



# Professional Identity in Narratives

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**Abstract.** The paper analyses six professional narratives in a workplace meeting. The first part presents the theoretical framework, namely definition, types of and approaches to identity and the main features of narratives, namely the structure, function, and narrator's roles. The underlying assumption is that speakers display particular facets of their identity considering the environment and the type of interaction in which they are engaged and that narratives change depending on their purpose and context. The theoretical framework relies on Tajfel's social constructionist approach to identity and on the Membership Categorization Analysis. The second part is the data analysis of the narratives presented by several employees of a multinational company during a phone conference meeting, with a focus on the professional identity in terms of narrative structure and values upheld by the narrators. The analysis presents the structure of the professional narratives, the values upheld, and the narrators' roles and concludes with a possible professional master narrative.

**Keywords:** identity, narrative, membership categorization, institutional talk

## 1. Theoretical framework

The paper analyses the way in which narratives are used to present professional identities in a joint company in Romania. During the last three decades, the setting up of such companies has been a common phenomenon in Romania, and this is the reason why the way in which professional identities, values, and communities are presented has been considered of relevance.

The theoretical part presents the two main concepts used in the paper: identity and narrative. The first subchapter of the theoretical part is related to identity and provides a definition and several types of identity; it briefly introduces the social identity theory, which is actually used in the analysis. The second subchapter of the theoretical part is related to the narrative and describes its main elements: the narrator's function, the audience's influence on the narrator, and the use of

narrative in displaying identity. These theories are applied to the analysis of six self-presentations that constitute the data, with a view to identifying the manner in which professional narratives are used to present professional identity and values, thus contributing to the establishing of a professional group.

### **1.1. Definition of identity**

Identity, also called “self, selfhood, position, role, personality, category, person formulation, person description, subjectivity, subject, agent, subject position and persona” (Benwell–Stokoe 2006: 5) has been studied by several sciences such as psychology, sociology, or linguistics.

Both sociologists and linguists approach identity as being the result of individual interactions and relations to social groups: in sociology, identity is defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1981: 255), while linguistics analyses identity as “a fragile construction of different facets of self and other, within social units such as interaction, encounters and situation, during which individuals draw from numerous material and symbolic resources including but not limited to language” (Schiffrin 2006: 110). The paper uses both approaches considering identity as the result of social interactions, individuals presenting different sides of their identity according to contexts.

### **1.2. Types of identity**

For a long time, identity has been considered as essential, having fixed personal features that do not change in any context; this view has been opposed to the non-essentialist one, which considers interaction of paramount importance. The latter approach states that people have multiple selves that they display at various times. Identities emerge in discourse, where they are dynamically recreated (Androutsopoulos–Georgakopoulou 2003: 1). Antaki and Widdicombe (2008a: 196) also claim that identities are forged in interaction, they are not pre-given, with people exhibiting different features of identity at different times, depending on the type of interaction they are engaged in.

However, the last two statements should not be interpreted as individuals having no stable identity but rather that identity is an on-going process, with people changing (to a major or minor extent) their values, beliefs, and attitudes. Linguists have advanced the concept of multiple selves, namely the varying selves people might have or feel they ought to have (Ely et al. 2007: 160).

Below three types of identity are presented, namely social, cultural, and discursive.

Social identity is defined as the “selves that people construct with others [...] through social interaction and the appropriation of resources, including language, space, time, and routinized practices” (Ayometzi 2007: 42).

Cultural identity considers people as being a product of discourse, which accounts for multiple identities co-existing in the same individual, as it takes into account traits such as ethnicity, race, gender, class, all having a share in identity construction. Identity is defined as the positioning of the individual in respect to social and cultural discourses, discourse being defined as a broader concept than talk or linguistic repertoires (Zimmerman 2008: 87) and including elements such as ideology and power. This type of identity considers the opposition of positive and negative groups, whom the individual feels close to or rejects; “identity is discursively established through classifications; it includes and asserts a certain ‘horizon’ of possible social positions as ‘positive’ and excludes others as ‘negative’” (Chouliaraki 2003: 304). Individuals express their identities by resorting to acts of identity, defined by Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2003: 5) as a way in which speakers express belonging or rejecting particular communities. Acts of identity are considered to be markers of group identity in which specific linguistic features are used and which are directly associated with their group (Kisling 2007: 264); they are projected in a conscious way through language (Evans Davies 2007: 74) or can be stated in a more indirect way, being achieved linguistically in a variety of ways – use of narratives, “shared assumptions”, choice of words (De Fina–Schiffrin–Bamberg 2007: 15). They are also expressed by resorting to non-linguistic means – dress style, activities, hobbies; Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2003: 9) call them an “identity kit including semiotic systems”.

Discourse identity is closely related to the moment-by-moment exchange of roles, for example, speaker–listener, with situated identities adopted by individuals in particular situations, for example, interviewer–interviewee, client–provider, etc. All these identities combine and contribute to the formation of more global identities (De Fina–Schiffrin–Bamberg 2007: 14).

Conversation analysis studies identity as defined by interaction, identity being one of the participants’ resources (Widdicombe 2008a: 203). Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 70) distinguish between visible indicators of identity, which are ways in which the individuals display their identity, and oriented-to-identity features, which are possible ways in which individuals expect themselves to act in a particular situation (Zimmerman 1998: 91). The type and context of interaction are very important, as different identity types can be resorted to – for instance, individuals can emphasize their professional identity if the interaction is at the workplace, and, as such, they can present themselves as experts, mediators, interviewers, customers, teachers, or students. Conversation analysis considers of paramount importance to start from the bottom-up meaning of the talk itself and move to theory, the aim

being to show that “context and identity have to be treated as inherently locally produced, incrementally developed and, by extension, as transformable at any moment”. This approach “charts the identity work of shifting selves, contingent on the unfolding demands of talk’s sequential environment” (Benwell–Stokoe 2006: 37). Other linguists, such as Wetherell, consider that conversational analysis should be combined with wider macrostructures and cultural-historical context: “[t]he resulting analytical approach is a genealogical one which aims to trace normative practices, values and sense-making through both historical and synchronic intertextual analysis” (qtd. in Benwell–Stokoe 2006: 41).

The current paper relies on a combination of the three types of identity – social identity, adapted here to the professional environment (employers and employees), cultural identity, as the speakers are all Romanian young men, and discursive identity, as the narrators are speakers and listeners.

### **1.3. The social identity theory**

There are two major trends in explaining identity – namely identity as a social phenomenon and identity as a psychological one.

The social constructionist theory defines identity as a process having the following features: it takes place in specific interactions, displays several identities of an individual rather than one, does not emanate from an individual but as the result of social processes, and assumes discourse work (De Fina–Schiffrin–Bamberg 2007: 2).

This paper is based on Tajfel’s (1981) social identity theory, which claims that identity has a dual nature – it is both a social and a psychological reality. Social identity, however, is not automatically accepted by individuals, as they gradually come to understand the social categories and develop a preference for a particular social group, to which they become emotionally attached (McKinley–Dunnett 2008: 47). Tajfel also advances the self-categorization theory which accounts for the way in which individuals identify themselves with particular groups because of either emotional attachment or specific dispositions. As group members, individuals share a particular identity, are expected to possess certain characteristics, and have certain “motives” and “rights” (Widdicombe 2008b: 53). The group also defines itself by contrast to other groups, resorting to “relevant categories” and relying on “stereotypes” (Widdicombe 2008a: 193). In actual interaction, self-categorization is influenced by “salience”, meaning that it is the features of the context that settle which of these social categories are probably perceived by “the interaction participants as most obviously applicable” (McKinley–Dunnett 2008: 47–48).

Similar to this theory is the Membership Categorization Analysis, which derives from conversation analysis and ethnomethodology and aims to identify categories

used by participants to describe people. Membership Categorization Analysis studies the “locally used, invoked and organised presumed common sense knowledge of social structures which members are oriented to in the conduct of everyday affairs” (Hester–Eglin 1997: 3). These categories provide an understanding of the specific activity, of moral rules and values governing specific communities, pointing at accepted types of behaviours and responsibilities (Petraki–Baker–Emmison 2007: 111–112); they express the speakers’ expectations of social norms and “what it means to be a certain kind of person or to act in a certain way. However, they are also fluid, as new predicates can be added, and thus new identities can emerge” (De Fina–Schiffrin–Bamberg 2007: 15). The theory explains the way categories are linked to each other and thus to particular actions (“category-bound activities”) and characteristics (“natural predicates”) (Benwell–Stokoe 2006: 38–39); predicates for categories may include, for example, “rights, entitlements, obligations, knowledge, attributes and competences” (Hester 2008: 135). These categories become one of the participants’ main resources of “doing identity”, and interlocutors may align or dissociate themselves with/from the features associated with these categories (Paoletti–Cavallaro Johnson 2007: 91). Linguistically these features are realized in a wide variety of ways – descriptions, explanations, narratives, exonerations, corrections, etc. (McKinley–Dunnett 2008: 48–49).

The analysis in this paper supports the social identity theory, and the self-presentations lend themselves to the Membership Categorization Analysis, as all the speakers share or orient themselves towards similar norms and rules; the predicates include knowledge (professional), competences (information technology), and obligations (permanent development of professional skills), all expressed by means of narratives.

#### **1.4. Narratives**

Narratives have been more recently studied as a way of constructing identity: “[n]arratives are central for the negotiation of identity, an ordering principle that imposes meaning on the individual’s life” (Bamberg–de Fina–Schiffrin 2007: 5); they have been approached as “coping devices to create coherent identities, as institutional tools to regulate identities and as interactionally co-constructed texts to create community” (De Fina–Schiffrin–Bamberg 2007: 16).

Narratives have several features that make them recognizable as a particular text type: the narrator, characters, settings, plot, sequence of events (Benwell–Stokoe 2006: 133), their structure, with beginnings, middles, and ends, their space-time organization – as the events are structured by space and time. However, the beginning, middle, and end of personal narratives are sometimes “designed” by the narrator, being rather subjective interpretations. In many cases, narratives are longer texts, but linguists also comment on mini-tellings, which include the

fundamental elements of a narrative in terms of events and the way they end (Georgakopoulou 2003b: 89).

In this paper, narratives are defined as stories concerned with “spontaneous personal experience” (Holmes 2007: 171), having a chronological sequence, a cause and effect structure, a resolution, a narrator, and a setting. Functionwise, narratives present personal experiences: “By telling stories, we convey to others a sense of who we are, of our beliefs and values. Narratives of personal experience have been related to many forms of social identification such as cultural belonging and gender affiliation” (Bastos–de Oliveira 2007: 190). Narratives are a way in which individuals can make sense of their life and can give meaning to the events that they have experienced. As such, “narrators interpret the past in stories rather than reproduce the past as it was” (Bell 2007: 235). Narratives are “a privileged mode for self-construction” (Georgakopoulou 2003a: 83), as well as a means of understanding, explaining, or displaying a particular identity, depending on the local and wider context (culture, time, etc.); “[n]arrative practices are ways of legitimizing social identities while rejecting others” (Wortham–Gadsden 2007: 324). The past is reshaped, and thus different identities arise (De Fina–Schiffrin–Bamberg 2007: 25); due to these features, narratives are also called “storied selves” (Benwell–Stokoe 2006: 138).

Narratives express not only personal but also group identity (De Fina 2007: 351), and they can adopt or reject master narratives (widely accepted stories).

Other functions of narratives are of entertaining, of conveying a moral message, of more or less directly judging the world shared by the teller and the audience (Ayometzi 2007: 44). They are also used to make or support a point, since claims can be made more plausibly by relying on a story (McKinley–Dunnnett 2008: 39). The audience is intimately involved in the construction of the narrative, as audience members can ratify the stories, challenge or delimitate them (Georgakopoulou 2003b: 100).

Narrators have different roles. De Finna (2007) claims that they represent social worlds, which they also evaluate and within which they align themselves by means of linguistic or behavioural choices. The identity displayed in the narrative is often related in more or less direct ways to the general identities that exist in the group. Commenting on the narrators’ roles, Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2003: 18) list “teller of events”, “assessor”, or “evaluator of the reported events”, and “contester”, while De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg (2007: 1) state that the narrators can fulfil the roles of the author, animator, or figure.

The current analysis focuses on professional identity and on the ways in which the narrators construct it both at the personal and collective level. The narratives are analysed temporally, having a cause–effect structure. All the narratives include professional values highly rated by the employees, which points to their belonging to the group and to the company.

## **1.5. Institutional talk**

The workplace is a setting for displaying and negotiating identities, as employers and employees aim to align their job responsibilities and their identity. However, professional identities are complex, shift from context to context, and resort to a wider range of personality traits, as individuals aim to strike a balance between their professional and individual identity (Holmes 2007).

## **2. Data analysis**

The data analysed below were recorded in a multinational company, whose headquarters are in Belgium and which has one of its branch offices in Romania. The activity of the company is information technology, and the Romanian employees are organized in teams, each one having a Belgian team leader; the teams and their leaders meet in face-to-face or phone meetings (Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 5). The company is rather new, having been set up around eighteen months before the recording was made, which means that the organizational culture is in the making.

The analysis below studies a phone meeting during which the employees introduce themselves to a new colleague. These self-presentations resemble a CV, the speakers talking about their professional life from the present to the past. Their presentations are analysed as narratives because of the common elements these two text types share: the narrator (the employee), the setting (the workplace), the plot (the decision to change the job), and the resolution (the current job). The employees' success is based on their professional and personal qualities, which have helped them to get the current job. The function of these narratives is to make sense of the employees' professional life and to introduce them as valuable professionals.

The employees' professional identity is analysed based on the social identity theory and the Membership Categorization perspective; the narrators recount the experiences undergone during their previous employment periods and present themselves as sharing knowledge and skills with their colleagues. They describe themselves as a cohesive group, connected by homogenous competences and values. The narratives are triggered by the team leader, who invites the employees attending the phone conference to introduce themselves to a new colleague, F2.

Each analysis of the six narratives is structured around a similar pattern – the transition from the previous to the current speaker, the temporal sequence of the employee's professional experience, the language used, the values upheld, and the differences between the narrators. The aim is to identify the way in which the employees use narratives in order to build their professional identities.

The first speaker is F2, the new team member, who is based in a third country, followed by five Romanian colleagues working in the Romanian office. For transcribing conventions, see the *Appendix*.

### 2.1. Narrative 1

The first speaker is F2, who starts his self-presentation by specifying that he joined the company eight months before and then talks about his previous jobs. The narrative is divided into two parts, from the present moment (the meeting) backwards until the moment he joined the company; in the former part, F2 presents the teams he worked with in the current company and the responsibilities he had (ll. 4–8). The latter part of his narrative lists his previous jobs, being a mixture of information in terms of lengths of employment with the particular company, a description of the activity of the company, and his job responsibilities there. The final part of the narrative is focused on the present, namely the connection between his entire professional experience and its relevance for the current job:

- 1 F2: hi actually ere uhm I joined XXX from eight nine months  
 2 before last August uhm,  
 3 uhm at XXX I joined here  
 4 and before that I was working with CAT group  
 5 basically I was working in high frequency domain  
 6 but but yeah, the the the whole experience  
 7 I, I, I have with CAT  
 8 and it was good and that sort of things  
 9 and and before joining XXX  
 10 I was working in the [unclear] systems for two years uhm  
 (Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 26–27)

In terms of the professional values emphasized by F2, professional experience comes first (ll. 4–5). The experience is presented as good, and F2 suggests that he would have more to add – “and it was good and that sort of things” (l. 8), but he is not specific about it; however, positive values are implied.

The repetition of the word “experience” (twice in F2’s self-presentation) indicates the high value of this feature. The idea is also indirectly supported by the jobs presented in the narrative, all these being indirect claims made in support of F2’s professional experience. He emphasizes it in the final part of his presentation again, where the word “particularly” is repeated.

Next, F1 invites the Romanian team members to present themselves.

- 1 F1: can you do the same on the other side in Braşov side  
 2 that each of you present a bit yourself to introducing?  
 (Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 27)

From here onwards, the relationship between the speakers and their audience changes, as they mainly address F2, whom they have not met so far. Everybody is already familiar with the Romanian team members and with the team leader. It is worth noticing that the five Romanian narrators adopt F2's narrative structure, namely from the present towards the past.

## 2.2. Narrative 2

The first Romanian speaker is R5, who introduces himself and states that he has been with the company since February the year before:

- 1 R5: hi, I'm R5.  
 2 I've started with XXX R from Feb from February last year.  
 3 I worked in structure team only,  
 4 so uhm I worked on B mesh modelling for five B,  
 5 that was one of the major tasks I've worked on  
 [...]  
 6 R5: so in many ways for me this is the last call for CAT  
 7 because I moved, I was moved to MAV team so  
 8 F2: ah, ok, ok yeah ok  
 9 R5: and previously I worked mostly for for seven years for a company  
 10 which was involved in different a different type of software  
 (Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 27)

R5's only job in the current company has been with the structure team, and as part of this job he mentions some of the most important tasks he has achieved (ll. 4–5). R5 considers that his job is a complex one, involving specific knowledge. The complexity of technical knowledge required by the job is the professional value that R5 seems to put forward. The next part of R5's narrative looks towards the future, as he states that he is going to switch teams (ll. 6–7). After this announcement, R5 continues his professional narrative by talking about the jobs he has had before joining the current company. The values upheld are indicated by the information R5 presents in his narrative – he mentions the length of experience in a particular IT area (l. 9) and the variety of tasks he had to carry out there, for which he uses the adverb “mostly” (which implies there were other tasks, too), such as “satellite data transfer”, “multicasting”, etc.

### 2.3. Narrative 3

The next speaker is R4, who also starts by stating the date he joined the company – sixteen months before. He adapts his narrative not only to F2’s structure but also to R5’s one, as he uses the adverb “also” to indicate the similarities between himself and his colleague (l. 3); therefore, he presents himself as a team member.

- 1 R4: I’m also from the beginning in CAT team,  
 2 I work with IO features here  
 3 also a bit of over-connectors  
 4 and uhm in N solutions also  
 5 and automation.

Like the previous speakers, R4 starts with his current position (l. 1) and describes the tasks he performed as part of the CAT team – “IO features”, “a bit of over-connectors”, “N solutions”, and “automation” (ll. 2–5), which indicates that he values wide professional experience.

In the next lines, R4 speaks about R2 and R5, who are the oldest members in this team, which is an unexpected turn of the presentation, indicating that R4 considers length of employment to be a significant detail; he joined the company in February and the other two colleagues a month earlier:

- 8 R4: R2 and R5 are the two first  
 9 who joined the structure team  
 (Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 28)

In the last part of R4’s presentation, he describes his previous experience acquired in the three companies where he previously worked, doing websites and web application “mostly”. The use of the particularizer “mostly” (l. 12) points to the range of tasks performed by F2, something that he considers worth mentioning.

F2 asks R4 a question about his experience in Java technology and C++:

- 10 R4: yes, I have uhm also some uhm three years of Java experiences  
 11 uhm and I’m I was a little bit new in C plus plus  
 12 when I joined the company  
 (Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 28)

R4 considers his Java experience as adequate – he mentions three years in his answer, and he diminishes what he considers lack of professional knowledge/experience by resorting to the mitigator *a little* in “a little bit new” (l. 11), but the way in which he phrases it indicates that learning on the job is another

professional value that R4 appreciates. He also uses the past tense (“I was a little bit new”), suggesting that this is no longer the situation.

#### 2.4. Narrative 4

The next speaker is R3, who starts his narrative in the same manner as his colleagues:

- 1 R3: hi, I'm R3.  
2 so I joined CAT team and XXX in March last year,

He starts with the previous experiences he obtained during his former jobs:

- 3 R3 my background is more an engineering one than programming  
4 so I worked in FEM as an a CAE engineer  
5 for about two years

R3's narrative is slightly different from that of the previous speakers, as he mentions his personal interest, which was not related to the previous jobs but is linked to the current one (ll. 6–9).

- 6 R 3 but my personal interest is more programming and  
7 but I did not have too much experience  
8 when I joined XXX.  
9 more in web programming (Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 29)

As such, R3 seems to advance the idea that he values a job in which he can learn new things, and that his having obtained the current job is less the result of professional knowledge and more of personal interest and personal qualities, both matching the current company's field of activity.

#### 2.5. Narrative 5

R2, the next speaker, is the newest team member, and his narrative overtly indicates it:

- 1 R2: I came last year in May at XXX  
2 no experience in CAE  
3 I just have eight months  
4 in microcontroller programming and that's all  
(Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 28)

R2 directs his narrative to his colleagues, namely to R3, as indicated by the fact that he mentions no use in CAE (as opposed to R3, who worked as a CAE engineer and had two years of experience in this area).

Unlike his colleagues, R2 does not mention previous jobs and does not consider his eight months' experience in microcontroller programming as adequate – as indicated by the use of the diminutive “just” (l. 3) and by the way he finishes his presentation: “and that’s all” (l. 4). R2’s narrative points to the fact that he values professional experience despite his not having too much.

## 2.6. Narrative 6

The last speaker is R1, who starts his narrative on a more personal note, reminding F2 that they had met earlier in the main office, a remark pointing to his valuing professional relations. He then starts his narrative, which he signals by the use of “so”:

- 1 R1 ok, so I think uhm we know some some words about  
 2 uhm so I joined XXX in August last year  
 3 uhm and then we have some we had some uhm trainings here

R1 begins by stating the date he joined the company, but the next thing he mentions about his job is the trainings he attended, which indicates that he considers knowledge and training a strength and that he appreciates the company that has offered them (l. 3).

Next, R1 lists the responsibilities he had in the current company, apparently implying that he has been able to carry them out as the result of the training, after which R1 lists the jobs he had done in his current position (ll. 6–9):

- 4 R1: and then I worked for IO restraints  
 5 then for uhm N automation test objects,  
 6 and then for uhm offsets  
 7 and for FRS test objects also (Coposescu–Chefneux 2008: 29)

The temporal sequence emphasized by the use of “then” (ll. 4–6) underlines the variety of tasks performed by R1.

F1 asks whether this is R1’s first job, and R1 replies that he has worked six months for another company. However, he does not mention what experience he acquired there and even says that his current job could be considered to be the first, which points to the importance he assigns to it.

R1’s professional values suggested by his narrative are professional experience, learning, a wide range of tasks, and good working relations with his colleagues.

### 3. Conclusions

The speakers display their identity by resorting to narratives. These self-presentations are interpreted as professional narratives, as they include many features of narratives: temporal sequence, cause–effect structure, narrator, setting, plot, and resolution. The time orientation is from the present towards the past. The employees reshape their professional past, which is presented as the cause that has led to their obtaining the current job.

The narrators position themselves very carefully against their colleagues (both new and old) and their team leader. They adopt the narrative structure used by the first speaker, adapting it to their own story – they all begin by saying when they joined the company, mention the current tasks and responsibilities and their previous professional experience. The differences in their narratives point to their varying experiences and values.

In terms of narrative roles, the team members are mainly tellers and evaluators of themselves and of the other storytellers. Their narrative explains how they came to obtain the job for which they present themselves as efficient and good. Their past is interpreted in such a way as to indicate that what they have done before has prepared them for the current job.

All the employees present themselves as part of a group, joined by common professional beliefs and values; their identity is mainly collective but also individual, as the digressions from the pattern indicate (for example, R3's personal and professional interests).

The six narrators position themselves against each other and present themselves as sharing similar values, thus affirming their group membership; the common values are wide experience, on-going learning, previous employments involving various responsibilities; the length of stay in the current company appears to be an important element according to which the members self-categorize. They value professional knowledge and display it during the narratives.

The master narrative to which these six narratives can be connected is that of becoming a good professional and the values associated with it: acquiring experience, changing jobs (always to a better one), learning new things, doing new and challenging tasks, having the capacity to solve complex tasks and the ability to learn on the job, being a good team member and colleague.

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## Appendix

### Transcribing conventions

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Arabic numerals	line numbers
[ ]	laughter
[work]	guess
.	clause-final falling intonation
?	clause-final rising intonation
,	slight rise
//	the onset of overlapping talk
[unclear]	non-verbal information and/or unclear passages
XXX	words not transcribed to provide confidentiality