EID

$Sage

Organizational restructuring, precarious employment and work intensification: Women managers' experience of work under neoliberalism

Catherine Farrell
Cardiff University, UK

John Hassard (iD)
Manchester University, UK

Jonathan Morris (iD)
Cardiff University, UK

Abstract

In recent decades there has been a perceptible rise in employment precarity across professions, industries, institutions and economies, including for managerial grades. In this article the authors contend that this emanates from an implicit neoliberal governance agenda promoting deepening career uncertainty amidst transformative digital innovation and radical corporate restructuring. Among the effects of such changes have been managers experiencing longer working hours, greater work intensification and worsening work–life balance. The authors argue such effects have been particularly acute for women and notably under the institutional (economic, political and social) constraints of the coronavirus pandemic. Presenting quasi-longitudinal information from three qualitative studies (based on data collected variously in Japan, the UK and USA in 2002–2006, 2015–2019 and 2020–2021) the article considers not only women managers' experiences of work since the millennium, but also their occupational prospects for the future. The authors conclude that under neoliberalism the enduring interaction of organizational restructuring, precarious employment and work intensification will continue to affect adversely the equilibrium between women managers' personal lives and their professional work, given many confront increasing demands of corporate availability and work-related connectivity whilst simultaneously dealing with significant parenting and care responsibilities.

Corresponding author:
Jonathan Morris, Cardiff University, Aberconway Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, UK.
Email: MorrisJL@cardiff.ac.uk

Introduction

Focusing primarily on the work experiences of women managers, we contend recent employment practice in major corporations is characterized by rising job precarity. In developing an analysis of the increasing precariousness of managerial work we frame our arguments within a theoretical perspective that accounts for a rise in corporate restructuring and digital innovation amidst a widespread ideology of neoliberalism in major capitalist economies.

In its most palpable manifestations, the onset of precarious work has been associated, for example, with the gig economy, zero-hours contracts and casualization (Fleming, 2017; Henley, 2023; Tirapani and Willmott, 2023). However, a significant proportion of the 'precarious workforce' is found in managerial and professional occupations, or what traditionally are perceived of as relatively privileged labour market positions, with employees more likely to determine some aspects of their work (Alberti et al., 2018; Kalleberg, 2011, 2018; Pennycook et al., 2013). Arguably, therefore, the concept of precarity has implications for a much wider occupational corpus than normally assumed, including employees in various managerial and white-collar positions and sectors (Kraiger and Mohammed, 2021; Sewell and Taskin, 2015; Styhre, 2017). In the UK, for example, nearly 50% of workers defined as 'precarious' are employed in three white-collar groups: managers, professionals and technical staff (Brinkley, 2013; Weingarten et al., 2021). Furthermore, the relative rise of precarity has not occurred in a vacuum, but is instead part of a resurgent neoliberal governance regime having significant and widespread implications for society, corporations and employees (Holborrow, 2015; McCann et al., 2020; Mirowski, 2013; Peck, 2010).

Accepting this scenario, but assessing how past trends may influence future work and organizational practice, the article explores four issues: First, how neoliberalism has led to heightened competition and a search for shareholder value on behalf of large companies, irrespective of their country of origin, business system or sector (Ho, 2009; Kalleberg, 2011; Vallas, 2015). Second, how neoliberal ideological developments have created a situation of occupational precarity – an economy-wide phenomenon, embracing both organizational and employment practices (Choonara et al., 2022; Clegg and Baumeler, 2010; Lazzarato, 2009; Moisander et al., 2018; Vosko, 2010). Third, how this economic, political and social situation has had major implications for employees *on the ground*, reflecting the increasing demands on workloads and changing perceptions of security (Burchell et al., 1999; Ho, 2009; Lane, 2011; Sharone, 2014). And fourth, and how such trends are often gendered – with increases in workload having a significant impact on those with caring responsibilities, resulting in differential impacts on work roles and career advancement for women (Blair-Loy, 2009; Goldin, 2021; Pugh, 2015; Spann et al., 2020).

In developing this analysis, we draw information from three, primarily international comparative (UK, US and Japan) empirical studies that focus on the changing nature of managerial work under neoliberalism since the millennium. These nations were chosen given their status as among the top advanced economies in the world, based on gross domestic product and as contrasting economies, institutionally. A subsidiary but important reason was that the authors had ready research access to managers in many large corporations within these economies.

The first study, carried out in the early 2000s, indicated longer work hours, work intensification and increasing perceptions of job insecurity for managers, with these being trends far from conducive with goals to achieve greater work–life balance. By the second stage, which commenced in the late 2010s, managerial work had further intensified – assisted notably by developments in remote digital technologies; with managers working more extensively outside of corporate premises, a situation where perceptions of job insecurity had become essentially normative for managerial employees. The third stage was more spontaneous and stimulated specifically by the onset of the coronavirus pandemic from early 2020. Given the potential impact of the pandemic on managerial work, and for this enquiry on women managers' work particularly, it was felt gaining additional information for this period was important for the field. Thus the study was extended to account for a period in which managers were required to work from locations outside corporate premises.

Theoretical considerations

Neoliberal ideology

Neoliberalism is a concept often used to describe the contemporary resurgence of essentially 19th-century ideas associated with economic liberalism and free-market capitalism. In developing a theoretical context for this analysis, we argue that neoliberalism can be broadly defined as an implicit policy agenda, an ideology and a form of governmentality. While the concept has been contested in recent organizational theorizing (see Learmonth and Morrell, 2021; Peck and Theodore, 2019; Springer et al., 2016; Vincent, 2009), we argue it continues to provide an appropriate, insightful and instructive theoretical context for the types of corporate reforms, employment practices and work experiences described below.

As a contemporary economic and social phenomenon, neoliberalism emerged primarily in the 1980s and principally in the economies of the US and UK. By the mid- to late 1990s it was well-established and had made significant economic and social impacts on the ways in which large corporations operated and how employees experienced work within such contexts. Essentially neoliberalism is a state-facilitated and market-governed mode of regulation. As such, it privileges liberalist policies and governance systems: maximizing economic freedoms within an institutional framework which promotes, for example, private property rights, free markets, free trade and entrepreneurship (De Coster and Zanoni, 2023; Harvey, 2005, Mudge, 2008). Neoliberalism can be considered, therefore, as a transnationally interconnected process of market-driven reforms (Brenner et al., 2010; Peck, 2010), albeit one which intersects with historical trajectories

and national contexts in a form of 'complex hegemony' politically (Brenner et al., 2010; Williams, 2020). Above all, however, it is manifested notably through processes of globalization and is avowedly pro-corporate (Greer and Umney, 2022; Hathaway, 2020; Peck and Theodore, 2019).

In such an environment of fierce competition, economic liberalization and free markets, corporate governance systems – in liberal market economies (LMEs) at least – have witnessed a qualitative shift to forms of 'shareholder value' logic that are increasingly central to the management of corporate affairs (Kotz, 2002: Lazonick and O'Sullivan, 2010). In this situation, shareholders are privileged over other organizational stakeholders – including employees – amid a wider financialization of the economy (Fligstein and Shin, 2007; Froud et al., 2006; Moore and Robinson, 2015). Large corporations in this scenario are faced with intensified competition, often due to deregulation, and a need to reduce costs relentlessly in order to placate large institutional shareholders, with notably there being an unswerving focus on labour costs, particularly in LMEs such as the USA and UK, but also increasingly in Japan, purposely chosen as a less market-driven coordinated market economy (CME).

In the 1990s, large organizations tended to respond to such pressures by instigating widespread restructuring, often at the exhortation of business and management 'gurus' (Collins, 2020; Kennedy, 2012; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996). The professed objective was often for corporations to become more 'agile', 'lean' and 'flexible', and notably so through adopting principles of 'business process reengineering' (Hammer and Champy, 1993; O'Neill and Sohal, 1999), which notably included widespread downsizing, delayering and the outsourcing of activities (Hassard et al., 2009). Come the millennium, such reorganization trends were not only facilitated by, but also often intensified by, news forms of digitalization, which served variously to accelerate the mobility of capital amidst reductions in industrial regulation and company size; or the trend for what Davis (2016) has termed the 'vanishing corporation'.

Finally, we would note how neoliberalism and patriarchy are often intertwined, and how neoliberalism can perpetuate forms of masculine management and culture, and vice versa (Billing, 2011; Rottenberg, 2019). For example, the experience of increased insecurity and expanded workload can be seen to result from neoliberalism reproducing specific male norms in management and amplifying tokenism effects such as performance pressures (Adamson, 2017; Scharff, 2016). There is today a large body of literature on how patriarchy and neoliberalism are linked, including notably the effects on women managers (Baker and Brewis, 2020; Baker and Kelan, 2019; Mavin and Yusupova, 2023).

Precarious employment

The effects of neoliberal corporate strategies and human resource practices of recent decades –notably as witnessed during the recent Covid pandemic and its effects on industry worldwide – have highlighted crucial problematics at the heart of our dominant means of economic, political and social organization (Graham et al., 2017; Hodder, 2020; Tooze, 2021). Notable here have been series of structural and operational liabilities related to various stands of employment (Kramer and Kramer, 2020; Kuhn, 2016; Newlands, 2020). The rationalizing of major economic sectors has emphasized

graphically a range of shortcomings in the capacity for corporate capitalism to deliver adequate levels of income and standards of living for employees (Gans, 2020). This scenario has accentuated the perilous state that major sectors of the working population have been faced with in terms of employment conditions and financial rewards (Cominetti et al., 2020).

Given this situation, a major consequence of recent forms of economic change, we argue, is the emergence of the 'precarious organization' (Graham and Papadopoulos, 2023) and associated forms of precarious employment, in what were essentially enterprises formerly characterized by commercial stability and occupational longevity (Jacoby, 2005; Kanter, 1977). A significant effect is modern white-collar working being characterized increasingly by job-related ambiguity, risk and uncertainty (Kalleberg, 2018; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018), and notably in the case of women (Acker, 1990; Blair-Loy et al., 2009; Padavic et al., 2020). This in turn has seen precarity become temporally associated with neoliberalism, with over several decades these concepts becoming critically interrelated (Alberti et al., 2018; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006; Standing, 2011). They have also been linked to the emergence of post-industrial society, the questioning of Fordism and the emergence of the knowledge/digital economy (Cocco and Szaniecki, 2015; Huws, 2014; Sennett, 1998). Furthermore, what started as a feature of weakening forms of labour regulation within LMEs, occupational precarity later became reflected more widely across OECD economies, and notably in a range of CMEs in Europe and the Far East, including Japan (Doellgast et al., 2018; Lorey, 2015; Lukacs, 2020; Osawa et al., 2013).

Much of this evidence, however, has been associated largely with Western economies, and with established labour markets characterized by male, full-time, permanent employment. It is further characteristic of these organizations and employees in a relatively narrow time frame: notably from the late 1940s to the early 1980s (Jacoby, 2005). Arguably this is a fairly limited phase, which might be regarded as untypical, with the result that precarity is essentially considered a reversion to the norm of pre-Second World War employment patterns (ILO, 2015, 2016). Additionally, it can be contended that this scenario only reflects segments of the labour market in particular locales and thus largely excludes, for example, workers from the Global South, where precarity has been more normative (Breman and van der Linden, 2014). It can also be argued that it has ignored the occupational 'periphery' of the Global North, particularly the work, employment and labour market position of women (Betti, 2018; Hewison, 2016; Munck, 2013).

Further, it is our contention that the projection of entrepreneurship in many liberal and coordinated economies – as part of the new implicit neoliberal agenda – has led to a situation where many employees, including managers, have increased perceptions of insecurity in what are not conventionally perceived of as precarious occupations (Ahl and Marlow, 2020; Fleming, 2017; Gandini, 2018; Vallas and Cummins, 2015). This arguably leads to employees working long hours to mitigate insecurity, particularly in a context where digital technologies are pervasive (Introna, 2019). This has significant implications for managers in these organizations, with work intensification and extensification being a consequence of corporations employing fewer managers due to downsizing (Hassard and Morris, 2021). There has also been a consequent worsening of work–life balance due to progressive digitalization, with managers also having fewer opportunities

for career advancement due to delayering and outsourcing (White et al., 2004; Worrall et al., 2000, 2016).

There is considerable evidence, therefore, of marked increases in perceived job insecurity in large corporations, and insecurity for managers in particular, whose jobs had previously been regarded as relatively secure (Kalleberg, 2011). Theoretically, this has been characterized as a situation where labour market flexibility and precarious employment are placed centre stage economically, as part of a move to consumerism in a 'brave new world' of work (Beck, 2000). This is a scenario where the seemingly stable institutional structures which formerly provided occupational security have been removed amidst 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2001) and the emergence of the 'risk society' (Bevins, 2011; Sennett, 2006).

Nevertheless, this situation still poses a paradox, with large-scale data sets pointing to continued rates of long-term tenure across developed economies (Gallie et al., 2017) and authors pointing to the 'irrationally' of employment insecurity (Doogan, 2009; Fevre, 2007; McGovern et al., 2008). Presenting data from North America and Western Europe, Doogan (2009), for example, refutes the insecurity argument of 'social transformation' and argues instead that long-term job tenure has actually increased (Farber, 2008; Green, 2006; Mishel et al., 2009), with evidence from Japan supporting this despite an increase in 'non-standard' employment (Gagne, 2020; Kambayashi and Kato, 2017). While Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) argue there has been a relative decline in job tenure, particularly for men, and Hollister and Smith (2013) claiming women's rates have increased, these trends are not significant enough to explain fully the levels of insecurity purported either in surveys or field-based data, particularly for managers (Bachman et al., 2015; Worrall et al., 2016). Moreover, for the UK, Felstead (2019) argues that perceptions of job security have increased, and that feelings of insecurity are now spread across age groups and occupations. Analytically, therefore, job security may have to be decoupled from job tenure in order to make sense of this issue (Doogan, 2009; Gallie et al., 2017).

Thus, the reasons behind a job insecurity 'paradox' may be a consequence of a number of factors, including public sector restructuring and marketization, merger and acquisition activity associated with neoliberalism, shareholder capitalism and financialization, and a wider process of recurrent strategic change in organizations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Davis, 2016; Froud et al., 2006); factors which centrally inform the case analysis presented below.

Work intensification and extensification

Evidence from the employment and industrial relations literature also points to increasing work intensification and extensification, and for managers in particular; or what is commonly referred to as the 'overworking problem' (Burchell et al., 1999; Hassard and Morris, 2020, 2024). This is associated with trends outlined earlier, such as outsourcing, delayering and downsizing. Arguably, managers, while generally being in a privileged labour market position, are particularly prone to overwork, for despite being notionally contracted for particular hours, they often lack the protection that trade unions offer other occupational grades (Hassard and Morris, 2021), and hence are expected to work beyond contract (extensification).

Further, the precarity found in large organizations, plus associated perceptions of job insecurity, can combine to pressure managers into working for longer periods. We note evidence on how traditional employment boundaries have shifted markedly in recent decades, serving both to increase the number of 'real' hours managers work and change how their work is controlled. Felstead (2019), for example, in a large-scale survey of UK employees (from 1997 until his survey in 2017), points to increasing work intensity, alongside increased occupational insecurity and employment stress. Similarly, a longitudinal survey of managers by Worrall et al. (2016) points to continued downsizing and delayering, plus (post the Global Financial Crisis, 2008–2009) corporations placing greater emphasis on cost reductions while encouraging managers to work even longer hours. The latter trend of course has been exacerbated by developments in remote digital communications technologies, particularly smartphones, which allow work to be conducted readily outside traditional workplace confines – particularly working at home and in 'third places' (parks, commuter trains, coffee shops, etc.), with this potentially facilitating significant work extensification for managers (Butts et al., 2015; Hassard and Morris, 2021; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Okhuysen et al., 2013; Takami, 2018). Indeed, we note how managers regularly accomplish work from outside traditional spatio-temporal corporate precincts (Johns and Gratton, 2013; Kossek et al., 2017; Waber et al., 2014), with such change reflected, for example, in so-called 'flexible' work arrangements (Allen and Shockley, 2009; Bidwell and Briscoe, 2009) and 'alternative' employment systems (Ashford et al., 2007; Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2017). In addition, the historical span of the current study has seen relative earnings decline, with the result that the work intensification described in our study has been accompanied by a decline in 'real' compensation, which makes the situation even more fraught (Brown, 2023; Giupponi and Machin, 2022; Machin, 2024).

While work extensification arguably impacts on most managers, it can be argued it has particular implications for those with responsibilities for care and caring, yet who work amidst the expectations of an 'availability' culture (Durbin et al., 2017; Marks et al., 2020; Wajcman and Rose, 2011). This relates to broader debates on gender inequalities in organizations (Acker, 1990, 2006a, 2006b; Calás et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2017; Stamarski and Hing, 2015) – debates which suggest inequalities are often implicit but pervasive (Czarniawska and Hopfl, 2002). In many high-profile management jobs, across a range of economies, women are not only underrepresented but also marginalized (Babic and Hansez, 2021; Mahasha, 2016; Williams and Multhaup, 2018), with an historical lack of career progression (Cooper et al., 2021; Kossek et al., 2017). These disadvantages are particularly acute in an international context of 'hegemonic neoliberalism' (Anderson, 2022), the supremacy of the market (Mellor, 2022), and consequent long working hours and extensive work-related travel (Stone and Hernandez, 2013). Given the gendered spatial and temporal segmenting of urban workplaces, there is evidence, for example, that such trends function to restrict women from undertaking 'multi-locational' working (Burchell et al., 2021). Similarly, under recent periods of economic austerity in Europe, public policies seemingly promoting 'flexibility' in job creation have not always served the interests of gender equality (Rubery, 2015).

Finally, while as yet the future implications of the Covid pandemic for work and the workplace are still uncertain, the recent impact has been uneven, with significant effects

being felt by employees who have been required to work at home yet who have also retained, for example, significant childcare obligations, notably in connection with demands during the pandemic for home-schooling (Reuschke and Felstead, 2020; see also Beckman and Mazmanian, 2020). The pandemic has also had a significant impact on job losses for women across major economies; for example, in the UK, US, Germany and Japan (Alon et al., 2020; Hipp and Bunning, 2021; Takami, 2020; Warren and Lyonette, 2020a, 2020b; Zhou, 2021), with this being due characteristically to overrepresentation in sectors most affected by economic downturn. Research also suggests women have not only undertaken the greatest share of childcare in families during the pandemic (Andrew et al., 2020; Cominetti et al., 2020; Sevilla and Smith, 2020) but also taken more unpaid leave to carry out such responsibilities (OECD, 2021). Further, there is evidence internationally that working hours as a whole have increased as a consequence of home-based work, which again can exacerbate pre-existing gender implications associated with long-hours white-collar labour (Dundon et al., 2020; Osborne, 2021; Takami, 2021). There is evidence, moreover, that women employees have often had to reduce their working hours to meet childcare demands (Aliaga, 2021; Banks and Wu, 2020; Carli, 2020; Collins et al., 2021; Pregnant then Screwed, 2020).

Research design and process: Issues, methods and stages

The literature on the context of contemporary work organization suggests that we have seen a rise in precarity across occupations, sectors and economies in recent decades, and notably for managerial cadres. We have argued this is a consequence of an implicit neoliberal economic governance agenda – one accentuating 'market forces' ideology and, in turn, sponsoring a culture of occupational precarity. This has led to a number of arguably negative outcomes for employees at various levels in large organizations, including job insecurity and work intensification/extensification, a situation which has seen particularly adverse consequences for women managers, notably during the recent coronavirus pandemic.

In developing this research on managerial work we are mindful of silhouetting our data contextually against 'varieties of capitalism' analysis, for example, of Hall and Soskice (2001), Dore (2009) and others (see McCann, 2014, for a review). This argues theoretically that business systems can be clustered into capitalist forms based on particular organizational dimensions, and notably dominant types of ownership coordination, non-ownership coordination and employment relations. The suggestion is that different countries have different modes of economic organization, which are often internally consistent, or reflect 'complementarities' (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

Nevertheless, there have been several criticisms of the business systems theory approach. Notably, Hall and Soskice's 'varieties of capitalism' framework has been critiqued for its inability to explain institutional change, which is germane given the focus of this article. Further, the 'dynamics' of the business systems approach have been explored, and it can be argued that institutionalization is an essentially actor-centred social process: one predicated on far greater agency than is often assumed. This is a line of analysis with which the current study on managerial experience of organizational change within major economies has sympathy.

Turning to our empirical research, we make sense of these issues through a series of qualitative studies on the recent nature and history of managerial work. Methodologically, the information presented is from a quasi-longitudinal series of investigations starting, as noted, with an investigation into the nature of managerial work in the early 2000s, followed by a second in the late 2010s, and finally with a briefer enquiry conducted during the recent coronavirus pandemic. We defined the research method as 'quasi-longitudinal', as strict subject replication could not be achieved, albeit many of the same respondents were consulted at more than one point in time (see Bryman and Bell, 2011).

In examining what is primarily interview-based information, methodologically we identified themes by way of a traditional inductive approach, rather than with the aid of a computer software package (e.g. NVivo). This approach saw the researchers identify themes manually from the data, before inferences and classifications were cross-checked, verified and validated by colleagues (see Watson, 2011, on this issue). Essentially, the approach involved three stages of information processing – empirical description, thematic identification and conceptual construction (see Geertz, 1973; Strauss and Corbin, 1998, for explanation). Ultimately, the main themes emerging from the data reflected conceptual clustering around strategic, political and technical phenomena.

The three studies that comprise the analysis can be summarized as follows: stage one (2002–2006) was part of a broader comparative study of the consequences for managers of major organizational restructuring in large organizations in three major economies (US, UK and Japan). The aims were broadly to: review the extent of restructuring in large organizations against a backcloth of the emergence of neoliberal economic policies; ascertain the implications of this restructuring for mid-level managers in these organizations; and review similarities and differences in both restructuring and its managerial implications between national contexts. Ten companies/bodies were visited from each country, with these being selected on the basis of being characteristic of manufacturing and services, private and public, and high and low technology sectors. In the course of the investigation 259 managers were interviewed, with in the UK and US there being approximately a two-thirds to one-third ratio between men and women (full data set details are available from the authors). However, for Japan at this time, very few women managers were available to interview, with this mirroring the paucity of females then employed as managers in Japanese industry generally – an historical state reflected in the gendered Japanese term for this employment role, 'salaryman' (see Gagne, 2020; Kodachi, 2020; Lucaks, 2020; Osawa et al., 2013). The percentages of women interviewed across the three economies also varied between sectors and firms, with the numbers being lower in 'traditional' or 'heavy' industries (such as automotive, brewing and steel), but higher, for example, in financial services, health, utilities and the public sector. Interview questions were divided into two parts: Part A considered issues relating to the context and history of organizational change in a company/sector; Part B covered thematic questions on the impact of organizational change on managerial work (including issues of job security, working hours, managerial careers and work–life balance).

Stage two was a follow-up study, conducted 2015–2019 – an investigation into the nature of managerial work in wake of the Global Financial Crisis (2008–2009). Many organizations visited were ones that had also been visited in 2002–2006. Although in the second study we attempted to interview many of the same managers as in the first, given

a decade or so had elapsed, a substantial number had changed roles, departments or divisions; moved to other employers; or simply retired. Despite such attrition, we frequently managed to trace managers previously consulted, many of whom were still working for the same employer and in the same or similar roles. In addition, middle managers new to the research were interviewed about the same core issues considered in the first study. In all, 136 managers in 28 organizations were consulted, the bulk in the UK and Japan (as a research visit to the US, planned for summer 2020, had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic). A major difference between the first two studies was that in the second a far larger number of interviewees were women. This reflected, for example, the sample of managers being on average younger than the first; the organizations visited including many newer, technology-based, firms; and importantly, there being a greater incorporation of women into the managerial workforce in Japan.

Finally, stage three reflects information gained exclusively in the UK, in 2020–2021, during the coronavirus pandemic. As noted, taking the form of informal consultations with women managers previously interviewed, and concerning primarily the impact of the pandemic on work and home life, this evidence acts essentially as a coda to the thematic discussions of earlier investigations. When mooting this third enquiry, it struck us that many themes from our prior studies had important resonance with work experiences during the pandemic: particularly issues of job insecurity, workload intensification and completing tasks outside of corporate premises. In presenting information from this third stage (with data gathered mainly via Zoom-based interviews with six women managers, but with a further 21 responding to a short questionnaire survey), we focused our attention on personal accounts of what for many respondents were significant concerns now affecting their lives, work and careers.

Findings

Study 1 (2002–2006): Fundamental change and new expectations

The period of this first study was characterized by significant organizational transformation and changes in the day-to-day nature of managerial work, although the latter were far from being characterized as 'post-bureaucratic' (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Hodgson, 2004; Josserand et al., 2006). Organizations had undergone significant changes to their forms, although contrary to many prescriptions of the 'management guru' literature, cited above, the driving motivation for this seemed not so much about achieving more 'responsive', 'flexible' or 'lean' operations, but rather reducing costs, and primarily labour costs. The organizations visited in the three countries (UK, US, Japan) were often undergoing processes of both downsizing and delayering, with these often linked to the outsourcing of activities now regarded as 'non-core'. Indeed, in the US seven of the 10 sample organizations had downsized, sometimes extensively, while in the UK, eight, and in Japan, seven. Meanwhile seven of the US organizations had engaged in significant delayering exercises, with similarly six each in the UK and Japan.

In line with neoliberal prescriptions, restructuring was thus widespread and often caused or accompanied by strategic outsourcing and/or corporations refocusing on core functions (Elmuti, 2003; Lahira, 2016; Pereira et al., 2019). In Western corporations,

such as those visited in the US and UK, this was characteristically driven by 'shareholder value' logic. However, this could also be true among Japanese firms, as the latter faced both extreme cost pressures from East Asian competition and the rising influence of foreign shareholdings. The implications for managers in these organizations were profound, as the managerial cadre was now smaller and comprised fewer layers, with firms commonly adopting flatter and leaner hierarchies. The consequences were broadly three-fold: (1) that reduced managerial numbers, combined with larger spans of control, meant increased volumes of work and worsening work–life balance; (2) that downsizing, combined with a sense of continual change and wider competitive pressures, led to perceptions of managerial job insecurity in many hitherto secure occupations; and (3) as a consequence of delayering, career-wise managerial advancement opportunities were significantly reduced.

Such forces suggested, therefore, that managers were working harder and for longer hours, had fewer opportunities for professional progression, and felt less secure in their positions. Furthermore, these forces were to a certain extent reinforcing, with managers feeling obliged to undertake longer working hours in response partly to perceptions of job insecurity both at a corporate and individual level. In other words, they felt obliged to maintain the competitiveness of their organizations while they personally also needed to remain 'competitive' in their own jobs. However, while such trends mirrored organizational responses to neoliberalism, they also reflected a range of gendered effects, with women managers often needing to respond to specific pressures related to increased workloads, heightened job insecurity and greater work–life balance demands.

The perceived reality for managers generally, therefore, was facing pressures arising from the twin demands of longer working hours and greater job insecurity. Working hours were typically extensive across organizations, sectors and economies. In Japan, for example, working hours for managers had been long historically, and our case firms were no exception, with managers commonly undertaking 10- to 12-hour days. While this had not hitherto been characteristically the case for US and UK managers, it was now a major occupational consequence of the latest forms of neoliberal restructuring. In the US, for example, managers at USHospital regularly reported working 50-hour weeks, commenting that this was normative for large US organizations. In the UK, meanwhile, long working hours were also becoming commonplace. At multinational auto firm GAC (a corporation also included in the US sample) Gabby (pseudonym, as with all respondents quoted) was unusual in that she was the only female production-related engineer in either the UK plant or its US sister operation. Relating experiences of her work she described starting 'very early' in the morning and often working a 12-hour day, which was not untypical. She was however also aware of what this meant for her life in broader terms:

> I don't really feel I have a social life during the week . . . there's no way you can be out [in the evening]. Yes, that's probably one of the real downsides. . . . I'm not married, I've no children, so at my interview I said 'yes' I can commit to it. . . . I can't imagine what it's like for anybody who gets up at 4.30, I don't think relationships would fare well, you're not home 'til such and such a time and then you're tired, you get home, kick the dog, you can't be bothered cooking or going to the supermarket. And why do you have to go in on weekends? So yes, that would be something new. That person would have to accept that's what I do.

Managers across the sample reported coping with the pressures of working long days in offices, factories or other workplaces, which unsurprisingly they felt was arduous. However, working from home had started increasingly to be used as a coping mechanism, aided by advances in technology, such as personal computing, mobile phones and importantly email, which was growing significantly at the time, and had been from the mid- to late 1990s. The ability to take advantage of new digital communications devices seemed to be welcomed overwhelmingly by managers for the flexibility it afforded them personally, particularly for the spatio-temporal advantages it offered working parents of school-aged children. The enthusiastic reaction of interviewees to such developments, however, drew the attention of the researchers, for in terms of labour process theory (Braverman, 1974) analysis of employment relations it appeared to invite reflections on the nature of the new 'normal working day' (*sensu* Marx, 1887) under neoliberalism, given much labour time was seemingly being offered freely and 'beyond contract' (Fox, 1974; Roche, 1991; Siebert et al., 2015). Managers, for example, reported enthusiastically about working from 8 or 9 a.m. until 5 p.m., but then going home to feed, entertain and put to bed their children, before starting work again – often to deal with a backlog of office email messages – on a home PC from around 8 or 9 p.m. Samira, for example, a manager at UKFinancialServices (UKFS), explained the situation thus:

> I've got two kids, eight and five, so my husband and I share the drop-off to someone who takes them to school. We both then rush to work to be in at 8.30, work hard all day but I am gone by five (p.m.) and then rush home for 5.30–6, and then it's their [the children's] time. I do their tea, do any bits of homework, then play with them, bath them, and read to them, and then its bed. Then we can do a few hours [work] at about 9.

The means of coping with such increased workloads, by either extending the time spent completing tasks on corporate premises and/or through completing work additionally from home, could also prove a factor in dissuading women managers from seeking promotion. This was mentioned by several managers in the UK and US, but was probably left unsaid by many more. While these managers are in a relatively privileged financial position (and thus able to access paid childcare help), there are limits to this and some female managers did not wish to do this, as later cases point to. In the US, at gas and electric corporation USUtilities, Mary, a middle manager with two young children, raised this issue, while adding wistfully:

> I sometimes reflect on the future and I see what I am doing, [and I think] I can just about cope with this, the work volume, and what have you, and [then] I look at Bill [her line manager] and I see how many more hours he is doing than me, how much extra pressure he is under, how much more stress he has to deal with, [and I think] could I cope with this and would my family suffer . . . I don't think they could cope.

Emails and the early emergence of mobile, later 'smart', phones began increasingly to have an impact on work, and especially as coping mechanisms to deal with the volume of tasks. Managers started to report on increases in work volumes, particularly those associated with 'email overload'. Furthermore, while the direct messaging offered by

email potentially aided ease of communication, it also obviated the need for administrative assistants, which could also add to the volume of work a manager must process. At this time, interviewees were generally neophytes with regard to the changes that digital devices would bring to work and the workplace. Indeed, this theme of the time spent on work being increased by digital technology emerged in several discussions with managers in US organizations. At USHealth, for example, the BlackBerry was becoming extensively used, which many informants suggested was adding to their sense of the work day becoming progressively stretched. As Moira noted:

> Everyone is working really hard, they are probably working from, you know, seven-thirty to six and they are going home and doing emails. And you've always got the wireless BlackBerry for your emails, everyone's got a BlackBerry. A lot of people with families might even leave early and then do their emails later. It's a great enabler.

As noted, however, at this time the use of such mobile digital devices was only in its infancy in terms of the impact such technology would come to have on managerial work, and specifically in respect of conducting work additionally from home. Indeed, it was in stage two of the research that mobile communications devices had become truly pervasive and had such a dramatic impact on not only the location and timing of work, but also on personal autonomy. These were issues of technical surveillance, managerial control and work extensification that would come to direct much of the investigation as it progressed. Additionally, the finding that managers felt increasingly insecure in their jobs should perhaps not be counterintuitive, given the levels of restructuring outlined earlier and the degree of downsizing in particular. However, when managers are faced with such uncertainty first-hand, it is not only devastating at a personal level, but also can serve to undo long-established cultural assumptions of normative corporate behaviour. Three brief vignettes from the US and UK – at GeneralAutoCo (GAC) (US), USElectronics and UKFS – serve to illustrate this.

First, the GAC (US) plant we visited had been through a considerably turbulent period, with the plant closing temporarily for periods as long as a year. Interviewees reported that this and other events had served to dissolve long-held staff beliefs about the nature of corporate paternity and the importance of loyalty to the company among managers and workers. As recurrent rounds of restructuring had served increasingly to lengthen the working day and erode career prospects, managers of both genders reported a spirit of alienation had increasingly shaped corporate culture on the ground.

In the second case, Carole was a business strategy manager at UKFS, whom she joined on having been made redundant by a subsidiary of another large financial services firm. Her previous company was closed by its parent, a major multinational, almost without notice as far as the workforce was concerned, for it happened 'overnight' and 'nobody knew it was coming'. Indeed, she had received the news of the company's closure first thing in the morning, by a phone call, an event that had disillusioned her significantly regarding any residual sense of job security in the industry. Carole then spent three months searching for another job, an experience she described as 'devastating', especially as her husband had recently retired.

A further case was a US-owned multinational chemicals concern, where we interviewed a HR manager. The corporation, purportedly, operated a 'rank-and-yank' performance management system in which the bottom 10% of managers annually were under the threat of being 'outplaced' (made redundant). The manager we interviewed extolled how he had been hired by the corporation purely on the basis that he had previously worked for the firm that had originally formulated this neoliberal performance system. The tenor of the interview revolved around how to instil a sense of job insecurity in a corporate workforce and how in the view of the manager interviewed this was a 'positive' practice for companies strategically. In one rather counterintuitive discussion – concerning a recent large-scale redundancy exercise by the company – his suggestion was that the experience of being made redundant (or 'transitioned', as he put it) could actually be a 'good thing' for the manager concerned, despite losing one's job being one of the most stressful experiences a person can face in life.

Given these neoliberal scenarios, together with the levels of restructuring outlined earlier, perceptions of job insecurity were not unexpected. However, somewhat perversely, the perceived reality of working life for some managers could be that their jobs were relatively safe. Compulsory redundancies were rare in our Japanese organizations, and exceptional in some organizations in the UK and US samples. What is more, many managers in our sample had long-term careers in their current organization. At both the US and UK plants of GAC, for example, many managerial employers were 'lifers', having worked for the corporation for many years and sometimes decades. Nevertheless, in our interviews an incipient sense of job insecurity was apparent. Denise, a mid-level HR manager at UKDrinks, for example, had begun to accept this new neoliberal 'reality' of job insecurity, a phenomenon that was striking, given she worked at a signature plant of a company known internationally and historically for its paternalistic style of management, a style promoted in its advertisements on television. Going as far as to rehearse part of the neoliberal lexicon, she described the 'new' culture of the company thus:

> I think that's it's a relationship. It's a contract and the contract is that I will work hard. I will put a lot of effort and time into trying to enhance shareholder value. And I get rewarded, so I'm loyal to that agreement.

Meanwhile, in our visits to corporations in Japan around this time, while notions of a job for life were still culturally robust, the seeds of significant employment and organizational change had also been planted. In virtually every organization visited, and despite traditional expectations of corporate practice being rehearsed, there appeared awareness that the 'three pillars' (lifetime employment, seniority based pay/promotion and corporate unions) notions of human resource management may soon be under significant pressure, this being experienced culturally alongside bourgeoning threats to the hallowed occupational status of the 'salaryman'. Fears of budding job cuts and increasing career instability seemed to herald the potential for what would be culturally radical workplace reforms in the face of threats to the country's exacting service culture.

Study 2 (2015–2019): Continuous change with normative expectations

Many of the perceptions of change expressed in the first round of restructuring remained in the second. However, while organizational change continued apace, what had been perceived as novel structural phenomena in the first stage (delayering, downsizing, outsourcing, etc.) were now considered essentially normative by managers, despite the turmoil involved. Many of our sample organizations, for example, continued to downsize and delayer, but often on a more regular, incremental basis. Likewise, discussions of job security issues were often less conspicuous in our interviews, seemingly for the reason that for many managers they had become habituated to what were now largely hegemonic phenomena. Indeed, many managers often looked back rather contemplatively on the perceived workplace reality they had described in the first stage, with current working culture being reported as far more pressurized than that previously experienced, a situation that for women managers could have far-reaching implications.

In the first stage of interviewing, for example, managers at UKDrinks had reported being affected dramatically by restructuring practices. However by the second stage there was almost an air of resignation with regard to the enduring pace of strategic and structural change, as reflected in a brief comment by Denise, now a senior manager; a view suggesting she was now reconciled to the new cultural logic of neoliberalism:

> Yes we've seen huge changes [since the first study], new ways of working, we're flatter, downsized and with less demarcation . . . but there's lots of pressure, because so many people went.

Likewise, at UKUtilities, managers who reported significant restructuring pressures during the first study nevertheless suggested these had 'ramped up' during the years since. Sarah, a senior manager interviewed at the second stage, reported the organization had been through a 'horrendous process' of change; one she described as 'organizational pandemonium'. She reported 'never turn[ing] off' her mobile phone and that she regularly sent emails in the evening during the week and also on Sundays. Other UKUtilities managers described a similar situation, with Janet in customer services explaining the organization's intervening restructuring history as 'brutal', while Lauren in planning and innovation as a period of 'horrendous change'. The difference from 15 years earlier was perceived as 'massive', with several layers, and a large number of managers, now removed. Accounts manager Saleema described similarly how:

> The roles have grown. I go home . . . and I carry on for a few hours. I have meetings all day. The only time to prepare is at night. And I also do all the emails. Oh and I work on Sundays, but I don't personally class Sundays as the weekend any more.

The period between the first and second investigations was thus marked by reports of far greater volumes of work for managers, with this often being recounted as linked to reduced headcount and fewer hierarchical levels. At a more micro level, increased work volume was related to new digital technologies and especially to a vast increase in email traffic. This reflected cultural demands for managers to respond to work tasks and

requirements 'anywhere and anytime'. Indeed, by the second investigation such work expectations were considered culturally normative by both corporations and managers themselves.

Whereas in the first research phase, work could be both intensive and extensive – with managers historically having taken home 'paperwork' – there remained, nonetheless, vestiges of occupational engagement being a definable phenomenon in traditional (home/ office) spatio-temporal terms. By the second phase, however, the widespread accessibility of digital technologies – smartphones, tablets, laptops, etc. – meant home–work divides were increasingly blurred, with implicit and mounting expectations of 'availability' and 'connectivity' on behalf of corporations and managers themselves. When during stage two, for example, we emailed Alison, a senior HR manager at UKTelecoms, at around 7 a.m. to confirm the arrangements for the day's interviews, she replied instantly. Questioning her later in the day about the swiftness of response she confided, 'I actually never turn my mobile off, for I find it less stressful to be with it than without it. . . . I always need to know what messages I've received.'

Indeed, managers across US, UK and Japanese corporations reported increased availability expectations on the part of employers, with this largely a consequence of the growing volume of digital communications, emails in particular. Managers in all three nations suggested corporations were increasingly adept at getting employees to 'work for nothing' and signally to get them to 'work at home for nothing'. In the US and UK especially, managers described the colonization of time formally devoted to home and family life by new digital technologies. Numerous managers recounted the dilemmas of handling email outside of work, with Lisa, a senior manager at USHospital, for example, suggesting when going on vacation she was always in a quandary as whether to 'check on my emails every day and keep them under control' or 'relax, enjoy the break, and come back to a mountain of them'. The ability to process work-related information via increasingly mobile technologies – smartphones, tablets, etc. – was a major reason allowing work to be undertaken 'flexibly' and from a number of 'third place' (Okhuysen et al., 2013) locations. This was reported by virtually all the respondents interviewed and often in negative terms, almost as tyranny. Nicky, a manager at the UK technology consultancy UKTech, suggested sharply, and almost certainly with exaggeration, that: 'whoever invented email should be shot – I'll be with you for an hour [being interviewed] and I'll go back to 60 new emails'.

The general extensification of work also often meant that many managers would often start their working week late on Sunday afternoons – a phenomenon reflective of the pressures placed upon them under new normative expectations. Some managers, however, argued this extensification of work was a conscious choice of the individual. Althea, an experienced manager at UKInsurance, for example, suggested that she regularly worked additional hours from home because 'I don't like them [emails] building up'; although also admitting as a result, 'I'm my own worst enemy' in this regard.

On wider issues of work and occupational choice, a number of women managers reported – either in specific or hypothetical terms – career options being circumscribed by having children. This was the case, for example, at UKInsurance, where the majority of managers interviewed were women and work hours were often dictated by shift patterns. Here, finance manager Margaret, for example, reported 'giving up on career

advancement' when she had children, at which point she reduced her working week to four days. Meanwhile colleague Rachael described the difficulties of 'looking after her children for the last 15 years' in a work environment where 'some of my counterparts and my boss are emailing at all times of the night', a situation she described as 'bonkers'.

Respondents in this study often suggested managers were now more 'accepting' of a 'new reality' of insecure work. Managers in the US and UK, for example, suggested they had no genuine expectations of a 'job for life' any more, a prospect which historically had been a reality for many managers' in the UK, US and certainly Japan. Sarah, at UKUtilities, argued that 'uncertainty is the new norm', which given she was a very senior manager perhaps explained the degree of job insecurity felt by her subordinates. At UKTelecoms, for example, Zara described her organization undertaking a restructuring exercise in which 15,000 staff were to be made redundant. At the time of interview (six months after the retrenchment announcement), she had only just heard that she retained a job, albeit one with less pay and inferior conditions. Members of her team however were still unaware of whether their positions were secure, a situation she described as 'horrendous' and 'incredibly stressful'.

This new culture of work expectations was portrayed in a manner qualitatively different to an era of relative corporate loyalty which earlier many older managers interviewed had often professed. During the second enquiry, Stephie, a senior manager at UKFS, described a climate in which any residual loyalty managers once had to their organizations had certainly ended, for now 'people are expected to manage their own careers . . . [because] this is a different generation – people advertise themselves on LinkedIn'. Nevertheless, she acknowledged that a significant downside of this new culture lay in 'handling increased [labour] turnover'. Another manager at UKFS, Nia, suggested similarly that 'people under 30 don't have any corporate loyalty . . . none expect to be here in ten years' time; they simply don't think that way; they expect to have moved on'.

Managers across organizations and economies extrapolated on this increased fluidity in managerial employment as well as managerial jobs being increasingly insecure, despite many having worked long-term for a single employer. This was starkest in Japan, where historically job security was characterized as a cornerstone of the lifetime employment/seniority-based pay system; although in truth this had been predominantly a characteristic of large corporations and for male managers. By the second study of managerial work in Japan, however, a number of women managers were available for interview both in large corporations – such as JapanTelecom (JTel) and the manufacturing keiretsu JapanElectronics (JEl) – as well as newer firms, such as JapanTechnology (JTech), a software, games and internet provider. In what historically could be seen as a paradoxical situation for Japanese employment, such managers often expressed both satisfaction with their employer *and* a desire to move to careers in other organizations. This was particularly the case with younger managers in Japanese corporations, a number of whom were contemplating alternative careers; as in the case of Mei, a marketing manager at JTech who was about to leave the company to study in the US. She was one of many younger managers in Japan who talked about considering 'alternative futures'. This appeared a consequence of an environment where long-term employment was no longer guaranteed and managers were taking an employer's mantra of 'flexibility' at face value and looking elsewhere for employment prospects. For example, one young woman

manager interviewed at JTel had been assigned a post in a provincial location, but had refused, and was instead transferred to a Tokyo-based division, a situation unthinkable some years earlier.

Woman managers in the Japanese organizations, did, however, face difficulties in career progression over and above those faced in the UK or US. Notably women managers who returned to the workplace after having children were often placed on different, and essentially inferior career ladders. Indeed, this was often a 'non-career' ladder, as it was reasoned that they could not meet the cultural expectations of historically 'normal' occupational demands – based on rigid and uncompromising work patterns. This was exacerbated by the potential for reduced career opportunities stemming from the increasing prevalence of delayering in large Japanese organizations – a phenomenon not reserved for older, traditional, industries, but which could now also be witnessed in newer organizations, such as JTech, with its supposedly more progressive human resource policies. At JTech women managers with children talked with some bitterness about this situation, suggesting that being switched between managerial and non-managerial career tracks was often not a matter of choice, even if you were willing to work the hours necessary for progression on the managerial ladder. The consequences for women following the managerial track were also clear at JEI, where Yuki, a young marketing manager, described her long and unsociable working hours, coupled with considerable foreign travel. Musing on her future work and life prospects she commented:

> Although there are HRM systems where you can take maternity leave and have re-entry later . . . I think if I had children it would be very difficult for me to continue [on the managerial track], for you cannot really lead a normal married life.

In this regard, Yuki went on to relate a story of a senior woman manager at JEI who had left her job when her partner was transferred abroad. Although this would normally have signalled an end to this colleague's managerial career, uncharacteristically many years later she was able to make a successful 're-entry' to the corporation. However this came at the price of work increasingly colonizing her life:

> Yes, she is a bucho [senior mid-level manager] but she quit her job when her husband got a job in London in finance. After she returned, she concentrated on raising two kids. But when the youngest became a junior high school student she returned [to JEI]. She is really hard working. After finishing here she goes home, cooks, and then cleans her house. She then sends emails, frequently at midnight.

While by stage two women managers were more numerous in our Japanese firms, and sometimes occupied senior positions, this was indeed a relatively recent and innovative phenomenon. It was also one that might have been expected to take more time to work through in terms of Japan's cultural and economic systems, especially in terms of promotion. However, women managers in Japan were still less numerous relatively than in our UK or US organizations, and appeared to face barriers over and above those confronting their Western counterparts, notably in terms of career advancement.

Study 3 (2020–2021): Revolutionary change and uncertain expectations

As noted, prompted by the pandemic, and conducted shortly after the second study, this was a more informally responsive – than formally planned – phase of investigation. It was stimulated because managers (and other white-collar employees) were now obliged to work primarily from home. Given our previous findings, two concerns directed our enquiries: (1) how managers would cope with significant workloads whilst working from home; and (2) how they would do so while potentially also dealing with wider responsibilities for the care and education of others. Thus, whereas this enquiry stage was not planned in terms of the original quasi-longitudinal study, it was felt – if presented as an analytical coda – it could illuminate new employment trajectories and thus whether managerial work, as we have known it, has a future.

The information we received from managers during these more informal sessions was heavily influenced by personal, rather than wider civic or political, circumstances: particularly concerns over domestic arrangements. Indeed, reactions to discussions of ostensibly work-based issues would often lead to additional or related views on domestic concerns – specifically regarding caring responsibilities – being offered. Once again the managers interviewed were mainly mid-level, with many having young and/or school-age children. In general, the women managers consulted reported a number of common findings: including, for example, increased communication difficulties, task issues being harder to resolve, and a general blurring of work–life boundaries. In households with couples working, if not '24/7', then commonly they would report extremely long hours being worked between them in order to accommodate professional and domestic responsibilities. Work was often reported as being 'incessant', and completed recurrently during evenings and weekends in addition to the 'working week'. As Davina, a manager with a civil service agency reported, for example:

> There is [now] no division between work and parenting. For two days I am alone at home with both girls whilst also trying to work, which has been interesting! Thankfully a lot of tasks I can spread over the course of the whole day, such as during evenings when my partner is home, or even into the weekend or other non-work days, to balance the need to complete tasks.

Largely reflecting this statement, many of the issues discussed in this enquiry related thematically to the following: (1) the nature of work and domestic interactions; (2) changes in commuting and business travel requirements; and (3) the form of task demands under remote working. For the first, Gwen, a senior middle manager at UKFS, emphasized how home-schooling under the pandemic had proved to be enormously onerous for managers with parental responsibilities. Gwen was a single parent of three children, whose former partner resided outside the UK; hence she was solely responsible for childcare responsibilities. In addition, she reflected on how her current work situation was particularly fraught, as she was being pressured by her firm to persuade some of her direct reports to take redundancy or else move to part-time positions. Gwen's responses to the demands of work and home life varied enormously during the pandemic, and significantly depending on whether local schools were open for all children. At the time of a first discussion (June 2020) Gwen's situation was particularly challenging, leading to

the admission that: 'I was frightened about losing my job and it was a choice between home-schooling and my job and the job won; the children will have to catch up later'! During the period of initial lockdown she managed to juggle the demands of work and home-schooling with the assistance of her septuagenarian father and restauranteur brother. Gwen also managed to help personally with home-schooling via Zoom, a practice she described as 'parenting from work'. She confessed to being tempted to take a part-time post at work herself, primarily to cope with home-schooling. However, she had resisted, mainly because she thought it could make her a target for redundancy too. Gwen explained succinctly the pressures she was under and the compromises she had to make:

> Home-schooling is a nightmare. The 13-year-old can get on, and so can my 10-year-old, sort of. But my seven-year-old needs to be taught, and I just don't have the time. My 13-year-old is really lonely, locked up really.

By the time of a further discussion with Gwen (in December 2020), children nationally were back at school. As such, Gwen now described her situation as 'more beneficial'. Nevertheless, by the time of a third conversation (January 2021) children in the UK were being home-schooled again. Also the situation at work had changed as the organization had announced a series of job cuts; although this ironically had the effect of making Gwen's own position more secure. However she subsequently contracted (and recovered from) Covid, an event that persuaded her to reduce her workweek to four days, and ultimately to 'take a more relaxed view of work'. This was perhaps illustrative of the impact of the pandemic upon many parents of younger children; and single parents and mothers in particular. After the initial desire to save her job and career (in the first discussion), Gwen had indeed changed her perspective more to 'focusing on [her] children'. She reported that ideally she would like to reduce her workweek to three days, but could not afford to. It was now implicit that her career would henceforth have to take second place to the needs of her children in making decisions on work–life priorities. As a postscript, Gwen reported to us that, following a further family case of Covid, she had decided to reduce her work to two days per week, to take off the six-week summer school holidays and thus put her career 'on the back-burner'.

   For the second theme, Zara (a manager at UKTelecoms interviewed during stage two) noted how she had previously travelled UK-wide with her work on an almost daily basis. However, given the pressures involved she had eventually changed jobs to cut this down, and primarily as a consequence of having a first child. While her present work still involved a considerable amount of business travel (for she had to travel for several days a fortnight in connection with large projects and team meetings) she felt fortunate in this regard as her husband had taken retirement at a relatively early age and was now primarily responsible for childcare. Zara suggested this arrangement was, for her, largely essential, for business travel could often involve catching a 6 a.m. train to another part of the UK, working a long day in unfamiliar circumstances, and then arriving home perhaps as late as 9 p.m. She also suggested a considerable amount of this travel was superfluous or counterproductive. Her ire in this regard was directed mainly at her organization's 'meetings culture', suggesting that attendance was often largely for reasons of 'presenteeism', or simply because 'senior bosses were involved'. Thus, of the work changes brought

about by Covid, being relieved of the burden of travelling and commuting could be a welcome development, with this not only suggested by Zara but by many others among the small group of managers consulted. As such, this seemed to represent another important concern for the future of managerial work and its research.

And for the third theme, Annabel, a 'fast-track' regional manager of a civil service agency (and with two boys, aged 9 and 11), explained in a particularly vivid way her experience of homeworking in connection with the multiplicity of task demands she now faced. In many ways this account appeared to crystallize the kinds of work–life pressures the modern manager now faces in an organizational context defined by employment precarity, economic neoliberalism and the 'overworking problem':

> My workload has increased significantly due to the nature of my work and there is now far less down-time in the workday. I'm constantly on calls, either scheduled meetings or people calling as soon as my Skype light goes green. I also have stimulus overload – I'm simultaneously getting bombarded with emails, Yammer messages, Teams messages, Skype instant messages, phone calls on Skype and phone calls on Teams – we have two separate telephony systems so I'll be on a call on one and be getting called on the other. There's no 'thinking time' or 'doing time' as my diary is constantly booked up with calls. I'm regularly sat at my desk for more than four hours without moving at all. Conference call fatigue, discomfort of wearing a headset all day, jumping from one call to the next on a range of topics feels more tiring than a normal day in the office. And trying to home school two children when work is extremely challenging – the children have a schedule from school which runs from 9 [a.m.] to 3:30 [p.m.], with set tasks needing to be done at set times. I'm frequently trying to juggle work calls and field questions and help the children with their school work and just provide quality general supervision.

Our third enquiry, therefore, identified a range of issues for the future of managerial work raised by the pandemic. Notable here were reports by managers of working at home on a more or less permanent basis, a practice that while initially suggesting increased occupational flexibility and discretion, could also bring with it intensified workloads, perceptions of isolation and physical and psychological concerns over virtual working. Despite the claimed benefits of working from home, we often encountered views that such working does not appeal to all; and especially managers with young children, who can often find such arrangements challenging. Moreover, while digital technology provided much of the means for managers to work increasingly at home, this could also engender the closer monitoring of managers' actions through progressively sophisticated forms of surveillance. Taken together, these issues suggested the longer-term prospects of the practice may certainly be moot.

Discussion: Neoliberalism, precarity and the future of work

We argue that to understand the future of work we must first take cognisance institutionally of the economic, political and social contexts of its recent past. In establishing context for an analysis of the future of managerial work we have argued that a hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism has led increasingly to restructuring exercises for large corporations, irrespective of sector and country. This has involved considerable and continued delayering, downsizing and outsourcing. Additionally, this has had significant negative

implications for managers of both genders, with the emergence of what appear to reflect increasingly precarious employment cultures in contemporary organizations. Middle managers, for example, report feeling increasingly insecure in their jobs, despite job tenure rates appearing relatively stable. Indeed, corporations often appear to have consciously prompted a narrative of job precarity, one which can frequently be seen as explicit and purposive in terms of corporate politics. In our research, GAC, the global automotive company, for example, deliberately encouraged its manufacturing sites to 'compete' against each other for investments based on productivity metrics, including staffing levels. One result was that towards the end of our investigation, the GAC plant we visited in the UK actually closed. Although other examples of precarity were perhaps less stark, in corporations across our sample managers were no longer guaranteed long-term job security. This led managers – both men and women – to suggest, for instance, they now have considerably less corporate loyalty and are not afraid to 'job hop' to advance their careers.

The search on behalf of corporations for continual cost reductions has also led to work intensification and extensification, given there are now far fewer managers employed; while in the future there may be fewer managerial positions available still. However, managers – both men and women – appear currently more accepting of their 'precarious' situation, due to hegemonic and normative acceptance of employment uncertainty under neoliberalism. We have highlighted in particular how corporate structuring has significant consequences for managers – particularly women managers – given long working hours and the demands of 'availability' and 'connectivity' brought about, in part, by advances in digital technology. Moreover, such factors and forces potentially pose extreme difficulties for traditional care and parenting responsibilities. This was witnessed in a number of cases in our sample organizations, and especially in illustrations from the UK and Japan: for example, instances where women forwent promotion opportunities if they involved significant relocation or taking on increased levels of responsibility. In the UK, the technology consultancy had an explicit commitment to increase its percentage of women managers, despite them being required to spend considerable time 'on site' at client premises. Corporations in Japan, however, reflected the most extreme examples, with women managers, on having children, often being obliged to move to an inferior career track, even within firms regarded as relatively progressive employers.

We have noted more broadly that for several decades digital technology has offered the means to allow staff to work at home. This, though, has frequently engendered the increased monitoring of managerial actions by way of more sophisticated forms of surveillance. Until the introduction of more resourceful forms of digital control, relatively few white-collar employees worked from home other than on 'out of hours' tasks, and which notably those employees deemed 'appropriate' in terms of character and status. This begs the question of whether with greater authority to influence or direct employee behaviour through digital means, corporations will find securing the 'remote' control of managerial work a factor that is easy to effect in the future.

We have noted, finally, how the Covid pandemic had significant implications for managerial work, particularly concerning where and when it is carried out. Many of the consequences appeared extremely negative for managers – and women managers in particular

– given intensive working and long working hours coupled with wider responsibilities for childcare and home-schooling, notwithstanding access to support. These themes are noteworthy in that they appear to reflect, for example, women managers feeling progressively pressured into extending their work to maintain employment in an increasingly uncertain environment. Going forward, it can be argued that greater intensification and extensification of managerial work, together with wider consequences of employment precarity, may be increasingly incompatible with many areas of domestic life.

Conclusions

This article has argued that over recent decades, and notably since the millennium, we have witnessed under contemporary neoliberalism a clear increase in employment precarity, and that this includes employees among the managerial classes, answering research question one. Looking to the future for managerial work, and focusing on the experience of women managers, we argue an underlying dynamic remains an increasingly hegemonic neoliberal economic agenda; one sponsoring, inter alia, pervasive corporate restructuring and increased employment uncertainty, answering questions two and three, creating work intensification and extensification and perceptions of managerial precarity. The article describes a range of negative employment outcomes for managers in recent times, including longer working hours and work intensification and extensification – outcomes likely to be at the heart of managerial experience in the decades to come. We argue such trends have been concentrated by work experiences of the recent Covid pandemic – a phenomenon presaging important employment trajectories for the future. While the pandemic has represented an atypical context for employment research, we feel it has served to highlight many pre-existing pressures and institutional constraints experienced by or placed upon managers. In particular, we feel it illuminates forces having significant consequences for research on employment precarity and work intensification under neoliberalism. We argue that while these forces and factors impact upon white-collar workers of both genders, they are particularly acute for women, given their potential to act as barriers to career development and advancement, answering question four.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iDs

John Hassard ![iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0468-4609
Jonathan Morris ![iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4307-5948

References

Acker J (1990) Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society* 4(2): 139–158.

Acker J (2006a) Inequality regimes: Gender, race and class in organizations. *Gender and Society* 20(4): 441–464.

Acker J (2006b) The gender regime of Swedish banks. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 22(3): 195–209.

Adamson M (2017) Postfeminism, neoliberalism and a 'successfully' balanced femininity in celebrity CEO autobiographies. *Gender, Work and Organization* 24(3): 314–327

Ahl H and Marlow S (2020) Exploring the false promise of entrepreneurship through a postfeminist critique of the discourse of enterprise policy in Sweden and the UK. *Human Relations* 74(1): 41–68.

Alberti G, Bess I, Hardy K et al. (2018) In, against and beyond precarity: Work in insecure times. *Work, Employment and Society* 32(3): 447–457.

Aliaga MB (2021) Gender inequality during the pandemic: Perspectives of women workers in Latin America and the Caribbean. *International Journal of Labour Research* 10(1–2): 92–106.

Allen T and Shockley K (2009) Flexible work arrangements: Help or hype? In: Crane R and Hill J (eds) *Handbook of Family and Work: Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 265–284.

Alon T, Doepke M, Olmstead-Rumsey J and Tertilt M (2020) The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality. *Covid Economics 4*. London: CEPR.

Alvesson M and Spicer A (2016) *The Stupidity Paradox*. London: Profile.

Anderson T (2022) Hegemonic neoliberalism: A historical re-evaluation. *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 90: 49–74.

Andrew A, Cattan S, Costa Dias M et al. (2020) How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown. IFS Briefing Note.

Ashford S, George E and Blatt R (2007) Old assumptions, new work: The opportunities and challenges of research on nonstandard employment. *Academy of Management Annals* 1(1): 65–117.

Babic A and Hansez I (2021) The glass ceiling for women managers: Antecedents and consequences for work–family interface and well-being at work. *Frontiers in Psychology* 12.

Bachmann R, Felder R, Frings H et al. (2015) *Job tenure in turbulent times*. Luxembourg: Eurofound.

Baker D and Brewis D (2020) The melancholic subject: A study of self-blame as a gendered and neoliberal psychic response to loss of the 'perfect worker'. *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 82: 1–13.

Baker D and Kelan E (2019) Splitting and blaming: The psychic life of neoliberal executive women. *Human Relations* 72(1): 69–97.

Banks J and Wu X (2020) The mental health effects of the first two months of lockdown and social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK. Institute for Fiscal Studies W20/16.

Bauman Z (2001) *The Industrialized Society*. Cambridge: Polity.

Beck U (2000) *The Brave New World of Work*. Cambridge: Polity.

Beckman C and Mazmanian M (2020) *Dreams of the Overworked: Living, Working, and Parenting in the Digital Age*. Philadelphia: Wharton School Press.

Betti E (2018) Historicizing precarious work: Forty years of research in the social sciences and humanities. *International Review of Social History* 63: 273–319.

Bevins J (2011) *Failure by Design*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bidwell M and Briscoe F (2009) Who contracts? Determinants of the decision to work as an independent contractor among information technology workers. *Academy of Management. Journal* 52(6): 1148–1168

Billing Y (2011) Are women in management victims of the phantom of the male norm? *Gender, Work & Organization* 18(3): 298–317.

Blair-Loy M (2009) *Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Women Executives*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Boltanski L and Chiapello E (2006) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.

Braverman H (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Breman J and van der Linden J (2014) Informalizing the economy: The return the social question at a global level. *Development and Change* 45: 920–940.

Brenner N, Peck J and Theodore N (2010) Variegated neoliberaization: Geographies, modalities, pathways. *Global Networks* 10: 182–202.

Brinkley I (2013) *Flexibility or insecurity?* London: The Work Foundation.

Brown D (2023) Are UK pay increases too large or too small? *Personnel Today*, 29 June.

Bryman A and Bell E (2011) *Business Research Methods*, 3rd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burchell B, Lapido D and Wilkinson F (1999) *Job insecurity and work intensification*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Burchell B, Reuschkw D and Zhang M (2021) Spatial and temporal segmenting of urban workplaces: The gendering of multi-locational working. *Urban Studies* 58(11): 2207–2732.

Butts M, Becker W and Boswell W (2015) Hot buttons and time sinks: The effects of electronic communication during nonwork time on emotions and work-nonwork conflict. *Academy of Management Journal* 58: 763–788.

Calás MB, Smircich L and Holvino E (2014) Theorizing gender-and-organization: Changing times. . . Changing theories? In: Kumra S, Simpson R and Burke RJ (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Gender in Organizations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 17–52.

Cappelli P and Keller J (2013) Classifying work in the new economy. *Academy of Management Review* 38(4): 575–596.

Carli LL (2020) Women, gender equality and COVID-19. *Gender in Management* 35(7/8): 647–655.

Choonara J , Murgia A and Carmo RM (eds) (2022) *Faces of Precarity: Critical Perspectives on Work, Subjectivities and Struggles*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Clegg S and Baumeler C (2010) From iron cages to liquid modernity in organizational analysis. *Organization Studies* 31: 1713–1733.

Cocco G and Szaniecki B (2015) *Creative Capitalism, Multitudinous Creativity: Radicalities and Alterities*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Collins C, Landivar LC, Ruppanner L and Scarborough WJ (2021) COVID-19 and the gender gap in work hours. *Gender, Work and Organization* 28(1): 101–112.

Collins D (2020) *Management Gurus*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Cominetti N, Gardiner L and Slaughter H (2020) *The full monty: Facing up to the challenge of the coronavirus labour market challenge*. London: Resolution Foundation.

Cooper R, Baird M, Foley M and Oxenbridge S (2021) Normative collusion in the ecosystem: Explaining women's career pathways and outcomes in investment management. *Human Relations* 74(11): 1916–1941.

Czarniawska B and Hopfl H (eds) (2002) *Casting the Other*. London: Routledge.

Davis G (2016) *The Vanishing Corporation: Navigating the Hazards of a New Economy*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

De Coster and Zanoni P (2023) More than prefigurative politics? Redefining institutional frames to reduce precarity under neoliberal capitalism. *Organization Studies* 44(6): 939–960.

Doellgast V, Lillie N and Pulignano V (2018) Introduction. In: Doellgast V, Lillie N and Pulignano V (eds) *Restructuring Solidarity: Labour Unions, Precarious Work, and The Politics of Institutional Change in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Doogan K (2009) *New Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Dore R (2009) Japan's conversion to investor capitalism. In: Whittaker DH and Deakin S (eds) *Corporate Governance and Managerial Reform in Japan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dundon T, Stringer L and Mustchin S (2020) Technology and remote working post COVID-19. *Work and Equalities Institute, Manchester University*, July.

Durbin S, Page M and Walby S (2017) Gender, equality and 'austerity': Vulnerabilities, resistance and change. *Gender, Work and Organization* 25: 1–6.

Elmuti D (2003) The perceived impact of outsourcing on organizational performance. *American Journal of Business* 18(2): 33–42.

Farber H (2008) Employment insecurity: The decline in worker-firm attachment in the United States. *CEPS* Working Paper 172, Princeton University.

Felstead A (2019) Changing job quality in Britain. Presentation to Cardiff Business School, 4 December.

Fevre R (2007) Employment security and social theory: The power of nightmares. *Work, Employment and Society* 21(3): 517–535.

Fleming P (2017) The human capital hoax: Work, debt and insecurity in the era of Uberization. *Organization Studies* 38: 691–709.

Fligstein N and Shin T (2007) Shareholder value and the transformation of the US economy, 1984–2000. *Sociological Forum* 22(4): 339–421.

Fox A (1974) *Beyond Contract: Work, Power and Trust Relations*. London: Faber.

Froud J, Johal S, Leaver A and Williams K (2006) *Financialization and Strategy: Narratives and Numbers*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Gagne NO (2020) *Reworking Japan: Changing Men and Work and Play under Neoliberalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Gallie D, Felstead A, Green F and Inanc H (2017) The hidden face of job insecurity. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(1): 36–53.

Gandini A (2018) Labour process theory and the gig economy. *Human Relations* 72: 1039–1056.

Gans J (2020) *Economics in the Age of COVID-19*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Geertz C (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Giupponi G and Machin S (2022) *Labour market inequality*. IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities.

Goldin C (2021) *Career and Family: Women's Century-Long Journey toward Equity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Graham J and Papadopoulos D (2023) Organizing the precarious: Autonomous work, real democracy and ecological precarity. *Organization* 30(4): 649–667

Graham M, Hjorth I and Lehdonvirta V (2017) Digital labour and development: Impacts of global digital labour platforms and the gig economy on worker livelihoods. *Transfer* 23(2): 135–162.

Green F (2006) *Demanding Work*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Greer I and Umney C (2022) *Marketization: How Capitalist Exchange Disciplines Workers and Subverts Democracy*. London: Bloomsbury.

Hall P and Soskice D (eds) (2001) *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hammer M and Champy J (1993) *Reengineering the Corporation*. New York: Harper Business.

Harvey D (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hassard J and Morris J (2020) Corporate restructuring, work intensification and perceptual politics: Exploring the ambiguity of managerial job insecurity. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 41(2): 323–350.

Hassard J and Morris J (2021) The extensification of managerial work in the digital age: Middle managers, spatio-temporal boundaries, and control. *Human Relations* 75(9): 1647–1678.

Hassard J and Morris J (2024) Is managerial homework new? Assessing strategic, technological and political influences before, during and after coronavirus. *Organization Studies* 45: 777–800.

Hassard J, McCann L and Morris J (2009) *Managing in the Modern Corporation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hathaway T (2020) Neoliberalism as corporate power. *Competition and Change* 24(3–4): 315–337.

Heckscher C and Donnellon A (eds) (1994) *The Post-Bureaucratic Organization*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Henley A (2023) Is rising self-employment associated with material deprivation in the UK? *Work, Employment and Society* 37(5): 1395–1418.

Hewison K (2016) Precarious work. In: Edgehill S, Gotfried H and Granter E (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*. London: Sage, 428–443.

Hipp L and Bunning M (2021) Parenthood as a driver of increased gender inequality during COVID-19? Exploratory evidence from Germany. *European Societies* 23(Suppl. 1): 5658–5673.

Ho K (2009) *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Hodder A (2020) New technology, work and employment in the era of COVID-19: Reflecting on legacies of research. *New Technology, Work and Employment* 35(3): 262–275.

Hodgson DE (2004) Project work: The legacy of bureaucratic control in the post-bureaucratic organization. *Organization* 11(1): 81–100.

Holborrow M (2015) *Language and Neoliberalism*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hollister M and Smith K (2013) Unmasking the conflicting trends in job tenure by gender in the United States, 1983–2008. *American Sociological Review* 79(1): 159–181.

Huws U (2014) *Labour in the Digital Economy*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

ILO (2015) *World employment and social outlook: The changing nature of jobs*. Geneva: ILO.

ILO (2016) *Non-standard employment around the world*. Geneva: ILO.

Introna L (2019) On the making of sense in sensemaking: Decentred sense making in the meshwork of life. *Organization Studies* 40: 745–764.

Jacoby S (2005) *The Embedded Corporation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Johns T and Gratton L (2013) The third wave of virtual work. *Harvard Business Review*, January–February, 66–73.

Josserand E, Teo S and Clegg S (2006) From bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic: The difficulties of transition. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 19(1): 54–64.

Kalleberg A (2011) *Good Jobs Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment in the United States, 1970–2000s*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Kalleberg A (2018) *Precarious Lives: Job Insecurity and Well-Being in Rich Democracies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Kalleberg AL and Vallas S (2018) Precarious work: Causes, consequences, characteristics, and consequences. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 31: 1–30.

Kambayashi R and Kato T (2017) Long-term employment and job security over the past 25 years: A comparative study of Japan and the United States. *Industrial and Labour Relations Review* 70(2): 359–394.

Kanter RM (1977) *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

Kennedy C (2012) *Guide to the Management Gurus*. New York: Random House.

Kodachi H (2020) Top Japanese business lobby sets 40% goal for female managers: Keidanren's target for 2030 a long way off with the current share below 12%. *Nikkei*, 13 October.

Kossek EE, Su R and Wu L (2017) 'Opting out' or 'pushed out'? Integrating perspectives on women's career equality on gender inclusion and interventions. *Journal of Management* 43(1): 228–254.

Kotz D (2002) Globalization and neoliberalism. *Rethinking Marxism* 12(2): 64–79.

Kraiger K and Mohammed R (2021) Working on the edge: Precarious employment in organizational research. *Academy of Management Review* 2021(1).

Kramer A and Kramer K (2020) The potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on occupational status, work from home, and occupational mobility. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 119: 103442.

Kuhn K (2016) The rise of the 'gig economy' and implications for understanding work and workers. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 9(1): 157–162.

Lahira S (2016) Does outsourcing really improve firm performance? Empirical evidence and research agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 18(4): 464–497.

Lane C (2011) *A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence and the New World of White Collar Employment*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.

Lazonick W and O'Sullivan M (2010) Maximising shareholder value: A new ideology for corporate governance. *Economy and Society* 29(2): 13–35.

Lazzarato M (2009) Neoliberalism in action: Inequality, insecurity and the reconstitution of the social. *Theory, Culture & Society* 26(6): 109–133.

Learmonth M and Morrell M (2021) 'Leadership' as a project: Neoliberalism and the proliferation of 'Leaders'. *Organization Theory* 2(4).

Lewis P, Benschop Y and Simpson R (2017) Postfeminism, gender and organization. *Gender, Work and Organization* 24(3): 213–225.

Lorey I (2015) *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. London: Verso.

Lukacs G (2020) *Invisibility by Design: Women and Labor in Japan's Digital Economy*. London: Duke University Press.

McCann L (2014) *International and Comparative Relations*. London: Sage.

McCann L, Granter E, Hyde P and Aroles J (2020) Upon the gears and upon the wheels: Terror convergence and total administration in the neoliberal university. *Management Learning* 51(4): 431–451.

McGovern P, Hill S, Mills C and White M (2008) *Market, Class, and Employment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Machin S (2024) Real wage stagnation, inequality and labour market institutions. *LSE Public Policy Review* 3(2): 1–17.

Mahasha K (2016) Balancing work and family responsibilities: The case of women in management positions in Nkangala district. Working paper, University of Witwatersrand.

Marks A, Mallett O and Shountridaki L (2020) Where does work belong anymore? The implications of intensive home-based working. *Gender in Management* 35(7/8): 657–665.

Marx K (1887 [1867]) *Capital* (Volume 1). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Mavin S and Yusupova M (2023) 'I'm competitive with myself': A study of women leaders navigating neoliberal patriarchal workplaces. *Gender, Work & Organization* 30(3): 881–896.

Mazmanian M, Orlikowski WJ and Yates J (2013) The autonomy paradox: The implications of wireless email devices for knowledge professionals. *Organization Science* 24(5): 1337–1357.

Mellor M (2022) A challenge to neoliberal economics and the myth of market supremacy. *The Guardian*, 31 August.

Micklethwait J and Wooldridge A (1996) *The Witch Doctors: Making Sense of the Management Gurus*. New York: Times Books.

Mirowski P (2013) *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. London: Verso Books.

Mishel L, Bernstein J and Shierhouz H (2009) *The State of Working America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Moisander J, Gross C and Eranta K (2018) Mechanisms of biopower and neoliberal governmentality in precarious work in precarious work: Mobilizing the dependent self-employed as independent business owners. *Human Relations* 72(2): 375–398.

Moore P and Robinson A (2015) The quantified self: What counts in the neoliberal workplace. *New Media & Society* 18: 2774–2792.

Mudge S (2008) What is neo-liberalism? *Socio-Economic Review* 6(4): 703–731.

Munck R (2013) The precariat: A view from the South. *Third World Quarterly* 34: 747–762.

Newlands G (2020) Algorithmic surveillance in the gig economy: The organization of work through Lefebvrian conceived space. *Organization Studies* 42(5): 719–773.

OECD (2021) Caregiving in crisis: Gender inequality in paid and unpaid work during COVID-19. OECD policy responses to coronavirus (COVID-19), 13 December.

Okhuysen G, Lepak D, Ashcraft K et al. (2013) Theories of work and working today. *Academy of Management Review* 38(4): 491–502.

O'Neill P and Sohal A (1999) Business process reengineering: A review of recent literature. *Technovation* 19(3): 571–581.

Osawa M, Kim MJ and Kingston J (2013) Precarious work in Japan. *American Behavioral Scientist* 57(3): 309–334.

Osborne H (2021) Homeworkers putting in more hours since COVID, research shows. *The Guardian*, 4 February.

Padavic I, Ely RJ and Reid EM (2020) Explaining the persistence of gender inequality: The work–family narrative as a social defense against the 24/7 work culture. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 65(1): 61–111.

Peck J (2010) *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peck J and Theodore N (2019) Still neoliberalisation? *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118(2): 245–265.

Pennycook M, Cory G and Alakeson V (2013) *A matter of time*. London: Resolution Foundation.

Pereira V, Munjal S and Ishizaka A (2019) Outsourcing and offshoring decision making and its implications for businesses. *Journal of Business Research* 103(2): 348–355.

Pregnant then Screwed (2020) COVID and careers: Survey results.

Pugh AJ (2015) *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in the Age of Insecurity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reuschke and Felstead A (2020) *Home working in the UK: Before and during the 2020 lockdown*. WISERD Working paper, Cardiff.

Roche W (1991) Trust dynamics and organisational integration: The micro-sociology of Alan Fox. *British Journal of Sociology* 41(1): 95–113.

Rottenberg C (2019) Women who work: The limits of the neoliberal feminist paradigm. *Gender, Work & Organization* 26(8): 1073–1082.

Rubery J (2015) Austerity and the future of gender equality in Europe. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 68(4): 715–741.

Scharff C (2016) The psychic life of neoliberalism: Mapping the contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity. *Theory, Culture & Society* 33(6): 107–122.

Sennett R (1998) *The Corrosion of Character*. New York: WW Norton.

Sennett R (2006) *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sevilla A and Smith S (2020) Baby steps: The gender division of childcare during the COVID19 epidemic. Department of Economics Discussion Paper, 20/723, 22 May. Bristol: University of Bristol.

Sewell G and Taskin L (2015) Out of sight out of mind in a new world of work? Autonomy, control and spatiotemporal scaling in telework. *Organization Studies* 36(11): 1507–1529.

Sharone O (2014) *Flawed System, Flawed Self*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Siebert S, Martin G, Bozic B and Docherty I (2015) Looking 'beyond the factory gates': Towards more pluralist and radical approaches to intraorganizational trust research. *Organization Studies* 36(8): 1033–1062.

Spann A, Vicente J, Allard C et al. (2020) Challenges of combining work and unpaid care, and solutions: A scoping review. *Health and Social Care in the Community* 28(3): 699–715.

Spreitzer G, Cameron L and Garrett L (2017) Alternative work arrangements: Two images of the new world of work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behaviour* 4: 473–499

Springer S , Birch K and MacLeavy J (eds) (2016) *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Stamarski C and Hing SL (2015) Gender inequalities in the workplace: The effects of organizational structures, processes, practices, and decision makers' sexism. *Frontiers in Psychology* 16(6): 1400.

Standing G (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.

Stone P and Hernandez L (2013) The all-or-nothing workplace: Flexibility stigma and 'opting out' among professional-managerial women. *Journal of Social Issues* 69(2): 235–256.

Strauss A and Corbin J (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Styhre A (2017) *A Precarious Professional Work: Entrepreneurialism, Risk and Economic Compensation*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Takami T (2018) Are long working hours in Japan becoming invisible? Examining the effects of ICT-based 'spatial flexibility' on workloads. *Japan Labor Issues* 2(8): 50–65.

Takami T (2020) The impact of COVID-19 on fulltime workers. *Japan Labor Issues* 5(28): 8–15.

Takami T (2021) Working from home and work–life balance during COVID-19: The latest changes and challenges. *Japan Labor Issues* 5(33): 21–33.

Tirapani A and Willmott H (2023) Revisiting conflict: Neoliberalism at work in the gig economy. *Human Relations* 76(1): 53–86.

Tooze A (2021) *Shutdown: How Covid Shook the World's Economy*. London: Allen Lane.

Vallas S (2015) Accounting for precarity: Recent studies of labour market uncertainty. *Contemporary Sociology* 44(4): 463–469.

Vallas S and Cummins ER (2015) Personal branding and identity norms in the popular business press: Enterprise culture in an age precarity. *Organization Studies* 36(3): 293–319.

Vincent A (2009) *Modern Political Ideologies*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Vosko L (2010) *Managing at the Margins: Gender, Citizenship, and the International Regulation of Precarious Employment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Waber B, Magnolfi J and Lindsay G (2014). Workplaces move people. *Harvard Business Review* 92(10): 69–77.

Wajcman J and Rose E (2011) Constant connectivity: Rethinking interruptions at work. *Organization Studies* 32(4): 941–961.

Warren T and Lyonette R (2020a) Carrying the work burden of the COVID-19 pandemic: Employment and mental health. Working paper, Women's Budget Group, Nottingham University.

Warren T and Lyonette R (2020b) Carrying the work burden of the COVID-19 pandemic: Housework and childcare. Working paper, Women's Budget Group, Nottingham University.

Watson T (2011) Ethnography, reality and truth: The vital need for studies of 'how things' work in organizations and management. *Journal of Management Studies* 48(1): 202–217.

White M, Hill S, Mills C and Smeaton D (2004) *Managing to Change? British Workplaces and the Future of Work*. London: Palgrave.

Wiengarten F, Pagell M, Durach CF and Humphreys P (2021) Exploring the performance implications of precarious work. *Journal of Operations Management* 67(8): 926–963.

Williams A (2020) *Political Hegemony and Social Complexity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Williams J and Multhaup M (2018) For women and minorities to get ahead, managers must assign work fairly. *Harvard Business Review*, 5 March.

Worrall L, Campbell F and Cooper C (2000) The new reality for UK managers: Perpetual change and employment instability. *Work, Employment and Society* 14(4): 647–668.

Worrall L, Mather K and Cooper C (2016) The changing nature of professional and managerial work. In: Wilkinson A, Hislop D and Coupland C (eds) *Perspectives on Contemporary Professional Work*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 60–88.

Zhou Y (2021) How women bore the brunt of COVID-19 damages at work. *Japan Labor Issues* 5(29).

Author biographies

Catherine Farrell is a Reader in Public Management in Cardiff University's Business School. Her research interests are in the areas of leadership and governance and the changing careers of professionals across a range of different occupations. Her work has been published in journals including *Public Administration*, *Public Management Review*, *Policy and Politics*, *Human Relations* and *Industrial Relations*.

John Hassard is Professor of Organizational Analysis at Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester. His research interests lie in organizational theory, business history and managerial work, with empirical studies often employing international comparative perspectives. He has published 20 books and over 100 peer-reviewed journal articles.

Jonathan Morris is Professor of Organizational Analysis at Cardiff University's Business School. He is interested in the managerial implications of new organizational forms, and the impact of neoliberalism upon professional and creative work. He has published nine books and over 100 articles on these themes, amongst others.