

The extensification of managerial work in the digital age: Middle managers, spatio-temporal boundaries and control

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Abstract

How has the experience of managerial work changed in the digital age? This two-phase (2002–2006, 2015–2019) study addresses this question by examining how middle managers perceive the spatio-temporal boundaries of their work to have shifted. Typically, such managers report change occurring in two directions: (i) the contractual employment boundary becoming stretched as hours completed *inside* the workplace increase; and (ii) this boundary becoming breached as managers conduct additional work voluntarily from locations *outside* corporate premises. Although such trends can be explained deterministically – the former stemming from corporate acceptance of consultancy-influenced organizational prescriptions (business process reengineering, lean management, agile management etc.), and the latter from widespread adoption of digital communication innovations (BlackBerry, email, WhatsApp etc.) – we argue that to achieve a more rounded appreciation of such work ‘extensification’ attention must also be paid to agentic forces of strategic and political choice. Developing this argument, and acknowledging paradox when theorizing spatio-temporal change, we suggest future research on managerial employment must entail documenting not only factors influencing the stretching and breaching of work boundaries, but also – given incipient political regulations and innovative surveillance technologies – others serving to strengthen and protect them, notably those directed at improving work–life balance and physical/psychological health.

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Introduction

Senior executives at Ford Motor Co. have come to expect emails from their new boss, Chief Executive Jim Hackett . . . [t]hey often come around 11 p.m., when he catches up on his reading. (*Wall Street Journal*, 15 August 2018)

In recent decades, the management and organization studies (MOS) literature has recorded how the world of work is changing profoundly in the ‘digital age’ (Vallas and Kovalainen, 2019). Changes have reflected an array of transformations, with practices often being branded ‘new’ ways of working (Fayard, 2019; Sweet and Meiksins, 2013). This is reflected in the integration of artificial intelligence in organizations (Faraj et al., 2018; Kaplan, 2015; von Krogh, 2018), the emergence of platform-based and app-based work (Duggan et al., 2020; Veen et al., 2020) and the rise of ground-breaking digital devices (Mazmanian et al., 2005, 2013), as well as more widely in the emergence of new forms of entrepreneurial relationships (Miles et al., 2005) and the rise of the ‘gig economy’ (Ashford et al., 2018; Friedman, 2014).

Relatedly, it is claimed that innovative influences on work arrangements have impacted on how large-scale organizations function (Spreitzer et al., 2017). Among the trends highlighted have been a rising number of firms embedded in the ‘sharing economy’ (Sundararajan, 2016), increasing emphasis on ‘autonomy’ and ‘flexibility’ in corporations (Feldstead et al., 2005), and changes to ‘managerial functions’ (Foster et al., 2019). Some writers have stressed the originality of these practices, but others suggest that ‘new’ forms of work, management and organization echo issues associated with earlier forms, such as control, inequality and resistance (Alcadipani et al., 2019; Brivot and Gendron, 2011; Fleming, 2009).

Through longitudinal analysis this study examines how work has changed markedly for one occupational group – middle managers (those who manage at least one subordinate level of managers while also reporting to a higher managerial level) – and focally since the millennium. Drawing upon two phases of interview-based investigation, the article illuminates how the manager’s lifeworld has been transformed consistent with the demands of technological and organizational innovations, with this often reflecting issues of ‘behavioural visibility’ (Leonardi and Treem, 2020). Theoretically, in addition to outlining the influence of a range of deterministic factors and forces – and noting how paradox often defines managers’ experience of organizational change (Grigore et al., 2021) – we identify a role for strategic and political *choice* in shaping managerial work. Describing ‘against the grain’ scenarios, we suggest how strategic and political choice can serve to resist rather than augment the ‘extensification’ of managerial work, a term denoting how work intensification (more tasks, greater responsibility levels etc.) has engendered a need for managers to devote more time to work, which has often resulted in the traditional spatio-temporal boundaries of contracted employment being breached.

The aim therefore is to account for how managerial work practices have been transformed in the ‘surveillance’ or ‘digital’ age. Managerial work in this era appears characterized increasingly by the championing of ‘availability’ and ‘flexibility’, with these qualities crystallized in meeting demands for increasingly open and connected practices in management’s contribution to productivity. This is often legitimized in terms of satisfying ‘neo-liberal’ economic interests and the ‘logic’ of creating value for shareholders (Mizuchi and Kirneldorf, 2005).

Methodologically, we analyse changes to management work through longitudinal, interview-based, research in large corporations. Specifically, we analyse work experience under changing forms of organizational structuring and control, offering accounts of how managers have come to terms with work extensification, notably in an era defined by sophisticated and increasingly mobile digital technologies. Use of a quasi-longitudinal process (‘quasi’ because the design does not realize strict sample replication) allows us to ascertain how work has changed, and focally since the millennium – a period including the global financial crisis (GFC) 2008–2009.

Empirically, the study examines managerial work in organizations experiencing significant restructuring. This was the case for most corporations visited, many having undergone recurrent rounds of downsizing and delayering. This scenario is reflected in many liberal-market, coordinated-market and other forms of capitalism (Hassard and Morris, 2018), a situation associated with increased employment insecurity among managerial workforces (Anicich and Hirsch, 2017; Mantere, 2008; Ostroff, 1999). Despite corporate narratives espousing greater personal autonomy in managerial work – often reflecting the prescriptions of ‘management gurus’ (Darrell et al., 2016; Gratton, 2011; Wal and Gray, 2014) – this research describes, in contrast, the progressive, yet often tacit, development of surveillance-based monitoring to *control* managers’ actions. Similarly, despite proposals for increasing employee ‘empowerment’ (Huq, 2015), researchers suggest much paradox and contradiction in this regard. Mazmanian et al. (2013: 1337), for example, describe how the personal ‘sovereignty’ initially promised by mobile communications devices eventually turned into the opposite, a *loss* of independence for employees. In their study, managers were increasingly required to demonstrate corporate ‘commitment’ through increased digital connectivity and availability, for ‘in choosing to use their mobile devices to work anywhere/anytime . . . professionals were ending up using [them] everywhere/all the time’.

However, we make additional theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions, and notably through advancing the concept of work ‘extensification’, a term we borrow non-analogously from agricultural economics, where it is often used in discussions of land abuse (Eklund et al., 2017; Elnagheeb and Bromley, 1994; also, Romportl and Kuna, 2017). We offer this concept to define situations where changes to work reflect two trajectories: (i) where the contractual employment boundary becomes stretched as hours completed *inside* the workplace increase; and/or (ii) where this boundary becomes breached by managers voluntarily conducting work from locations *outside* corporate premises. Whereas Marx (1887: 253–264), in *Capital (Volume 1)*, describes the ‘struggle for a normal working’ day during the 19th century in terms of capitalists (in response to UK Factory Acts) extracting surplus value within reduced work-time parameters, modern (digitalized) employment of the 21st century sees work time extended – as tasks are

increasingly undertaken on an implicit, voluntary and contractually unpaid basis from spatio-temporal domains beyond the formal/physical parameters of the workplace, hence an extensification of ‘real’ working time. This sees the associated notion of ‘work intensification’ – a product of the ‘growth of competition and the continual drive for higher profits’ (Heery and Noon, 2008: 217) – become a constituent part of more extensive work regimes in terms of hours *actually* spent on tasks. We therefore feel the term ‘extensification’ captures the dynamic of the modern managerial labour process (sensu Braverman, 1974) more holistically than work intensification. We explain the complexity of the extensification issue not only in terms of external causal forces but also through exploring agentic situations where strategic and political choices play a role in shaping how managerial work is organized and controlled. The latter sees identification of ‘alternative’ (or against-the-grain) examples to those habitually rehearsed. Here, we draw upon empirical and desk-based research to suggest that future investigations may focus on means to restrain, as much as extend, the work middle managers undertake in a ‘normal working day’.

Further, we argue that although MOS research often focuses on the ‘functionality’ of corporate restructuring innovations (e.g. business process reengineering, lean management, post-bureaucratic organization), ‘critical’ issues of control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003) play an equally important role for understanding the ‘fads and fashions’ (Collins, 2000) of organizational redesign, and notably the transformation of management practices (Sewell et al., 2012). With the latter in mind, we provide 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. We document how managers now regularly accomplish work from outside traditional spatio-temporal corporate precincts (Johns and Gratton, 2013; Kossek et al., 2012; Waber et al., 2014), with such change reflected, for example, in ‘flexible’ work arrangements (Allen and Shockley, 2009; Bidwell and Briscoe, 2009), ‘alternative’ employment systems (Ashford et al., 2007; Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Spreitzer et al., 2017), working from ‘third’ places (e.g. coffee shops, hotel lobbies, commuter trains: Jeffres et al., 2009; Okhuysen et al., 2013), and a number of other systems and practices cited earlier.

In short, the article is developed in four phases. First, we explore research *context* by analysing issues relevant to understanding managerial work extensification. Second, we describe the *methodology*, particularly our use of a quasi-longitudinal approach based on semi-structured interviewing. Third, we present *findings* that illustrate the experience of managerial work extensification in an era characterized by corporate reengineering and digitalization. Finally, in Discussion we reflect on the concept of work extensification in light of our findings, the MOS literature, and future possibilities for researching managerial experience.

Corporate restructuring and the ‘new’ managerial work

In recent decades, corporations have faced a range of pressures arising from international competition under neo-liberalism (Kotz, 2002), a situation many argue has placed ‘shareholder value’ central to managing corporate affairs (Lazonick and O’Sullivan, 2010). To deal with these pressures, corporations have responded by restructuring operations into

neo-bureaucratic (Farrell and Morris, 2003; Hassard et al., 2009) or post-bureaucratic (Alvesson and Thompson, 2006; Johnson et al., 2009) structures. In the process, they have sponsored, inter alia, exercises in downsizing and delayering, and advocated refocusing on 'core' production and service capabilities. The aim is often to make corporations more 'agile' (Darrell et al., 2016), although minimizing costs has arguably been the central strategic driver during this 'investor capitalism' era (Styhre, 2016).

In this context, middle managers have increasingly come under greater work pressure, with commonly fewer to undertake a broader task range (Gratton, 2011). Several consequences emerge from this: not only more time and task pressures being placed upon middle managers (den Nieuwenboer et al., 2017), but also, as noted, increased perceptions of job insecurity (Hassard and Morris, 2020) being allied to greater career uncertainty (McCann et al., 2008). As we will see, progressive use of new digital technologies has often led to work stress being augmented, and notably through obliging middle managers to work outside of corporate premises and at times not traditionally rewarded (Butts et al., 2015; Derks et al., 2015; Johns and Gratton, 2013; Waber et al., 2014). This is despite management consultants and business academics claiming innovative digital technologies provide greater work flexibility (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016; Manyika, 2017), and notably in optimizing time and space, thus allowing managers to complete work wherever and whenever possible (Kerr et al., 2018).

Changes to work brought about by digitalization – especially portable communication devices – can reflect perverse consequences for working time, particularly where middle managers are already under significant time pressure. Use of such technology can blur locational boundaries of where work takes place and when it starts and stops (Ashforth et al., 2000; Golden and Fromen, 2011; Mazmanian et al., 2005; Wajcman et al., 2008). This poses additional questions in situations reflecting the confluence of new organizational forms and innovative control practices, signally in relation to digital technologies facilitating new ways of working. This can elicit seemingly contradictory consequences for middle managers, making it easier for them to claim temporal control over task execution, but also seeing their work extended into virtually any space where a smartphone, tablet or laptop can be operated (Mazmanian et al., 2013).

This scenario propels the study of management and organizational control into more nuanced areas. Whereas prior explorations of work surveillance have been influenced by Benthamite philosophies allied to Foucauldian theories – exemplified in 1990s shop-floor production studies (Sewell, 1998; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992) – we argue the social context of organizational control has changed, owing partly to the spread of *self*-surveillance linked to heightened levels of employment uncertainty (Elmholdt et al., 2020; Sudjic, 2018). Arguably, the economic context has been transformed too (Bauman, 2002; Beck, 2002), principally to one where competition has internationalized and managers experience increased occupational precarity (Fleming, 2017; Kalleberg, 2018).

At a more technical (business-platform) level, the issue of 'surveillance capitalism' has become of generic concern for those wishing to understand current economic and technological transformations in the management of corporations. The notion has been popularized by Zuboff (2015a, 2015b, 2019), who suggests the neo-liberal corporation has been 'hijacked' by surveillance through the covert connection of the digital with the powers of financial capitalism. Zuboff suggests that surveillance capitalism is contingent

on advances in computer architecture facilitating a new distributed and increasingly hegemonic manifestation of power – one she terms ‘Big Other’ (Zuboff, 2015a: 75), a view that sees economies increasingly deploy obscured apparatuses for the extraction, abstraction and control of behaviour.

Meanwhile, corporations claim that restructuring is directed at achieving greater productivity through facilitating ‘leaner’ organizing forms (Kallinikos, 2003; McCann et al., 2015). In such a scenario, middle managers must deal with significant increases in expected working hours, with this new ‘normal working day’ (McCann et al., 2008) accommodated by innovative digital communications technologies. To realize the potential of such systems, platforms and devices, we see emergent work practices reflect ‘distantiation’ and ‘dispersal’ (Halford, 2005), which Sewell and Taskin (2015) argue reflect moves to more diffuse and fragmented social relations at work. Organizational surveillance is thus transformed into more subtle, self and peer, forms of control (Brivot and Gendron, 2011; Schatzki, 2005), as realized in situations offering managers more elastic opportunities for task completion (Felstead et al., 2002; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). Indeed, digital communication technologies are often singled out for generating adverse occupational outcomes, not least in terms of self-exploitation (de Vaujany and Mitev, 2015; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). It is claimed that there is often pressure to shift the locus of work control from employer to employee, as witnessed in implicit demands for those working contractually from home to ‘prove themselves’ (Felstead and Jewson, 2002). It has been argued, additionally, that managers in such situations can be drawn increasingly into the all-embracing ‘gaze’ of these technologies (Mazmanian et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, middle managers have often welcomed innovative digital communications technologies, especially for the autonomy and flexibility they appear to offer when carrying out tasks (Golden and Fromen, 2011). The increased autonomy middle managers have espoused can be seen to reflect the specific occupational status of the employee and the potential they have to exercise control over the work such technologies facilitate (Sandberg and Pinnington, 2009). Mobile communication devices initially seemed to offer managers significant opportunities for redefining the temporal and spatial boundaries of their work (Golden and Geisler, 2007), notably to manage these boundaries at their discretion (Derks et al., 2016). There is considerable evidence pointing to managers initially welcoming not only the tractability such technologies presented but also the increased prestige they appeared to bestow in terms of controlling work practices (Sturges, 2013).

We have stressed, however, that tensions are also evident in this regard, for increased autonomy can also be accompanied by increased control, often implicitly. Reid (2015) describes how employees in the US frequently negotiated ‘ideal expectations’ in this respect, lending the impression of working long hours while in reality avoiding it by adapting work accordingly. Similarly, managers can ‘use’ such technologies to demonstrate – in political terms – organizational commitment (Burke and Cooper, 2008). Researchers point to managers experiencing significant pressure to conform temporally, and of digital communication technologies being used to signal ‘corporate loyalty’ (Gambles et al., 2006). This can lead to managers becoming caught in a ‘collective spiral of escalating engagement’ (Mazmanian et al., 2013: 1338) – working at ‘all hours’ and in

virtually ‘any location’. This reflects an autonomy paradox in relation to what elsewhere has been termed ‘concertive’ forms of control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; de Vaujany and Mitev, 2015; Sewell, 1998).

The use of digital communications technology can therefore alter considerably the structure and experience of both presence and absence in the workplace, while in turn affecting the control of work (Barley et al., 2011; Weber, 2004). New questions facing work organization are evident, and notably regarding ‘collaborative’ management forms, purporting to extend beyond direct visual observation and control in promoting new cultural forms (Halford, 2005). Commentators also suggest autonomy can become a synonym for governance (Bauman and Lyon, 2013) amid qualitative changes to ‘spatial packages’ of managerial work (Halford, 2005). Mazmanian et al.’s (2013) study of professionals using the BlackBerry, for example, found they viewed the technology positively and felt the device enhanced their competence and influence. However, the study also suggested such use went hand in hand with increased expectations of responsiveness, as well as implicit obligations for managers to be continuously accessible amid shifting norms of engagement. In leisure time during the workweek, many professionals checked their devices continuously, and also up to once an hour on weekends. In kindred research, Mazmanian (2013) reported lawyers checking their email even on vacation.

Digital technologies, especially mobile devices, have been viewed therefore as capable of escalating occupational engagement, raising work expectations and increasing stress. Researchers have similarly linked use of mobile communication technologies with work overload, expectations of availability, and home–work boundary blurring (Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Hughes and Silver, 2020; Perlow, 2008; Porter and Kakabadse, 2006; Wajcman and Rose, 2011). The distorting of traditional work and non-work boundaries – in ways appearing (temporally and spatially) ever more ‘permeable’ (Choroszewicz and Kay, 2020; Fleming and Spicer, 2004; Golden and Geisler, 2007) – can therefore reflect important changes in defining what ‘working’ as a middle manager now means.

Researching middle-managerial work

Having prepared the theoretical context in terms of factors influencing managerial work in the digital age, we now turn to our empirical investigations. As noted, findings are drawn from a quasi-longitudinal (two-phase) study of managerial work using semi-structured interviewing. In contrast to one-shot case studies or cross-sectional research, the approach describes not only how managers’ perceptions and experiences were formed, but also how they changed during a period of significant technological and organizational transformation. This allowed definition of patterns and trends in real time rather than through retrospection (Decker et al., 2020). It also permitted research flexibility in pursuing new lines of inquiry and shifting the analytical focus when interesting themes emerged.

The first study (2002–2006) investigated middle managers’ work experience in three advanced economies: UK, USA and Japan. It described a period when managers were making sense of change in terms of how several ‘big actors’ (Latour, 2005) were reshaping work, notably corporate restructuring prescriptions, digital communication platforms

and mobile information-access devices. This was a period, however, in which managers' interpretations of the impact of such actors were habitually vague and ambiguous.

The second (2015–2019) study was a follow-up – collecting data on the same/similar themes, from the same/similar managers, in the same/similar corporations. The initial motivation was to understand major changes to managerial work in the wake of the GFC. Data from this phase described a time when much of the change previously described had become 'normalized' (McCann et al., 2008) and 'sedimented' (Maclean et al., 2017). In longitudinal perspective, we appreciated how in under two decades what had been 'new' work realities were now largely taken for granted. It was also, however, a time in which certain socio-technical actors in the change drama took on 'dark or unexpected' (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021) roles, notably vis-a-vis observation and control through digital technologies.

In analysing two real-time sets of qualitative data, the investigation has appreciated trends and fluctuations in managers' experiences over time. Contrasting an earlier data set with a contemporary one allows us to place core issues in perspective, thus allowing understanding of how concerns considered remarkable in one period can become habitual in another, and vice versa. Additionally, field-based qualitative research allows us to discover so-called 'sleeper effects', or nuanced connections emerging between a variety of events, ones that otherwise might not be linked.

For data collection, the first investigation saw interviews carried out in a cross-section of commercial, service and administrative organizations. Industries included advertising, automotive, banking, consulting, electronics, engineering, food and drink, healthcare, insurance, local government, steel and utilities. In total, the study comprised 259 interviews with middle managers across 26 organizations. These organizations represented a range of sectoral types: public/private, manufacturing/services and old/new. Organizations were broadly matched across the three economies.

The second study was intended largely to replicate the first, not only regarding sectors and industries targeted, but also issues researched. In the event, many organizations visited in 2015–2019 were ones that had also been visited in 2002–2006. Although in the second study we attempted to interview many of the same managers interviewed in the first, given circa 10–15 years had elapsed, a number had changed roles, departments or divisions, moved to other employers or simply retired. Despite such attrition, we often did manage to trace managers previously consulted, many of whom were still working for the same employer, and often in the same or similar roles. In addition, middle managers new to the research (some from other industries) were interviewed on the same core topics. For the second investigation, 148 managers have thus far been interviewed across 30 companies.

During this research, managers were typically interviewed by two researchers, with most sessions being voice-recorded. In a few cases, interviewees declined to be so recorded, and here the researchers made handwritten notes instead. Interviews typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and focused on issues relevant to addressing the core research question of how the experience of middle-management work has changed under corporate restructuring during the digital age. In gaining answers, the semi-structured interview schedule covered the following main topics: background company information; employment history of the manager; managerial tasks, duties and responsibilities;

performance management and reward systems; job security and career trajectories; changes to organization structures and processes; corporate strategy, climate and culture; and work–life balance and well-being. For each issue, we designed a number of specific prompt questions to stimulate discussion. Typically, interview sessions covered the majority of core research topics but rarely in the order set. In addition to interview-based research, some corporations allowed the researchers to undertake ethnographic fieldwork, with this normally lasting between two and five days on site per firm.

Data analysis saw researchers generate interpretive themes personally, rather than through computer-based software (such as NVivo). Thus, themes were identified from researchers' own analyses of transcripts and fieldnotes, with this process being augmented by cross-checking among colleagues. Methodologically, the approach reflected 'grounded' theorizing based on inductive investigation of themes and concepts (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Watson, 2011). Practically, the analysis involved three stages of information processing: empirical description, thematic identification and theoretical construction (Geertz, 2005; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The first stage, developing empirical descriptions (the building blocks of the research), involved writing methodologically 'thick' accounts of issues and events (Geertz, 1973). Here, interview and observation-based information was recorded in a form that included not only material facts and researcher impressions, but also subjective explanations in the form of personal meanings provided by managers engaged in practices under investigation. This process produced qualitative data that served as an information repository for later analytical stages.

The second stage involved identifying themes from descriptive data. This saw qualitative information examined to establish thematic narratives in which intangible issues (e.g. autonomy, flexibility, work–life balance) were related to tangible factors (e.g. technological innovations, strategic policies, surveillance methods) in making sense of the changing experience of managerial work. The interpretive themes emerging from this analysis became the central narrative planks of explanation.

The final stage concerned theory development. As interpretive themes were reviewed and re-reviewed – to establish validity and reliability – they formed the basis for grounded theory. This saw major themes explained by higher-order and more abstract sociological concepts (e.g. spatial and temporal realignment, habituated assumptions, against-the-grain trajectories) to provide a core concept of work *extensification*. This conceptualization reflected the internal stretching and external breaching of contractual employment boundaries yet also acknowledged the potential for strategic and political choice in the making of organizational arrangements.

First study (2002–2006)

The first investigation analysed the extent to which managerial work was affected by new forms of organization. In line with expectations, most corporations had undertaken restructuring in recent times, this often influenced by strategic change philosophies, especially 'business process reengineering' (Hammer and Champy, 1993) and 'lean management' (Womack and Jones, 1996). Restructuring typically involved some variant of delayering and downsizing derived from such principles, plus in many cases a

strategic (re)focusing on ‘core competencies’ (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990), although one corporation was adopting an earlier strategic and structural prescription, moving from a functional to matrix form (Galbraith, 1971). Some firms also suggested they were either considering or actively developing performance management systems based on ‘rank and yank’ forced rating models (*sensu* Welch, 2001; also Hassard and Morris, 2020; Mulligan and Bull Schaefer, 2011). Discussions on change were typically contextualized by narratives recanting problems of heightened international competition, the need to keep the share price buoyant, and pressures to increase shareholder value, even in Japan. A key emphasis from the outset, however, was the impact organizational restructuring was having on middle-management work, notably regarding the hours such managers were now devoting to tasks, and issues of when and where they were carrying them out (Johnson et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2011).

In the latter respect, the research pointed to a marked increase in the volume of managerial work as a consequence of restructuring, with middle managers having larger spans of control yet reduced promotion prospects, as layering often affected traditional career trajectories adversely. Managers reported more extensive work regimes, as time needed to complete work increased alongside undertaking a greater variety of tasks. There were similarly increases in reported stress among middle managers, with longer working hours perceived as a major problem. Middle managers in US organizations, for example, reported high levels of work pressure – not only in working a large number of weekly hours but also through taking fewer days’ annual vacation than their UK and Japanese counterparts. Indeed, US managers reported being under much greater pressure historically to ‘perform’, as recurrent rounds of downsizing had often left fewer of them to complete a larger and more complex task set. As spans of control had increased, similarly areas of responsibility had too. However, this was not necessarily perceived as coercive, for undertaking more demanding work could be portrayed – perhaps paradoxically – as being of a manager’s ‘own choosing’, there being simply ‘too much work’ in the modern corporate environment.

Seemingly contradictory statements and sentiments emerged in many discussions. This was nowhere more so than when an issue not originally slated for discussion – the impact of new digital communication technologies on managerial work – was raised during an interview with a human resources manager of a US banking corporation in April 2004. In an off-the-cuff remark, he asked if we had heard of a device he and other managers were now obliged to use, the BlackBerry. He explained how this was a communications device, but one for which the implications for middle-managerial work were far greater than for any similar technology he had encountered during his long career, like pagers or beepers. In explaining his initial coming to terms with the BlackBerry, he highlighted several issues crucial to understanding employee control in relation to work practices. Among these were the sudden and widespread uptake of this technology, its impact on personal autonomy, and above all the role it could play in blurring home–work boundaries.

As the discussion developed, however, he hinted at potential ambiguities in the ways managers were defining the use and abuse of this technology. For example, while proposing on the one hand that ‘being free’ from the BlackBerry (e.g. while on vacation) was a ‘good thing’, he suggested, on the other, that having constant access to it ‘could

also be fun', despite this potentially extending the period during which work might have to be done. In a key phrase, he suggested that with the BlackBerry a middle manager 'now just can't escape being contacted'. This interviewee thus seemed uncertain whether forces stimulated by this technology – notably the potential for working 'faster' and 'harder' – were 'good' or 'bad'. Indeed, the contradictions he appeared to be experiencing seemed to reflect a paradigm shift in work experience, as this telling extract from the interview illustrates:

Well the world has suddenly gotten smaller, and as a result what you do in Frankfurt or London, New York or Chicago has an effect on all of us. You and I, you know, we see atrocities in Abu Ghraib prison or whatever they call it. We saw that almost instantly and we saw it worldwide. So worldwide communication and the ability to do banking and investments 24 hours a day, almost seven days a week, has had a major impact on all of us. So, to keep up we have to move faster and harder and I don't know whether that's bad or good. Frankly I am soon going up to my summer home in northern [US state]. I can't get telephone, I can't get computers up there, and I think that's pretty good. But my son, who's thirty, that would drive him nuts. He works in cash management here at the bank. He's constantly [indecipherable] and so it's a different world. But I think it's affected all of us, you know, from the new college graduate to somebody who's my age, who's getting ready, you know, in three or four years I'll retire. But I think definitely I'm moving faster and working harder. I am doing more. And in some ways I'm having more fun, but in others ways I'm not. But that's it to me – we're all working harder. The question is, are we working smarter, and are we taking time to smell the flowers? (Interviewee)

After describing the context of a period of significant turbulence for middle managers and their work at the bank, he went on to explain one of the main reasons underpinning this situation:

- Interviewee: Got your BlackBerry with you? Do you have BlackBerrys yet?
 Researcher: [University researchers] don't really have them in the UK.
 Interviewee: It won't work up here because I'm above the power lines. But this little sucker – see it's not picking up right now, it's showing Sunday. But this little sucker is nothing but, well, it's my computer, so it's tied into this PC and I can send and receive emails and I can write emails. And here is the hearing part, and this is the mouthpiece, so it's a telephone. So anywhere in the building people will get you, you know, you can't escape. Yeah you know I'll be on vacation and my wife says 'what are you doing', [and I say] 'I just want to check on my BlackBerry' . . .
 Researcher: We haven't quite got them yet.
 Interviewee: Oh they're coming. They will do, yeah, watch out. That's now got me working Saturday and Sundays, or in the evening you go home and check your emails and see what you've got. Now the handy part of this is – since it's, what time is it now, it's eight-thirty, nine-thirty in Europe – I can still communicate with my colleagues in Europe and they can send me emails at night. And when I get up in the morning at five-thirty, six o'clock, I can pick up my BlackBerry and see if I've got any emails in from Amsterdam or London.

Although this represented one of the first occasions that the issue of mobile digital communication technologies – and working ‘at a distance’ – had been raised, as the study progressed it became pervasive, especially in the context of control and surveillance. Middle managers in each of the three countries suggested their work was being spatially and temporally extended by digital innovations. Often discussions of work routines would give rise to managers describing accessing email from home, which was made possible initially via PCs but subsequently with the aid of mobile devices (Boswell and Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Cox et al., 2005; Yerby, 2013). For example, in our early interviews in Japan – a culture already defined by extensive working by managers – we were told such technologies were being used as a substitute for hiring support workers amid a general context of seeking to reduce administrative staff. This also had the effect of expanding the number of tasks to be accomplished by middle managers, with several interviewees suggesting it made a long working day even longer. As a manager at a Japanese automotive corporation suggested sardonically, ‘Yes, we are working long hours, but now we have email and teleconferences available to us as well!’

Middle managers in the UK also suggested that new, or comparatively new, communications technologies had stimulated the spatio-temporal expansion of their work. The use of email, for example, had exploded in office environments from around 1996–1997. Although historically managers often completed ‘paperwork’ from home, the implication now was the ‘connectedness’ offered by email had amplified remote working significantly. Interesting here was a sense that such innovations had now come to ‘colonise’ (Deetz, 1992) managerial work, for as a human resources manager at a large UK hospital explained:

Well when we first started getting email we weren’t sure how to handle it. Should we do it now or later? The problem was it was getting in the way of doing other things, reports and the like. So early on some of us tried to do it just at lunch time . . . But then the volume got too much and so we had to start doing it all the time.

However, perhaps the main way such technology had changed work was in digital innovations facilitating managers completing additional work – voluntarily and ‘beyond contract’ (Fox, 1974) – from home. Indeed many managers reported a growing cultural requirement ‘to be seen’ to be doing so (Cristea and Leonardi, 2019). While we received copious accounts of traditional spatio-temporal boundaries being breached in private-sector firms, this could also be so in other sectors. At a US hospital, for example, when voluntary work from home was included, middle managers often suggested they were now working more than 10 hours a day, with digital technologies being the means making this possible.

Nevertheless, digital technologies could also be seen as enabling and emancipatory phenomena. At the same US hospital, an experienced middle manager suggested she now regularly worked a ‘ten-and-a-half-hour day’ in the office, but then would ‘go home and do my emails’. However, she also suggested her work had been ‘revolutionized’ by the ‘flexibility’ offered by accessing messages remotely, specifically by BlackBerry, something ‘highly beneficial’ for ‘managers with families’. A nurse-manager colleague also expressed positive views in this regard, for ‘nowadays you can easily be emailed anywhere, anytime, and so information can be processed very quickly’.

At a large US utilities company, however, rather than digital technology sponsoring flexibility and emancipation, some managers suggested it was instead more a means of getting them to spend 'more and more time doing work'. Here, the number of managerial tasks had grown following a merger between the local gas and electric companies, one that caused many management posts to be amalgamated. For some managers, notably those with family commitments, the increased workload had become a source of domestic contention, especially in terms of managing the work-home boundary (Hamermesh and Stancanelli, 2015; Piszczek, 2017). As one middle manager explained:

Well I now get here [company office] between seven and seven thirty and I generally leave between five and seven. But I can log on from home. And so a lot of times I'll leave here at around five or six, and then when my son goes to bed I'll log back on, and I'll work until nine, ten, eleven, or over the weekend. It's a constant battle. You should see my wife's face [laughs].

These interviews from the early 2000s describe middle managers making sense of factors linked to the progressive extension of time spent working. Specifically, they illustrate how strategic restructuring and adoption of digital technologies were often at the heart of much managerial work 'extensification'. Middle managers explained they were now regulating the spatio-temporal boundaries of work and home in line with increasing workloads and the flexibility for accomplishing tasks by digital means. However, middle managers' sense-making also suggested much ambiguity regarding the effects of processing tasks 'remotely'. Managers were often unsure of whether such technologies offered the promise of greater freedom at work or, instead, the threat of being trapped increasingly in a technological gilded cage – one characterized by heightened surveillance and increased control.

Second study (2015–2019)

When conducting the second study (10–15 years later), we found elements of continuity in our analysis but also new developments and trends emerging. On the one hand, continuity was reflected in accounts of the all-consuming nature of managerial work; work-life balance problems of managing spatio-temporal boundaries; and wider effects of recurrent restructuring exercises. On the other, changes reflected aspects of managerial work formally considered novel now appearing normative; new technologies entering the organizational stage that offered greater potential for surveillance and control; and also control mechanisms emerging that seemed antithetical to those habitually discussed in MOS literatures.

Continuity and change

In terms of continuity, as noted, discussions with managers often referenced the problem of how to manage the work-home boundary (Kreiner et al., 2009; Perlow and Kelly, 2014), with conversations frequently focusing on email and ways to control it (Derks and Bakker, 2010). Interviews often suggested working hours were extensive because of the need for managers in 'competitive climates' to conduct work freely at home in addition

to that completed in the office. Indeed, what had been perceived as a relatively novel phenomenon a decade or so earlier now seemed commonplace, routine and essentially the norm. The impression was that the obligation to complete work voluntarily – in the evening, at weekends, and even on vacation – was accepted implicitly by middle managers, with this being so in each of the countries visited.

In the US, for example, a hospital manager suggested that when going on vacation she was always in a dilemma as to whether: ‘I should check on my emails every day and keep them under control, or else relax, enjoy the break, and come back to a mountain of them’. A middle manager in a US automotive plant expressed the same dilemma, but admitted he always ended up ‘doing [emails] every day so I don’t get swamped or too far behind’.

In Japan, managers continued to report working long days in the office while also completing work tasks voluntarily outside company premises. For working on-site, the most extensive hours were reported at a telecommunications company, with managers describing the characteristics of a ‘long hours culture’ as well as a ‘muscular performance management system’. When queried about the number of hours being worked, a young middle manager suggested, ‘I sometimes find colleagues who are almost living in the firm’. Other managers suggested they regularly worked ‘10 until 10’, with a manager suggesting he often ‘started at 9 and left sometime between 7 and 12’. Managers in some functional areas, however, seemed to work longer hours than others, with interviewees suggesting this applied especially to engineers, who ‘can sometimes work until 2 or 3 [a.m.]’. Indeed, many managers at the company reported working long hours despite an employment contract stipulating a 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. working day. One middle manager suggested cynically, ‘[Name of corporation] has become my hobby – I’ve made my hobby my work’. In this firm, a flat structure and diminishing number of senior positions had encouraged an extremely competitive environment, which possibly explained the very long days worked by many managers. However, the Japanese telecommunications sector is notorious for extensive working and burn-out among managers, even within a national culture already synonymous with over-working (Morris et al., 2020). For other corporations visited in Japan, although the time managers spent working could also be extensive, this could include tasks regularly undertaken ‘remotely’, which managers reported as now ‘taken-for-granted’, or just ‘part of the job’.

It was in the UK, however, that evidence from the second study appeared to contrast most vividly with the first. On weekend working, a utilities company manager commented: ‘I don’t really think of Sundays as the weekend anymore. It’s almost become just another working day’. Again, answering emails was the task most commonly referenced in this respect, as when an insurance manager suggested spending ‘much of the weekend getting rid of my rubbish, my emails’. Additionally, a manager at the London consulting firm linked working beyond officially contracted hours to the likelihood of achieving promotion. He explained this as the importance of ‘being seen’ to work long days, and suggested succinctly: ‘you don’t get promoted here for just doing the day job and working nine to five – you have to be working way beyond that’ (see Balgoyev and Schreyogg, 2019).

Similarly, an interviewee at an automotive corporation appeared to have internalized well the temporal norms and expectations of modern managerial work: ‘If I were to leave here at five I would actually feel guilty. I’m not forced to work on. It’s just what you do’.

Another manager at the utilities company suggested likewise that if a manager is 'seen to be working long hours' then this can impact upon the 'expectations of junior colleagues'. She went on to describe how 'I get into work around seven o'clock', a practice she felt might 'influence others to do the same'. Later she admitted to 'send[ing] off emails at 8 during the week and at 9 on Sundays'.

Likewise, on a day our research interviews were being held at a telecommunications firm, we emailed the manager responsible at 7 a.m. Seconds later we received a return email confirming the arrangements. When later we queried this manager about the promptness of the reply, received so early in the day, she suggested, 'I never actually turn my email off [for] I find it less stressful to be with it than without it – I always need to know what messages I've received'.

In rationalizing these practices, an interviewee at a financial services company summed up the underlying dynamic – managers had now joined a 'ubiquitous acceptance culture'. He explained his corporation's expectation that a middle manager's mobile phone would 'always be turned on', so that direct reports and superiors could 'always make contact with you anytime, anywhere'. An automotive industry manager explained similarly:

I do take lots of work home, during the week and at weekends. But once I was on the beach abroad and my wife caught me phoning work. She gave me a right bollocking. But [company] are very clever, they get you to work at home for nothing. Everyone does it. All multinationals. And mobile phones haven't helped, Twitter, Facebook, the like.

Another manager at the automotive corporation suggested he now regularly completed work during periods that were 'previously family time'. He explained vividly how 'I always look at my emails at home, basically whenever I have a spare minute . . . I take my son free-running at weekends and I'll even check my emails then'. However, like middle managers in the US and Japan, he also noted a more political side to the sending and receiving of email messages: that such acts can be valuable for 'playing the corporate game'. He went on to disclose how he often tried to send messages to senior managers 'very early or very late in the day', for this 'can signal you are showing commitment', a practice he defensively justified as 'flag[ging] up your worth'.

During the second study, other forms of communications technology came to the fore in respect of colonizing managerial work, primarily apps and platforms promising 'instant messaging'. In the US, managers mentioned Messenger, and in Japan, Line, but it was in the UK that such technologies were most frequently referenced, and notably the cross-platform messaging service WhatsApp. Once again, this technology engendered contradictory responses from managers, notably in terms of the perceived merits and shortcomings for work and work-life balance. Like the BlackBerry earlier, many UK managers saw WhatsApp in a broadly positive light, given it was free, encrypted and easy to operate. It also had the advantage of counteracting email overload. Thus, what initially appeared as a social media tool for younger people had increasingly become a technology key to internal messaging. As a UK manufacturing manager noted: 'It's easy to connect, and you get answers quickly', then going on to suggest: 'It has [facilitated] connections all over the world. We can reach people in meetings that we wouldn't do in person'.

Similarly, the human resources manager at the London-based consultancy firm cited WhatsApp in connection with handling her 'hectic, fragmented and long working day', noting the advantages it offered for 'checking all the time' on her WhatsApp groups:

I manage a 12-hour day here. I manage different projects. Currently I'm doing four and I'm constantly looking for new business, all the time. It's very complicated. I jump from project to project. So, I work eight to eight and then go home. But I am constantly checking my mobile all night. I have WhatsApp groups which I check all the time. It could be 10 o'clock and I still check. We have one for each of my project teams. I don't work Saturdays because of my ten-year-old son, but I do start again on Sunday afternoon to plan my week.

However, whereas middle managers frequently described WhatsApp in a positive light – for improving communications, efficiency, global reach and so forth – during a discussion of why the technology had become so popular, a consulting firm manager suggested a darker and more political side to its use:

It's easy to use and quick, and you don't have to talk and it's free. Also, if it's an email you can say 'I haven't seen it' [and so] you can use this as an excuse. But you can't with WhatsApp – it's confirmed even if you don't answer. So you [subordinate] had the chance to see it and you didn't reply.

WhatsApp therefore had the potential to reinforce corporate relations of power and control. Specifically, it offered heightened levels of surveillance, notably of junior colleagues. This was especially advantageous where group work was being managed as, unlike email messages, on WhatsApp they could not be tactically ignored.

Strategic and political choice

Evidence from our second study has again suggested that work extensification is linked on the one hand to recurrent corporate restructuring pressures and on the other to potential for completing work (anywhere/anytime) via digital technology. Thus, the impression formed is these factors have influenced managerial work deterministically, that is, by shaping the new 'normal working day' and in turn the contemporary managerial 'labour process' (Braverman, 1974). However, despite trends for restructuring and digitalization to facilitate work extensification, we also found organizational scenarios where such causal explanatory trajectories did not hold so fast. This was mainly where a different, more agentic, theoretical perspective appeared appropriate for explaining organizations taking alternative courses of action – that is, the perspective of 'strategic choice' (Bolman and Deal, 2008; Peng, 2003; Sekiguchi, 2005). In this regard, three principal scenarios emerged from the research: (i) where managerial work extensification (through digital or other means) appeared relatively insignificant; (ii) where the spatial locus for work extensification was changing in unexpected ways; and (iii) where policy regulations saw new forms of control deployed to resist or constrain work expansion.

The first scenario was reflected in interviews where middle managers did not necessarily highlight either long working days (inside or outside the workplace) or digitalization as major issues when explaining work-related experiences. A notable example was

the one genuinely public sector organization visited in the US, a large city government on the west coast. When addressing the nature of managerial work, the tone and content of responses differed little between the first and second investigations. Although some issues related to work extensification were discussed (mainly concerning use of cell phones), the examples offered were nothing like the magnitude of those described by managers in other US organizations, whether industrial and commercial corporations, or quasi-public bodies, such as the large US city hospital. Indeed, the discussion of such issues by city government managers could almost be characterized as relaxed or indifferent, with interviewees talking more in abstract than tangible terms about changes to routines and practices.

However, although these responses were qualitatively different to those garnered in other US organizations, we were informed by managers in other sectors that the city government in question possibly had a culture quite different from other US public organizations. Indeed, interviewees in other US organizations had characterized the city concerned variously as ‘geeky’, ‘cerebral’ and ‘counter-cultural’. Put simply, although this organization had seemingly exercised choice in discounting many of the strategic and technological pressures elsewhere discussed, there were possibly wider social and cultural factors also involved in explaining its corporate behaviour.

For the second scenario – where the spatio-temporal locus of control was changing in unexpected ways – an example emerged during recent UK interviews. In an interview at a telecommunications corporation, a manager described how her organization had switched from encouraging staff to ‘conduct more work from home’ to stressing (perhaps ironically, given the sector) that managers should ‘be seen more in the office’. Thus, a strategy encouraging managers to work increasing ‘at a distance’ – placing emphasis on digital control – had reverted to one emphasizing more physical means of regulation. For this manager the change meant returning reluctantly to her former routine of ‘putting in long days in the office’ and doing ‘a lot of unpaid overtime’, for on the company’s part ‘it’s now all about being seen; they just want to keep tabs on us; the trust level has gone through the floor’. She went on to explain the context for the change, which was one encountered readily during the investigation – large-scale restructuring based on downsizing and delayering, and this time under a strategic umbrella of ‘agile management’ (Highsmith, 2004). The restructuring was formally designed to counter ‘increasing competitive intensity’ from ‘established companies and new entrants’:

A lot of it is to do with the new round of cuts – 13000 to go this time over three years, after the 4000 announced a year or so ago. But they’re not saying yet where the axe is going to fall. It’ll no doubt be aimed at back office and middle managers. There’s a lot of cost-cutting going on. We’re also moving the corporate HQ out of [major UK city], and the final salary [pension] scheme has been scrapped. Basically, the share price is down and they’re worried. There was a big scandal in [company overseas operation] not long ago, and there’ve also been issues with outsourcing. But we’re still making money.

Finally, for the third and arguably most significant alternative scenario – moves to inhibit or resist extensification – a notable example emerged from our recent research in Japan. Here, instead of seeking to extend managerial working hours, managers suggested Japanese corporations were now often conscious of meeting requirements to constrain

them. Desk research suggested such policies were not restricted to Japan, with similar evidence emerging for corporations in mainland Europe. Notable were reports referencing the growing problem of email scrutiny outside the workplace, such as *The Guardian* (UK) newspaper (31 December 2016) suggesting ‘From Sunday, French companies will be required to guarantee their employees a “right to disconnect” from technology as the country seeks to tackle the modern-day scourge of compulsive out-of-hours email checking’ and *The Telegraph* (UK) newspaper (20 December 2017) reporting ‘German car-maker Porsche may soon follow in the footsteps of rivals Daimler and Volkswagen by banning out-of-hours emails for its employees’.

In Japan, the issue was raised when a telecommunications company manager suggested his organization was ‘trying to stop people working too hard’, and notably by installing in each department ‘a digital system for monitoring the amount of time spent working by each employee’, including overtime. He explained how middle managers were now unable to go online without it being recorded. Politically the upshot was that, after much public campaigning, Japan’s parliament passed legislation to counter the habitual tendency for firms to expect extensive working from employees. The principal measure – based on a scheme developed by Japan’s main business lobby, *Keidanren*, in collaboration with *Rengo*, the Japanese Trade Union Confederation – stipulated employees should not work more than 45 hours overtime per month on top of the normal working week, with legislation levying penalties on employers for non-compliance. For Japan, this represented a significant volte face from historically championing the corporate ‘salaryman’, or loyal lifetime employee who puts in very long hours, values work above all other commitments and as a result has little time for family life (Dasgupta, 2003).

Indeed, several interviewees described a particular event in this respect, one stimulating considerable debate about work extensification, which obliged then Prime Minister Shinzō Abe to address the culture of employees working extensively to prove their corporate commitment. The case in point concerned a 24-year-old University of Tokyo graduate, Maturi Takahashi, who worked in advertising for the Dentsu Corporation and committed suicide (in December 2015) after regularly clocking over 100 hours overtime per month. In the period before her death, Takahashi was reportedly sleeping, on average, 10 hours a week, while in posts on social media she commented, ‘I am mentally and physically shattered’ and ‘I want to die’.

The cause of the suicide was attributed to ‘mental collapse’ due to *karoshi* (death by overworking). At a trial in September 2017, lawyers claimed Dentsu had habitually encouraged its staff to undertake lengthy unpaid overtime despite several employees recently dying from *karoshi*. Indeed, this case occurred shortly after another high-profile *karoshi* incident – Miwa Sado, a media manager at Tokyo-based broadcaster, NHK, who had taken just two days off work in the month prior to her death from heart failure, in July 2013, aged 31. According to government sources, in the year to March 2016 more than 2000 Japanese employees committed suicide owing to work-related stress, and many others died from heart attacks, strokes and other conditions exacerbated by excessive working.

As a result of these and similar cases, work extensification has recently gained a high profile in Japan. In our research, middle managers often mentioned problems associated

with so-called ‘black corporations’, who operate exploitative employment systems and are characterized by long-hours cultures and intimidatory management practices. Originating in the IT sector, the term is now applied to employment practices in various Japanese industries. Although details vary from firm to firm, the image of the ‘black corporation’ is one where employees are forced to work large amounts of unpaid overtime in an essentially dictatorial corporate environment.

During a recent interview at the telecommunications firm, it was explained to us how in 2012 a ‘Black Corporations Award’ had been founded in Japan, where people voted on ‘the most evil corporation of the year’, and in 2013 a DVD titled *Black Kigyō ni Go-yōjin* (‘Beware of Black Companies’) was released to popular acclaim. In addition, we learned the protagonist of the manga, *ReLIFE*, was portrayed as working for a black corporation, while in another manga series, *Warau Salesman* (‘The Laughing Salesman’), the main character is similarly employed, and notably contemplates committing suicide until reconsidering on meeting the ‘Laughing Salesman’. A middle manager at the telecommunications firm suggested that being named as a black corporation could represent ‘very bad publicity’, notably in a tight labour market. He went on to inform that several ‘eye-catching comments’ from the previous company president had come back to haunt the firm in this respect. Among them was the pronouncement, ‘I only sleep four hours a night and this is all you need’, and another exhortation to employees urged ‘you should work at a level that is just before you are dying’.

The issue of overworking was also raised by managers at a Japanese automotive parts firm. However, there was a back story to the discussion, for we learned the company itself had been named (and shamed) as a ‘black corporation’. As a result, a middle manager interviewed suggested ‘motivation’ among managerial employees was currently ‘a big problem’, not only because of the firm’s reputation as a ‘long hours employer’, but also because – after a major delayering exercise – it was now far harder for managers to gain promotion. In line with new government policy, this manager stressed the corporation was ‘really trying to keep working hours down’, although this was currently difficult ‘because business is buoyant’.

Echoing earlier discussions, however, another interviewee at the firm suggested the company knew only too well how to compensate informally for new restrictions on office-based working – that is, to ‘get them [middle managers] to work willingly from outside’ the organization (Takami, 2018). Bringing our discussion full circle, he explained how ‘every bucho [section manager] has a company mobile phone, so you can easily work on a train, car or bus’. Seemingly not as advanced at our telecommunications firm installing digital technology to control overworking, here control and surveillance took on a more basic character. Indeed, one manager interviewed at the firm implied he knew pretty well whether or not his direct reports were engaged with work beyond the office, for in a telling phrase he noted: ‘One day I woke up at four and sent off an email to my team. Some didn’t reply until eight. But most had replied by six’.

Finally, although in Japan high-profile *karoshi* incidents have prompted digital control mechanisms as a means to constrain work extensification, and whereas in other coordinated economies (such as Germany and France) we have noted corporations (Axa, Porsche, Volkswagen etc.) developing policies for prohibiting out-of-hours checking of emails (or at least guaranteeing employees a ‘right to disconnect’), in other economies

examples of similar strategic and political interventions were thinner on the ground. Despite the considerable extensification of working time among UK and US managers, no overt concerns over issues akin to *karoshi*, or else legislation to reduce overworking, were raised. However, during our most recent round of UK interviews we did wonder if such a trend might be in the offing for liberal-market economies. One specific incident brought this to mind, for it concerned an interviewee whose profile appeared uncannily like that of Matsuri Takahashi, whose death by overworking had caused such an outcry in Japan. Here, the interviewee was a manager in a London-based market research company, also in her mid-20s, and likewise a graduate of a prestigious university – in fact of two elite ‘Russell Group’ UK universities. Near the end of our interview, she reported how factors such as the extensive time she was working in the office, in an intimidatory culture, and under considerable surveillance, were affecting her health and well-being:

Well I often work in the office until around 10, although I’m only paid to work until six. The pressure is always on to work really late. If you leave earlier, say just after six, then one of the senior women managers writes it down . . . A similar thing happens at lunchtime. Although we have an hour for lunch virtually no one takes it, for they don’t want to be seen to be taking lunch. But the other day I needed the hour . . . Well I get back and nothing is said, except one guy I work with has emailed another saying, ‘why is she taking lunch, she’s done nothing all week’. You know, when I’ve been working until 10. Well this [message] was supposed to be [sent] just to his friend, but he’s accidentally sent it to the group and so I get it. I went mad . . . The pressure is awful. They’re watching you all the time. Not long ago I had to take two months off with stress.

In this case, the normality of a ‘normal’ working day seems abnormal, as employees are obliged to work way beyond their contracted hours owing to the implicit demands of a seemingly oppressive and exploitative culture. It begs the question of whether extensification practices can be sustained by such corporations in the longer term, in their own interests as well as those of their staff. In the case of the last middle manager quoted, we learned subsequently that she left the company concerned a few months later.

Discussion

This two-phase longitudinal study has examined how during the digital age middle managers perceive the spatio-temporal boundaries of their work to have changed. Principally it has addressed the issue of how, in addition to putting in more hours (often unpaid overtime) on corporate premises, middle managers have increasingly undertaken activities from historically novel locations and at traditionally atypical working times. In making this argument, we have discussed the utility of a new term for advancing the debate on the nature of managerial work – ‘extensification’.

Importantly, this wide-ranging research has seen a revolution in the meaning of what and where it means to be ‘working’, especially given organizational control over managers’ actions has often changed from direct-physical to more indirect-digital forms, or exceptionally vice versa. We have noted a dominant trajectory for the locus of managerial work control to move from external- to self-regulation, with the latter involving reporting ‘at a distance’ through digital means. As a result, traditional hierarchical arrangements can

be affected, and notably the chain of authority, as new distributed measures potentially challenge established bureaucratic norms of space and time (Beyes and Holt, 2020; Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; de Vaujany and Vaast, 2013; MacDuffie, 2007).

There are, however, exceptions to such arguments, and we have discussed a number in this article. In the literature, Dambrin (2004: 358), for example, notes how corporations can be reluctant to implement working digitally ‘at a distance’ because managers may ‘lose control over their . . . employees’. Elsewhere, when encouraging remote working, corporations can present their actions as ones promoting employee welfare and well-being – through sponsoring independence and sovereignty – but such transformation can also reflect a heightened emphasis on discipline and surveillance by the same employers (Sewell, 2012).

Nevertheless, the dominant image emerging from the literature is that trajectories of managerial working increasingly reflect the influence of remote, distancing and automated technologies of ‘post-panoptic’ (Brivot and Gendron, 2011) or ‘liquid’ (Bauman and Lyon, 2013) surveillance, with this facilitated notably by the increased profusion and portability of digital communications devices. Thus, while in establishing the agenda for this research we refrained from placing primary emphasis on socio-philosophical interpretations of organization and control, we do though accept their importance. We would, however, stress that our role as empirical analysts is different – namely to question and challenge such arguments by considering how organizational transformation is ‘made sense of’ in everyday behaviour and interactions (Wooldridge et al., 2008). Specifically, our analysis is directed at explaining how middle managers in the digital era *experience* the nature of their work to have changed in terms of spatial and temporal boundary realignment. In a practical sense, this concerns how forms of organizational change become manifested in a range of new managerial practices.

Therefore, while appreciating the value of fluid, virtual and network-based metaphors for understanding managerial work, the emphasis in our study is on how control is engrained in a range of tangible practices, processes and outcomes, notably of a digital kind. We argue that a focus on palpable practices is important as they often stem – directly or indirectly – from corporate strategy, and notably as directed by influential consulting prescriptions of the neo-liberal era (Huczynski, 2006). Managerial practices can thus serve to reflect the subtle, intricate, multifarious and even contradictory qualities of business strategy as embedded in relations between space, time and technology in work arrangements (Floyd and Lane, 2000).

We also argue that there is much ambiguity on this issue in the literature – ambiguity that empirical research must attempt to rationalize and resolve. This frequently concerns developments in control technologies and signally how new platforms and systems are made sense of by managers ‘on the ground’. Although, as noted, we acknowledge the work of writers arguing for the increasingly ‘liquid’ character of control under ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Bauman, 1999; Bauman and Lyon, 2013; Zuboff, 2015a, 2015b, 2019), we have also suggested – through emphasizing strategic and political choice – the persistence of bureaucratic and neo-bureaucratic arrangements, as organizations seek to compensate for a lack of visibility in work and authority relations. Thus, to understand middle-management experiences and practices in the digital age we feel there is a need

to comprehend not only spatial, temporal and technological aspects of control, but also wider strategic and political forces affecting managerial and organizational behaviour.

Given these arguments, we contend that to understand contemporary practices of managerial work is also to understand – strategically and politically – the nature, form and above all contextual choice of alternative means and modes of control. The emergence of new management practices brings with it the challenge of detecting, in a subtle fashion, the effects of what is to be observed and what is to be hidden. For a critical analysis of managerial work in the digital age, a key concern is deciphering on the one hand what is being developed in the interests of genuine cooperation and well-being and, on the other, that which is fashioned for reasons of increased manipulation and heightened control for its own sake.

With this in mind, we argue that trends we have discussed regarding the extensification of managerial work – working at a distance, outside of normal temporal boundaries, in ‘third places’, and with digital aids – can mirror moves from traditional fixed and stable forms of power and control to ones reflecting more dispersed qualities, and importantly those that take recourse to relatively unrestrained knowledge bases and surveillance systems (Newlands, 2020; Sewell and Taskin, 2015). Bauman and Lyon (2013) argue that, over time, this may serve to promote organizational tension, as contradictions between progressive demands for the adoption of such technologies and wider social accountability goals for promoting employee well-being begin to emerge. Similarly, Brivot and Gendron (2011) note how technologies for augmenting the control of managerial workforces can see the manager become not only a site of observation and scrutiny, but also, and conversely, the embodiment of self-representation and subjective resistance. This has been identified in situations where deliberate, purposive and strategic ‘games’ of observation, concealment and resistance can begin to emerge spontaneously on the ground (Alcadipani et al., 2019).

This study therefore has addressed the issue that, as the business world becomes ever more competitive, notably through corporate globalization, organizational arrangements offering greater control of managerial workforces can evolve to exploit – strategically and politically – relations between time, space and technology. Much of the context for this research was predicated on the strategic introduction of new forms of organization and their implications for managerial work. These forms, whether introduced in liberal-market (US, UK etc.) or coordinated-market (Japan, Germany etc.) economies, are characterized by corporations seeking to maximize shareholder and stakeholder value amidst intense international competition. As a result, large firms frequently engage in major restructuring exercises while also seeking to refocus their corporate strategies on ‘core’ competences. For middle managers in the early 21st century, the consequences of such restructuring are complex, but signally reflect the extensification of work through digitalization and the realignment of home–work boundaries. In the process, owing to corporations recurrently experimenting with ‘reengineering’, managers have been obliged to undertake a greater number of tasks, deal with larger spans of control, and notably work longer hours, both inside and outside the workplace.

In sum, we have noted how many ambiguities, contradictions and inconsistencies emerge when considering the extensification of managerial work and thus the structuring of the new ‘normal working day’ for middle managers. Whereas, on the one hand,

managers often suggest that digital technologies enable ‘flexible’ working and with it greater personal ‘autonomy’, on the other, flexibility and autonomy can appear illusory concepts, for when managers become more ‘connected’ to work they can also become subject to greater control and surveillance. This argument was extended to discuss how agentically certain ‘alternative’ trajectories can be discerned for explaining how managers could or should be organized, observed and controlled, with some trends appearing antithetical to many previously discussed. We have argued that such scenarios can be explained through more grounded, nuanced and contextualized understanding of the many strategic and political forces that underpin the shaping of managerial work practices. Overall, we argue that whereas corporate restructuring and digital innovation can undoubtedly regulate new forms of management, work and organization, a range of strategic and political choices also potentially impact their definition, sanctioning and application.

Coda: Middle managers, coronavirus and beyond

Before we conclude, we must add a coda to state that this article was submitted to *Human Relations* on 25 February 2020, just weeks before the UK announced a national ‘lock-down’ (on 23 March 2020) in wake of the, then emerging, coronavirus pandemic. Although detailed discussion of trajectories for managerial work arising from the pandemic are beyond the scope of this section, we feel nevertheless three issues relating to issues of extensification and digitalization should be discussed (as at February 2021): (i) how much time managers have been spending on work under the pandemic (in comparison with pre-pandemic working); (ii) what the impact has been of digital innovations on recent managerial and white-collar homeworking; and (iii) whether the recent experience of home-based working for managers is likely to be a temporary or enduring phenomenon going forward. As each issue could form the basis for an article, we can offer only cursory comments here.

For the first, and despite evidence pointing to the significant extensification of management work in recent decades, during the first year of the pandemic data sets suggest white-collar employees who work from home are spending even longer at their desks and facing a larger workload than before the pandemic. Figures for the UK, Austria, Canada and the US, for example, suggest the average time a manager or other white-collar employee spends logged on has increased by around two and a half hours a day (Osborne, 2021). Analysing data from servers on how business networks were being used by employees remotely, research by NordVPN Teams suggest UK managers have increased their working week by almost 25%; similar staff in the Netherlands are on average logging-off at 8 p.m. Data from NordVPN Teams also suggest that in January 2021 white-collar personnel in the UK and US were typically logged on for 11 working hours a day (Meakin, 2021). Additionally, a survey by consultancy firm Wildgoose found 44% of UK employees being expected to do more work during the pandemic than previously (Osborne, 2021). Both studies suggested homeworkers taking shorter lunch breaks, working through sickness, and being ‘always on’, as the division between work and leisure time became increasingly blurred and the lengthening of the work day became the ‘new normal’ in many countries.

For the issue of the impact of digital innovations on managerial and white-collar homeworking, the literature suggests mental health issues can be exacerbated by working extensively from 'remote' locations via digital technologies. Banks and Xu (2020) suggest that even for experienced homeworkers regular use of screen-based technologies can produce high levels of occupational stress in contrast to working/interacting in corporate office spaces. Relatedly, reports have suggested that fostering meaningful and productive work relationships under digital homeworking can be difficult, with remote working also depriving companies of benefits from nurturing positive relations and creativity among staff (McKendrick, 2020). Additional adverse factors include feelings of social isolation through working digitally and physical problems associated with attending numerous and often lengthy meetings online, or the problem of 'Zoom and gloom'. During the pandemic many managers have also found the need to homeschool their children particularly difficult (Sevilla and Smith, 2020). Therefore, even with claimed benefits (less commuting, more family time, fewer business trips etc.) there are suggestions that continuing with homeworking post-pandemic may not appeal to all.

And for the issue of whether increased home-based working is likely to be a temporary or enduring phenomenon post-pandemic, conjecture is rife. As the pandemic has persisted much longer than many authorities expected, reports in the media and elsewhere have discussed organizations deliberating physical infrastructure costs and thus their 'real-estate footprint', notably vis-a-vis office space in city locations. Indeed, rather than – as described earlier – homeworking being a supplement to working in the office, some managers suggest in the near future the reverse might become the case. However, despite potential infrastructure savings, commentators also note organizations could find it difficult psychologically to spatially and temporally 'let go' of managers and 'trust' them to predominantly work remotely. This is despite a break from traditional bureaucratic control possibly triggering wider corporate acceptance of 'flexible' working patterns (Parker et al., 2020).

Conclusions

This research has examined how middle managers perceive the spatio-temporal boundaries of their work to have changed during the digital era. We have analysed the nature of such change not only in terms of the boundaries of traditional employment being stretched by the hours managers complete within the workplace having increased, but also how these have been ruptured by managers conducting work increasingly from locations outside corporate premises. By way of interview-based quasi-longitudinal research, we have analysed what we term the recent *extensification* of managerial work in the early 21st century. In so doing, we have discussed how the MOS literature commonly represents such extensification as the result of largely deterministic pressures. On the one hand we have described change being influenced by corporations accepting the advice of high-profile management consultants on how to restructure their operations for greater efficiency. On the other, we have noted how innovative digital technologies have made managers available for undertaking work 'any time' and in 'any place'. However, although we acknowledge that in many respects the recent boundary changes of managerial work can appear deterministic, and agree with previous researchers that paradox and contradiction can be found when we analyse such change 'on the ground', we feel the situation is more complex still. Specifically, we have sought to explain the prospects for extensification in situations where strategic and

political choices play additional roles in shaping how managerial work is organized and controlled. Drawing on a range of examples, we hypothesize that future research – specifically in the post-coronavirus era – may focus less on the extensification of managerial work and more on how, with the aid of new regulations and forms of digital control, the working time of managers may actually be constrained.

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