within the organisation’s strategic plans (Chao et al., 1994; Chatman, 1991; Kristof, 1996; Meglino et al., 1989): “Precisely in this context, organisational identification and loyalty are crucial concepts” (Rosanas and Velilla, 2005, p. 90). The ‘life project’ rhetoric ‘fills’ a significant void in this matter, operating hegemonically and supporting diverse articulations to each employee (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). In fact, more than simply a nodal point around which stable representations of the organisational and of each one’s expectations can be articulated, it represents something akin to an empty signifier\(^7\) (Laclau, 1996), i.e. a generic idea over which each employee could fill up with the own perspective of ‘life success’ or at least of ‘professional fulfilment’. Hence, it complements the entrepreneurship discourse developed within the organisation.

The executive body, especially the hired managers, receive this message of the ‘life project’ within the organisation: professional evolution, the image of a winner, or that this company provides

\(^7\) We mean ‘something akin to’, because empty signifiers represent a theoretical, ideal discursive component. No signifier could be completely empty of meaning, although emptiness is an essential quality and condition for the possibility of a hegemonic discourse (Laclau, 1996).
opportunities denied to them at other organisations. What is important is that the reward comes in the future (the long-term), while the work, commitment and challenge happen now:\[8\]

Partner 2: We brought in an excellent commercial manager who only came because of the life project. He believed in our project. He gave up making more money somewhere else and came to here.

This promise of a ‘future to come’ is essential in creating an organisational culture where short-to-medium term struggle and sacrifice are acceptable given the promise of future rewards.

4.5 Focus on Results

Partner 2: The priority today is the company’s results.

In discussing priorities and performance, the partners talk not about corporate financial results, but they refer to daily operations. This is potentially concerning as it renders them the hostage of daily routine, weakening the strategic focus. The partners’ references to results are vague, and there are significant voids, providing space for multiple meanings (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000), as broad objectives allow flexibility in interpreting results. This helps to centralise power in the partners though, especially in the construction of a successful entrepreneurial discourse: the informational vagueness of the ‘focus on results’ rhetoric supports the entrepreneurship discourse within the organisation. ‘Results’ in this sense may not represent an empty signifier as above: verifying results is an important feedback to managers and supports their commitment with the life-project opportunities within the company. Nonetheless, the organisation has little evidence for results, but this allows general and vague constructions: “we are on track for results” (Manager 4).

Moreover, while acknowledging the need for strategic focus, both partners do not completely delegate tactical and operational management to the managerial body: this runs contrary to the discourse of trust. If the partners trusted their managers, then they should be able to delegate and ‘trust’ that it would be done. They manage short-term, operational issues and exert much control over it. They would like to act strategically, moving away from daily tactical and operational decisions, but for the partners, it depends on the evolution of the managerial body:

Partner 1: I’d like to act at the strategic level but I had to focus on the frontline and solve problems in the factory, and even with the clients. As soon as there is somebody who can develop the necessary activities, I am going to spend more time on the company’s strategy.

Note the language here: ‘as soon as there is somebody’. Thus, in the eyes of Partner 1, some members of their management team are not capable. To earn the trust of the partners, the managers must do the job that they are employed for. Equally, this paints a messy picture, particularly in

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\[8\] In a way, this corresponds with Weber’s traditional Protestant work ethic. Work hard now, suffer now, in the name of future rewards (Weber, 2002).
relation to the entrepreneurship discourse and the life project discourse. In essence, the lack of trust centres the business completely within the Partners’ hands and centralises power: without the partners, there is no entrepreneurship. Equally, note Partner 2’s comments about the new commercial manager: “We brought in an excellent commercial manager who only came because of the life project. He believed in our project”. For us, this indicates an element of disagreement between the partners, as Partner 1 indicates that there is a need to develop the capabilities of their managers, so that they can move from operational to strategic concerns.

Consequently, every day, the Partners run a management meeting, following a list of items for discussion, regarding short-term operational actions; if something is on the list, it has to be discussed. This list orders tactic priorities (it substitutes for strategy) and was the most powerful artefact at the moment.

*Partner 2:* Every day, freight control, billing and whatever happened yesterday, is happening today and will happen tomorrow come in. Based on that information, I make the main decisions. Every day, we hold a meeting starting at 8.30 a.m., when we get on the key-issues list. What is important gets on the list, even if it is going to happen one month later.

*Partner 1:* Through this meeting, one sector charges the other, which can answer back right away. It is the company’s thermometer, every day the key-issues list is updated. It’s a one-hour meeting and it takes place every day. That is where actions are triggered and charged.

The daily meeting reinforces the ‘focus on results’ rhetoric, in this sense representing an important stage where the entrepreneurship discourse, along with the several components, is constituted. Several nodal points around which this discourse is constituted are raised and reinforced throughout this general meeting. In the sense of the entrepreneurial and results discourses, measurement is necessary and diverse measuring artefacts were available within the organisation.

4.6 The role of accounting

The company previously produced a comprehensive managerial (based heavily in accounting figures) report for their monthly management meetings. However, in introducing a new daily operational meeting, the new partners stopped the monthly meeting. There were two consequences to this decision: first, the partners concentrated on solving tactical and operational issues that arose on a daily basis, often at the expense of broader strategic issues, and second, the monthly managerial report was stopped:

*Interviewer:* Do you have management information to support the discussion of results?
*Partner 1:* No. Today, we have no such information about the financial results. Right now, in fact, we don’t even have the financial result of last year [financial statements prepared until around April regarding the previous financial year].
*Interviewer:* Don’t you feel that this information is missing?
*Partner 1:* Yes. Also because, in the past, we had both the information and monthly discussions.
*Interviewer:* And what happened?
Partner 1: We went through so many changes and the priorities gradually changed. It was better to respond to current crisis priorities than to discuss past results. Thus, we stopped producing the reports and holding the meetings. After all, we moved to another city, changed our focus and changed the company, as the current owners bought a new company and merged it...each month we discuss the financial results and even the planned results. Many challenges and projects came up and we stopped looking at monthly managerial information.

Interviewer: Why did you stop using monthly financial results?
Partner 1: In the end, so many things happened and the reports were left behind, they were not that urgent. At some point, we stopped producing and presenting the figures.

Partner 1 articulates that accounting was abandoned due to the emergence of new priorities and that the accounting information was not that important. However, the articulation later is changed: the partners changed their story and blamed one executive for the disappearance of the management reports:

Partner 2: We need to recover some procedures we lost in the rush. As a result of pressure and rush, we postponed the report; we did not forget it, nor did we put it aside. We delegated it to a person who should do the work we used to do. We delegated and, at the end of the year, we lost the information. The guy we trusted did not manage to produce the information but lost it.

This conversation is interesting for it starts by blaming the manager to which the responsibility was delegated to: the manager could not be trusted, which runs contradictory to the ‘trust’ discourse. Then, the partner changes tact:

Partner 2: His subordinates no longer worked for him, but against him. He started to embrace everything and lost procedures, we lost vital information. On the 10th of every following month at the latest, we used to present all results regarding the previous one, per product, area. We used to operate the 80/20 system and what happened? What action was taken? Immediately. It was a very pretty reporting and discussing model. He set up the model and was not able to feed it from the accounting system.

This is the third justification of the loss of accounting information: the problem is now one of internal team politics. The partners continue:

Partner 1: When things are calm, you can maintain your team and let things move on naturally.
Partner 2: It was very easy when we had money. We paid everything. Information was easy. When things became turbulent, then it changed. When things became more intense, he [the one responsible for the MAIS] lost his information. The information system no longer gave him what he needed. There was an important mistake. We have a system... it is mostly manual, but works very well. The guy who developed it, an internal IT consultant, did it in a very interesting way.

... Partner 1: We went for a new ERP system and, after 6-8 months, the controller gave up what he was doing and lost information.
Partner 2: We did not implement the new ERP and had no more information either. How are we going to feed the ERP? We were going to start when we perceived the situation and stopped everything. We’ve got a promise that we’re going to do again, starting next July 1st, the monthly meeting to discuss the results ...^{9}
Partner 1: We want to share everything. The company is transparent and everything must be informed and commented on. Until some months ago, each month, we presented the financial results to the managers.

^{9} Note that the monthly meeting has not started again.
The consequence of the lack of accounting information resulted in rambling, confusing and contradictory responses. The lack of the management accounting report provided managers with a modicum of ‘false’ comfort: things are ‘under control’ when you do not see contradictory artefacts:

*Interviewer:* How is business going?  
*Partner 1:* Very well. We are selling more than last year. We expect a more than 20% growth in sales.  
*Interviewer:* And income?  
*Partner 1:* Better too.  
*Interviewer:* How much?  
*Partner 1:* I don’t have an exact figure, but better.

After financial results for the year were finally determined, the company reported a large loss, much larger than the year before:

*Manager 1:* The income is not as bad as you saw yesterday. Some adjustments were made today and the income improved a little, although the loss continues. The cause of these problems is that, with so many projects going on in the company, we prioritised time and gave up discussing results. Thus, we did not understand various events that changed the company and did not adjust accounting. Some errors could have been detected but were not. We changed people in the controlling department and various procedures were changed without integration. The change in financial rules surprised us and we treated various expenses inappropriately.  
...

Reality is important. If growing the way we had dreamt is impossible, we’ll do what’s possible. We’ll adjust accounting and return to the monthly meeting.  
...

*Interviewer:* What is your product’s margin?  
*Manager 5:* 25%  
*Interviewer:* That’s a lot! That’s a high margin!  
*Manager 1:* He’s talking about net profit.  
*Interviewer:* So the percentage is even higher?  
*Manager 5:* It isn’t net profit but gross revenues.  
*Interviewer:* Are you talking about price less cost? If yes, it’s even higher.  
*Manager 5:* No, I’m talking about gross profit.

When asked about the financial losses, the lack of the management accounting reporting system was mentioned:

*Partner 2:* For each improvement, we had information about x Reais [the Brazilian currency] of payback. We had a kaizen program calculated in terms of costs.  
...

We worked with targets, outputs and effective actions. Without results we lost the sense of direction. We acted without knowing the result. We know that it’s positive but we don’t know to what extent. We will gain this perspective again as from July [NB: this did not occur]. The manager responsible for the management report did not follow the new accounting and costing approach, didn’t get updated. He emphasises only technical procedures. Forms of interpretation today are different as a result of the IFRS, for example.

As with every organisational environment, there will be competing articulations behind different events: in this narrative, the partners are quick to place blame for the loss of accounting information on the previous control manager. Similarly, the new control manager is equally comfortable blaming the predecessor. We note that we were not able to interview the previous control manager. However, our focus is not on who is responsible, but the effect of the loss of accounting. In short,
the organisational hierarchy values neither information systems nor the accounting information itself. This suggests that Morgan’s (1988) subjective construction of reality is not only limited by technical perspectives, but applies to how organisations generally construct their reality.

5 CASE STUDY – DISCUSSION

This establishes two parallel discussions that are the subject of the analysis of the paper: first, the organisation cannot escape its previous use of accounting; in that, the use of accounting created a need for measurement, as this is integral to the culture of accounting (Morgan, 1988). The case study is unique. It is not a situation of an organisation without accounting, but it is an organisation that has abandoned accounting. In that sense, it is akin to the notions of accountability discussed by Messner (2009). This organisation is, in a way, haunted by its previous accounting history. In examining the company’s abandonment of accounting, multiple explanations are provided: the responsible person left the company, the new manager was not necessarily up to speed with the accounting requirements, the company went through rapid expansion, and the company moved from a monthly strategic meeting to a daily operational meeting. In all of this, the previous accounting conversation was lost. However, the company cannot escape the need for measurement. This is not to suggest that accounting is always present in the organisation, but that in any results-driven environment, there is a need for a discussion about results. Accounting, in its own peculiar way, lends its support to this ‘results’ discussion. Thus, in not using accounting, we argue that this organisation is still ‘accounting’. By recognising the absence of accounting, recognising that it is helpful, and recognising that the organisation is results-driven, it is still engaged in a form of accounting conversation. This first section of the discussion addresses this part. Secondly, though, the conversation examines how the organisational discourses, despite the loss of accounting information, exist and function within the company, through the invocation of different measurement proxies. This destabilises the centrality accorded to accounting as the language of business and is an illustration of what accounting does and does not do within an organisation. This organisation drew upon a set of inventive measures to support its discourse; these are reasonably unstable proxies, but the discourses still flourished.

New Accountings: Accounting without Accounting

The organisational discourses identified traditionally satisfied the organisational need for measurement through accounting measures produced for the monthly managerial report (Messner, 2009). Accounting information was no longer produced, but the need for information and measurement, particularly of the cultural type produced by accounting, remains. In discussing the
limits of accountability, Messner (2009) considers what constitutes a narrative, drawing on the work of Butler (2005) and the concepts of performativity:

An account is a type of narrative and, as such, it ‘depends upon the ability to relay a set of sequential events with plausible transitions’ and ‘draws upon narrative voice and authority, being directed toward an audience with the aim of persuasion’…Therefore, ‘narrative capacity constitutes a precondition for giving an account’. (Messner, 2009, p. 924)

But what is crucial here is that the need to account justifies and legitimises the act of accounting. In a sense, one (the need to account) leads to the other (the act of accounting), but equally, the other (the act of accounting) legitimises and justifies the one (the need to account). Even in choosing not to give an account (the other), this constitutes discursive recognition of the need to give an account (the one). Choosing not to give an account is in this sense a form of accounting:

The act of accounting for oneself thereby co-constitutes the self, rather than merely communicating information about the self. Such identity shaping begins from the moment a demand for accountability is formulated, a demand to which the accountable self is expected to answer. As an accountable self, I always find myself already in a situation in which a demand has been formulated. And once I start to give an account, I have accepted the situation I am in as a legitimate one and cannot reasonably question it as I go on. I cannot claim to account and at the same time argue that there is no need to account. Once I account, I have entered the logic of accountability, implicitly agreeing that there is a legitimate need to give an account (Messner, 2009, p. 927) (emphasis in the original).

Similarly,

Even if I deny giving any account, my exposure to the addressee means that my denial to give an account may be interpreted as an account. In other words, I cannot not account, once I am exposed to a situation in which somebody demands that I account (Messner, 2009, p. 927) (emphasis in the original)

This reinforces Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) conception of discourse developed earlier in this paper: “What is denied is not that objects exist externally to thought, but rather different assertions that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive conditions of emergence” (p. 108). Thus, in the company choosing not to use accounting, they are still giving an account. Because the object of accounting previously existed within the organisation, the company is accounting despite not accounting. The company, by previously constructing and using accounting information, ‘implicitly agreed’ that there was a legitimate need to give an account. A simple choice not to have accounting, when an organisation has already recognised the need for accounting, does not escape the logic of accounting. This ‘account’ cannot be ‘constituted outside of discursive conditions of emergence’.

This also develops the work of Morgan (1988) in his discussion about how the organisation is affected through the introduction of accounting information. In introducing accounting controls into hospitals, Morgan illustrates how this reshapes the organisation, shifting from health and patient...
Financial controls can make hospitals more efficient. But they can also make them less humane. Accounting systems grasp and shape important aspects of the reality of running a hospital, especially the economic and financial aspects, but in the process, they also change the nature and quality of other aspects (Morgan, 1988, pp. 482-3).

Accounting is a coloniser; it is a not a neutral technology; this is what accounting ‘does’ within the organisation. This accounting historicity haunts the organisation: despite no active discourse of accounting, there was a history of accounting, and thus, the construction of these discourses is characterised by an engagement with the accounting discourse. It is accounting by not accounting. The historicity of accounting within the organisation suggests that while accounting is not actively being produced, the organisation is still, in that sense, accounting. We see this through traditional accounting constructions: “we had a good year”; “we are growing”; “we have a competitive advantage”; “we are on the right track”. This is especially evident in Partner 2’s statement: “Without results we lost the sense of direction. We acted without knowing the result”.

The lack of a concrete MAIS presents an opportunity for reflection on the usefulness of MAI. Given the set of developments within the company (including the purchase and integration of a new company; new production processes; and the development of new production facilities, amongst others), all of these investments and business developments constitute the traditional space for MAI, informed by budgets, strategic investment decisions, performance evaluation systems, and other ordinary tools. However, this organisation completed a tremendous range of developments on the basis of intuition, supported by limited financial data. What is interesting here is that the entrepreneurial discourse constitutes a discourse for everyone, but financial conversations were relevant to only a few organisational members. In both the discourse of entrepreneurship and of the partners’ beliefs, the organisation, as a whole, suggests that there is sufficient information for the management of the organisation. In examining the actual financial information about this company, there is a divergence from this confidence, which suggests that it faces various accounting challenges, particularly with respect to liquidity due to growing indebtedness, product margins and profitability, and that current financial results do not support all that was claimed during the interviews: this reinforces the centralisation of power as the information proxies and their interpretation were controlled by the partners. But, at one level, that is not important. The focus of this discussion is developing an argument based around accounting without accounting. In developing Messner (2009), there is always a failure in the search of accountability. It is the search for an unreachable and unattainable goal. More importantly, for us, in the decision not to be
accountable, the ‘accounter’ engages in a type of accountability. The same theoretical ‘trap’ applies to our paper. Of importance for us, though, is that the organisation was engaging in the use of accounting information before the production of accounting information was abandoned.\textsuperscript{[10]} The accounting cultural influence exists in the abandonment of accounting. The partners discuss income, margins, revenue growth, gross profits, margins, net profits despite not having such information. This is the organisational haunting by accounting. The accounting without accounting continues in the search for constructions to support and sustain organisational discourses in the absence of direct accounting information.

\textit{Satisfying the Thirst for Information: Informational Proxies and Constructing Discourses}

Our second contribution is that despite the loss of accounting information, these crucial organisational discourses – such as ‘competitive advantage’ and ‘growth’, which are traditionally grounded in and supported by MAI – continue to exist and function within the company. Messner equally supports this argument, despite concerning accountability:

\begin{quote}
Accountability is often realised through accounting technologies, but other technologies can bring about similar effects of exposure to demands of accountability (2009, p. 930).
\end{quote}

The inventiveness of the company in sustaining these discourses is interesting. What this also illustrates is the uncertainty and risk in managing organisations through unstable proxies and intuition alone. In part, this challenges the perceived centrality of the accounting discourse, but it does suggest a role for accounting, as a further source of information, as the lack of ‘concrete’ accounting information illustrated the risk of managing the organisation and deciding strategic matters without support in accounting information, either to challenge or to support the other discourses (this in no way suggests that accounting leads to correct decisions). It demonstrates the problem, further, of creating an unsubstantiated entrepreneurial discourse, as well as the risk of focusing on day-to-day operational matters, without having an overall set of strategic objectives supported by the accounting discourse.

This is an examination of what these informational proxies ‘do’ in the organisation (Mol and Law, 2004). To sustain this discourse, the organisation draws upon a range of information proxies including: freight control, billing, the daily meeting, increased sales, unique production facilities in comparison to competitors, and unique production options in comparison to competitors, amongst others. These are the organisational performance and control measures. They talk not of accounting

\textsuperscript{[10]} We do not suggest that accounting is always present in an organisation, so that it is not possible to escape the influence of accounting, and we have not considered this argument in respect of an organisation that has never engaged in accounting. One could presuppose that business is normally so enraptured by accounting, that a similar argument is possible.
measures which is how we have been acculturated to think about in relation to accounting. The company presents an optimistic discourse: due to the partners’ intuition and trust, the company has strong, unified leadership. In combination with the discourse of entrepreneurship, the macro-view is that the company’s competitive advantage gives the company strong impetus for success given its increasing competitive advantage (Covaleski et al., 2003) and its continued market growth; the future will be good for current members of the company, despite moments of great challenge that requires personal and professional effort to achieve the company’s life project so as to achieve future rewards (3-5 years) (Rosanas and Velilla, 2005). For these expectations to materialise there is a focus on results.

Many of the organisation’s discourses would traditionally be supported by accounting information. For example, competitive advantage is demonstrable from a production perspective, due to the vertical integration of production technologies, but accounting information would provide further information as to the competitive advantage; growth is measurable in increases in sales and orders, but growth can also be measured in accounting. In this case, increased productive capability, increased orders, and increased sales resulted in a marked increase in the fiscal loss of the year. Despite this, the organisation was convinced of its discursive constructions.

The relative importance of intuition derives from the organisational requirements of focusing on day-to-day operations, which depends on the entity’s information systems and organisational structure. What is noteworthy is that, due to the lack of information confirming outputs and results, the concept of output and results mean different things within different discursive constructions: punctual delivery, billing, a visit to a client that does not take place, etc. In these conditions, a set of operational and non-monetary activities are surrogate proxies for non-existent financial results. What is crucial here is that the partners’ intuitive management and its associated discourses construct an environment that generates alternative operational and non-monetary proxies for outputs and results, and further, renders them ‘acceptable’ (Miller and Friesen, 1984). As Hines (1991) argues in relation to financial accounting, “[l]egitimacy is achieved by tapping into this central proposition because accounts generated around this proposition are perceived as ‘normal’ ” (p. 328). This is the same phenomenon in action here. The discourses of the partners’ beliefs and entrepreneurship discursively construct the conditions in which these operational and non-monetary proxies for outputs and results are both necessary (information is evidence, and evidence is proof) and convincing (“we are growing”, “we have a competitive advantage”, “we are moving in the right direction”). These measures work together and centralise power in the hands of the partners.
As Figure 2 illustrates, the discourse of entrepreneurship comprises four components: (i) competitive advantage; (ii) growth; (iii) life project; and (iv) a focus on results. The competitive advantage discourse is fundamental for the entire discursive construction, including vertical production capacity, technological specialisation, and flexibility. The discourse is constructed through other measures of outputs and results. External discourses, such as client feedback, do praise the company’s flexible production structure, which is rare in this sector. This feedback does provide some discursive confirmation for the discourse of competitive advantage. This productive flexibility allows the company to respond to ‘unexpected’ demands and to provide vertically-integrated production. In addition, the potential to expand production adds a further variable to the construction of the competitive advantage discourse, reinforced due to the industries barriers to entrants.

In turn, the discourse of competitive advantage sanctions the associated discourse of growth. To some extent, past growth reinforces this discourse, which demonstrates that the company has growth exceeding the industries average growth rates. Clients perceive the company as a ‘winner’, and thus, this sustains this optimistic discursive structure of competitive advantage and growth. In combination with the discourses of growth and competitive advantage (which are outward focused), there is a need for internal organisational discourses to capture the imagination of managers and employees. Consequently, we see the discourse of the life project. This is both a collective discourse – the overall direction of the company – and an individual discourse – where each individual fits within the project and their potential rewards. Managers are promised that, if they dedicate themselves to the company, commit to its mission and targets, then in the future they will receive financial rewards such as increased remuneration, personal rewards such as promotion or industry/business kudos because they participated in the company’s success. The company has expressed a desire to list publicly, which would enhance the company’s prestige, raising the comparative value of the management team. As stated above, this is akin to the traditional Protestant work ethic: today’s suffering and stress will be rewarded in the future.

The final cog in the entrepreneurship discourse is the focus on results. The discursive focus on results does not follow the traditional economic logic of revenue less expenses equals profit, but rather, it operates through operational and non-monetary proxies (billing, trucks released, debt balance, problems solved at the client). These proxies are short-term and do not provide adequate approximations of economic results (margins and profits) or financial resources (cash). These proxies may indicate trends, but they do not identify timing. We are not saying that this information is not important. Thus, ‘results’ mean different things within different discourses based on operational and non-monetary proxies.
This discussion illustrates that intuition can be wrong (the partners predicted financial success, but a large loss ensued). It also demonstrates the benefit of perspective and long-term strategies. Information is vital. Would the return of financial and MAI result in the decreasing use of intuition? We would argue towards focusing their intuition attention on longer-term strategic objectives, where information is not readily available. This illustrates the risk of ‘false’ comfort, because these discursive constructions appear inherently unstable and contradictory (and perhaps that is true of all discourses). Consider the following series of quotes from Partner 2:

Partner 2: Everything I do is focused on results…

Partner 2: The priority today is the company’s results.

Compare this with:

Partner 2: Without results we lost the sense of direction. We acted without knowing the result. We know that it’s positive but we don’t know to what extent.

How can one focus on results, without knowing the results?

6 FINAL COMMENTS

This paper contributes to a range of discussions in the accounting literature. In particular, it contributes to complex debates concerning the materiality of accounting in a post-structural, ontologically-informed world. What we argue for, in a space where accounting does not exist a priori, where there are epistemological challenges around positing what accounting is, and where, as Hopwood (1987) would argue, the employment (or non-employment) of accounting within an organisation can lead to unexpected results or even the opposite of what was intended is that we should focus, theoretically, on what accounting ‘does’ or ‘does not do’ within an organisation. This is a new post-structural objectivity developed in an accounting context (Mol and Law, 2004). This case study constitutes, consequently, an analysis of what the absence of accounting does within the organisation. What is interesting for us in this case study is the complex psychological question of what convinces people to act in a certain manner. Predictive models like economic rationalism are too simplistic. Actors within the organisation take a range of information into account, including intuition, and take a decision. One thing that people within an organisation will try to do is promote a consistent internal discourse. Information helps in this process: consequently, an organisation with a history of previous MAIS is still thirsty for information and this organisation has a complex network of interrelated information proxies to support and sustain its internal discourses, controlled by the managing partners.
For us, the second contribution concerns a theoretical explanation of ‘accounting’ without accounting. Hopwood (1987) and Messner (2009) provide insight into the potential for accounting to exist without formal accounting. First, Hopwood argues that the absence of accounting constitutes the ontological space that enables accounting to continue to ‘exist’ within the organisation: the absence of accounting has the potential to transform into the unintended – the continuation of accounting. Similarly, through developing the logic of accountability from Messner (2009) and in particular, the limits of accountability, we develop a theorisation of accounting without accounting. This involves developing two particular elements of Messner (2009). First, management accounting differs from the context of traditional accountability, which constitutes a relationship between the self and the addressee. Secondly, the nature of the demand imperative in management accounting differs, as it is voluntary. There is no moral, ethical, legal, regulatory or other demand imperative that requires the account. However, what we then argued is that due the post-structural objectivity of management accounting (its history and culture), this previous historicity creates a demand imperative for information of a ‘particular type’. We argue that in choosing not to have MAIS, the organisation continues to engage with their previous accounting. Thus, in the search for alternative organisational proxies to support and enhance organisational discourses, in particular the measurement influence from accounting, it influences and impinges upon the form of informational, organisational proxies. There is, we argue, an impact and influence from accounting that infects the organisation and thus they continue to account without accounting.

Furthermore, we argue that in accounting without accounting, the lack of accounting information is a factor to centralise power in the partners. Despite informational proxies being drawn upon to sustain the organisational discourses, the partners control the interpretation of these proxies. A lack of accounting ‘de-democratised’ the organisation: we have seen similar arguments in relation to the dialogic accounting literature (Boyce, 2002; 2004). Given that accounting is contingent, this is a surprising conclusion for us. Equally, given the instability of the information proxies, this is a risky strategy for the partners as the demand for the mutual trust and confidence between the partners and managers could be destroyed.

Our final contribution is in relation to methodology. In drawing out the implications of post-structural ontology, we needed to employ a methodological framework that recognised and respected this theoretical space. The insights of Mol and Law (2004), Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) and Czarniawska (2000) illustrate that post-structural analysis is about decontextualisation and recontextualisation and that there is no account of the organisation that is not contingent and contestable. In this, our analysis identified the power shift within the organisation to the partners through the absence of MAIS and consequently, how the subsequent informational, organisation
proxies, supplemented by a discourse of intuition and trust, were difficult to contest. We also illustrated how different members of the organisation latched on to different organisational signifiers at different moments. This illustrates the power of organisational signifiers, as their partiality as nodal points enables different organisational members to ‘identify’ with the organisation’s ‘life project’ in different ways. This reinforces Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) by illustrating the legitimising nature of rhetoric within the organisation and illustrates further Mol and Law (2004) by suggesting what ‘accounting’ and other ‘organisational’ artefacts ‘do’ in the organisation.

MAIS, traditionally, enhances planning, control, and decision-making, but it requires interpretation. This is where management intuition steps in: MAIS does not guarantee that the right decision will be made. However, without appropriate information, intuition is a game of chance: the equivalent of a game of Russian roulette; at least with accounting information, you potentially have some idea of what chamber the bullet is in. This power is not always perceived in organisations. Information is necessary for decision-making at all levels and to all decisions in the organisation. What this paper illustrates is that when one component in the information process is missing (accounting), intuition is important, but the thirst for information is not satisfied until we conjure up information proxies.

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