Article

Is Managerial Homeworking New? Assessing strategic, technological and political influences before, during and after coronavirus

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Abstract

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is often assumed that working at home represents a fundamental transformation in the way managers work. But is managerial homeworking that new? To answer this question, we draw on labour process theory and three empirical studies to place post-pandemic homeworking in historical sociological perspective. Overall, we find that homeworking is not a novel phenomenon, but has been driven by various logics. Explaining these, we contend initially that recent studies of managers working at home have focused on the mandated temporal *present* of the practice under Covid-19, which has resulted in homeworking being portrayed idiosyncratically. In contrast, and to attain a more comprehensive understanding of what homeworking means for managers, we argue that it is necessary also to understand both the underappreciated *past* of the phenomenon as well as options for its projected *future*. A comparative – past, present, future – inquiry therefore portrays how a range of explicit (e.g. corporate restructuring, digital technology, government legislation) and implicit (e.g. responsible autonomy, cultural resistance, work–life balance) factors have influenced and affected the practice of managers working at home in recent times. Through content analysis, these factors are related to broader forces of strategic change, technological innovation and political regulation in describing the 'contested terrain' of modern managerial work. Amid a context of economic neoliberalism, work extensification and shifting spatio-temporal (home/work) boundaries, the paradoxical nature of homeworking – symptomatic of managers' contemporary 'struggle for a normal working day' – is documented through a series of interview-based narrative investigations (conducted in 2002–2006, 2015–2019 and 2020–2021). Ultimately, the paper makes a case not only for greater historical retrospection, but also for deeper critical reflection, in studies of managerial homeworking, and notably when considering whether the practice will likely be extended, ended or otherwise in the coming decades.

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Introduction

'The working day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of rest without which labour is absolutely incapable of renewing its services.' (Marx, 1887, p. 252)

'Each transformation occurred as a result of the intensifying conflict and contradiction in the firm's operations.' (Edwards, 1979, p. 18)

'Elon Musk, the Tesla chief executive, has asked employees to return to the office or "pretend to work somewhere else", according to a memo sent to staff.' (Rushe, 2022, p. 1)

The coronavirus pandemic of the 2020s impacted globally on public, private and third sector organizations, despite this impact varying across occupations, industries and geographies (Davenport, Farquharson, Rasul, Sibieta, & Stoye, 2020; Francis-Devine, 2020; Reuschke & Felstead, 2020). Indeed, it is common to hear that the consequences of the pandemic – in economic, health and social terms – are unparalleled (Cominetti, Gardiner, & Slaughter, 2020; Gans, 2020; Tooze, 2021). In the face of requirements to bolster employment levels and mitigate economic decline, this has often seen work and employment systems change significantly (Hodder, 2020; Sartin & Farr, 2020).

To conceptualize what, in this respect, the future holds for employees and organizations post-pandemic – and specifically what the 'new normal' of managerial work may be – we place strategies, innovations and policies advanced during the pandemic in historical perspective. Underpinned by concerns of labour process analysis (sensu Marx, 1887; Braverman, 1974), we contrast recent developments in managerial working with employment practices of previous decades – notably those witnessed since the beginning of the millennium – to address the central question of 'is managerial homeworking new'? We argue that only by appreciating a contemporary history of the homeworking phenomenon can we understand whether arrangements advocated for managers to work at home are, on the one hand, as ground-breaking as claimed and, on the other, likely to endure in the post-pandemic era.

In researching this topic, we cover three main areas: first, we advance a position that runs contrary to the emphasis placed in many recent reports on managers working at home (e.g. Brynjolfsson et al., 2020; Gibbs, Mengel, & Siemroth, 2021; Rudnicka et al., 2020); namely, it is historically more commonplace than commentators suggest. While under coronavirus managerial homeworking proved to be a largely obligatory phenomenon – required under state regulation – it has previously been both a strategically experimental (e.g. corporations developing formal homeworking programmes) as well as culturally implicit (e.g. employers expecting staff to work voluntarily at home) practice. Noting these distinctions, we analyse the strategic and experiential past of managerial homeworking. Through such analysis we define the historical 'prior context' (Hassard, 2012; Lubinski, 2018) of events and conditions influencing managerial homeworking before Covid-19. Empirically, we research the experiences and impressions of one category of managerial labour – middle managers (mostly 'managers' hereafter): those who manage at least one subordinate level of managers while also reporting to a higher level.

Second, we assess the form that organizational research took when discussing managers being required to work at home during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. We note how numerous academic and consultancy reports discussed the advantages and disadvantages of white-collar homeworking,

with surveys by consulting firms often informing discussions of whether the practice, for good or ill, is likely to be temporary or enduring (Deloitte, 2020; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020). Given that such reports often highlight the influence of new communications technologies on modern work organization, we explain the impact of digital innovations in shaping the present form and experience of managerial homeworking.

Third, we lay foundations for future research by considering prospects for what the 'new normal' of middle managers' work will resemble in the post-pandemic future. Specifically, we discuss how corporations may wish to redefine how managerial and other white-collar homeworking is organized and controlled. Reflecting on both our empirical inquiries and commentaries in the academic and other media, we discuss whether the practice of homeworking is likely to be extended, ended or hybridized in the years to come.

Finally, in terms of structure, the text initially describes the contextual, theoretical and analytical background to this comparative-historical account of managers working at home. Subsequently, it presents data from three empirical investigations illustrating the changing nature and experience of managerial homeworking since the beginning of the millennium. Finally, considering the findings, it discusses future possibilities for managerial homeworking, including research on the issue.

Context, Theory and Method

Research context

While it was during the recent coronavirus pandemic that managerial homeworking came to the forefront of public attention, for managers of the early 21st century, completing some part of their work at home is not a novel experience. As we describe, one of the major trends in modern managerial work has been undertaking tasks from locations other than formal corporate premises. Moreover, in recent decades the number of individuals mainly conducting their work at home has increased significantly (Felstead, 2012, 2021). Data for the United Kingdom, for example, suggest that immediately pre-pandemic the number had risen to over four million, of which more than a third were company employees (Office for National Statistics, 2020a).

Rarely highlighted in discussions of homeworking, however, is that from the 1980s many corporate programmes also required managers and other white-collar employees to work remotely, and principally from home. Probably the best known is that of IBM, which from a small experiment at its Santa Teresa facility (San Jose, California) in 1979, saw as much as 40% of its global labour force 'telecommuting' by 2009 (Cortada, 2019). The success of such programmes, however, has often been debated (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006; Lautsch, Kossek, & Eaton, 2009); in IBM's case, after decades heralding it had successfully 'sold' the practice globally, the corporation decided in March 2017 that thousands of employees must return to corporate offices (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015; see also Ford, 2024). Moreover, IBM was not alone in making this strategic volte face, for other large corporations have acted similarly, for example, information technology giant Hewlett-Packard, web services provider Yahoo, healthcare insurer Aetna and retailer Best Buy (Alexander, De Smet, & Mysore, 2020; Useem, 2017).

As well as homeworking being a formal corporate practice, firms have also encouraged managers to conduct work from external locations on an implicit and ostensibly voluntary basis. For many years, in addition to tasks being completed during 'office hours', managers have routinely completed them domestically, with the latter being largely unremunerated. When consulted, managers often cite in support of such practices issues also rehearsed by their companies, for example, that working at home facilitates task flexibility, responsible autonomy and work–life balance (Golden & Fromen, 2011; Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2014; Rofcanin & Anand, 2020).

From a 'critical' view of employment, however, such justifications can also be interpreted as reflecting the 'self-exploitation' of labour power (Bloom, 2013), and notably under conditions of 'controlled autonomy' (Heery & Noon, 2008). Despite arguments for the value of responsible autonomy (Abgeller, Bachmann, Dobbins, & Anderson, 2024; also Friedman, 1977) – arguments often resonating with consulting prescriptions (see Gray & Vander Wal, 2014; Rigby, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016) – we note relatedly the advent of increasingly sophisticated forms of electronic surveillance and monitoring to account for employee actions when working at home (e.g. measuring of keyboard strokes and patterns, pressing alert buttons to prove work is in progress, replying to irregularly sent emails to prove screen presence, and so on; see Sewell, 2021). Indeed, faced with recent corporate and consulting proposals for achieving employee empowerment through homeworking (Choudhury, Larson, & Foroughi, 2019; Reisinger, Sephton, & Fetterer, 2020), researchers have suggested not only political dislocation between the 'rhetoric and reality' (Huq, 2010), but also how 'paradox' and 'contradiction' can be detected when technological innovations are considered (Cañibano, 2019; de Vaujany, Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, Munro, Nama, & Holt, 2021; Mazmanian, 2013; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013).

Theoretical perspective

Theoretically, the approach adopted sees work practices and relationships between organizational actors (e.g. managers, corporations, the state) assessed in terms of labour process analysis (sensu Marx, 1887; Braverman, 1974). The main concerns of labour process analysis are how managers work, who controls their work, and what skills they use and why (Knights & Willmott, 1990; Thompson & Laaser, 2021). For this research, labour process concepts primarily inform analysis of relations between corporate restructuring, technological innovation and employee control. The experience of managerial work is placed in a 'critical management' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2011) perspective to consider antipathy and paradox in workplace relations (Thompson & Smith, 2009), primarily in relation to corporate strategies and accumulation policies (Thompson, 2010).

The study, however, also seeks to account for the epistemologically 'subjective' side of labour process analysis. It provides insights through exploring the 'missing subject' (O'Doherty & Willmott, 2001) of research into, for example, identity (Fachin & Langley, 2024), paradox (Mazmanian, 2013; Mazmanian et al., 2013) and resistance (Alcadipani, Hassard, & Islam, 2018) in managerial work. We note how the latter has been discussed in several illuminating studies of teleworking, describing, for example, trade-offs between home-based work and intensified work (Bathini & Kandathil, 2019; Paton, 2023), contradictions of flexibility in homeworking practice (Cañibano & Avgoustaki, 2022), and how teleworkers devise tacit strategies to manage work boundaries (Gálvez, Tirado, & Alcarez, 2020; Mustafa & Gold, 2013).

In advancing labour process analysis, the research is influenced principally by Marx's (1887) work on value theory in *Capital*. It takes recourse specifically to Marx's analysis of surplus value extraction in relation to labour power and its extension by Braverman (1974) in his landmark critique, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. In Braverman's work, instead of habitually accepting the structural economic relations of *Capital*, scholars were encouraged to consider changes in the 'productive processes' and 'occupational structure' of the working population (Braverman, 1974, p. 9). Initially focusing on industrial deskilling, over the decades labour process analysis has broadened to address, for example, the impact of new technology (Sewell, 2019), the work of managers (McCann, Morris, & Hassard, 2008) and the role of the modern state (Harley, 2019), all factors of concern to the current investigation.

However, while acknowledging the increasing scope and changing nature of labour process analysis (C. Smith, 2015), we also note one enduring characteristic – historical accounts of

occupational histories (McIvor, 2008). From the early 1980s, researchers have regularly explained historical developments in studies of new technology (Briken, Chillas, Krzywdzinski, & Marks, 2017; Knights & Willmott, 1988), managerial labour (Gospel & Littler, 1983; Hassard, McCann, & Morris, 2009) and corporate control (Jacoby, 2005; Littler, 1982). Frequently such analyses have appeared as periodized accounts of employment relations in firms, sectors and nations (Wright, 2011).

Similarly, this study offers a critical-historical analysis of a labour process issue – managerial homeworking. The aim is to extend labour process analysis of the shaping of managerial work (Harley, 2019; Hassard & Morris, 2021; McCann et al., 2008) for this particular 'contested terrain' (Edwards, 1979) of employment. At its core is an issue central to Marx's *Capital* – understanding worker, employer and political relations in documenting the 'struggle for a normal working day' (Marx, 1887, pp. 252–286). From Marx, through Braverman, to 'post-Bravermanian' analysis (Aglietta, 1976; K. Smith, 2017; West, 1983), this cornerstone of labour process analysis helps us define the strategic, technological and political shaping of employment issues such as homeworking (Tuckman, 2005).

We would, however, make a conceptual qualification in relation to our extension of labour process analysis. While Marx's work on valorization was framed by the progressive dynamics of work-time reduction under 19th-century Factory Acts (Moos, 2021), for our study of 21st-century managerial work, something of a conceptual volte face can be identified on the part of capital. That is, employers, under conditions of neoliberal economic ideology (Lazzarato, 2009; Peck, 2010) and recent cultural means of accumulation (Casey, 1999), are realizing novel possibilities for extending labour time (Hassard & Morris, 2021). We feel that understanding this trend in managerial work is crucial for advancing labour process theory, given that developments in digital technology and surveillance control, for example, have facilitated work often being undertaken on a voluntary and unpaid basis (Kaduk, Genadek, Kelly, & Moen, 2019). Specifically, this has seen managerial work completed from spatio-temporal domains beyond the physical parameters of company premises. Examples of such domains include 'third' workspaces (e.g. coffeeshops, commuter trains, hotel lobbies; Choudhury, 2020; Jeffres, Bracken, Jian, & Casey, 2009; Okhuysen et al., 2013) and notably the domestic home (Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020; Cappelli, 2021; Platts, Breckon, & Marshall, 2022).

Interpretive research and data analysis

Given these contextual and theoretical issues, the research assesses whether managerial homeworking can be considered a 'new' phenomenon. To this end, the research assesses factors and forces influencing managers to complete work at home in recent decades. The paper draws not only on the literature on managerial employment, but also on data from empirical (mainly semi-structured interview-based) inquiries into managers undertaking work at home since the beginning of the millennium, with specific attention given to managers' experience of work during the Covid-19 pandemic. Taken together, this data provides historical, contextual and experiential insights into how managers have been motivated, obliged or required to conduct work at home. Focally, such data provide insights into numerous ways corporations have attempted to deal with the indeterminacy of managerial labour (C. Smith, 2006) – notably through advancing neoliberal strategies for enhancing capital accumulation and maintaining control. This research chronicles corporate policies and practices influencing changes to managerial working in recent times: specifically, it explains how managers have made sense of such changes.

To understand such experiences, empirical investigations have adopted an interpretivist approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Documenting participants' lived experiences has

allowed us to explore the meanings managers attach to important events in work. Developing an iterative, reflexive method (Braun & Clarke, 2022), we consider issues emerging over time – identifying themes stemming from practice and comparing them to evidence in the literature (Watson, 2011).

Empirically, findings reflect three narrative accounts. In each, the investigative process saw textual analysis of interview transcripts extract various explanatory factors (see Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). The method involved content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), issue/theme identification (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and conceptual clustering (Guest & McLellan, 2003). Initially, this involved analysing interview data to identify issues recurrently signalled as relevant to explaining core aspects of the topic. This saw a range of tangible (e.g. digitalization, regulation, restructuring) and intangible (e.g. habituation, resistance, sovereignty) issues form conceptual building blocks for constructing narrative accounts. The analysis explained the importance of these factors through theme-based interpretations of how, for example, new corporate policies can engender greater work intensity, or a technological innovation can influence the realigning of spatio-temporal (work/home) boundaries.

Ultimately, empirical narratives were themselves content analysed to identify broader forces influencing managerial homeworking. Three dominant conceptual clusters emerged – initially for 'strategic change' and 'technological innovation', and subsequently for 'political regulation'. Interpretive analysis saw these themes combine to explain how such forces variously shaped managerial homeworking. The accounts acknowledged the potential for agency in defining organizational arrangements, for example, through executive policymaking, employee resistance and political fiat. The following empirical sections present these accounts, each including details of firms and sectors, participants and roles, and the types of research instruments used.

Experiencing Managerial Homeworking: Research Investigations

The past – managers working at home before Covid-19

2002–2006: The emergence of voluntary managerial homeworking. In the first inquiry our interest in managers working at home emerged from data accrued during a broad investigation into the nature of managerial work. The inquiry investigated managerial work during a period of significant corporate change and mainly through large-scale strategic structural reform. To appreciate such transformation, we studied managers working in three advanced economies: the UK, the United States and Japan. The research described a period when managers were learning to make sense of how a range of novel socio-technical factors – including innovations in digital communication systems and information access devices – were shaping the nature of their work. Prominent among these technologies were ones making it easier for work to be completed from the domestic home and other 'remote' locations.

This research saw face-to-face qualitative interviews conducted in a cross-section of commercial, service and administrative organizations. The investigation comprised 259 semi-structured interviews, in 26 organizations, across a range of industrial sectors – public/private; manufacturing/services; and traditional/modern. Industries included advertising, automotive, banking, consulting, electronics, engineering, food and drink, healthcare, insurance, local government, steel and utilities. The research instrument developed for interviewing managers incorporated questions on employment history; managerial tasks and responsibilities; performance management and reward systems; job security and career trajectories; organization structures and processes; corporate strategy and culture; and work–life balance. During this research, managers were generally interviewed by two researchers, with most sessions being voice-recorded (in a few cases,

however, interviewees declined to be voice-recorded and here the researchers made handwritten notes). Interviews typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. With a few exceptions (where participants requested meeting outside their workplace) interviews were held in private enclosed spaces, often a meeting room on corporate premises. In terms of participation, the ratio of male to female managers in the UK and US samples was approximately 2:1. In Japan at this time, there were relatively few women in the managerial cadre and hence virtually none was made available to interview.

This inquiry explained the nature of managerial work at a time when literature suggested corporations were undergoing considerable structural change, especially in the wake of popular 'business process reengineering' prescriptions (Hammer & Champy, 1993). It was during this inquiry that the issue of managers completing work at home – predominantly on a voluntary basis and in addition to working on corporate premises – emerged as a concern for many interviewees. This theme was highlighted in participants' reports that work sufficient to meeting corporate demands could no longer be completed during contracted office hours of the 'normal' day.

Initial findings suggested most corporations visited (in the UK, the US and Japan) had recently undergone significant restructuring, with firms commonly engaging in delayering, downsizing or outsourcing, and frequently all three. Consequently, managers often reported greater job intensification, as the amount of work had increased significantly during the working day. In addition, interviewees reported work stress, with out-of-hours working seen as a contributory factor.

However, completing additional work at home was not always perceived as a coercive phenomenon. Managers often accounted for this as being of their 'own choosing', simply a response to the greater quantity of work for completion in the modern business environment. Some managers suggested they welcomed the increased 'flexibility' of being able to 'choose' when and where to work, notably as this enabled better 'fit' with demands of non-work life.

Despite such assurances, expression of seemingly incongruous or inconsistent views on the nature of remote working materialized at many points in the inquiry. This was particularly so when a subject not listed for discussion – the effects of recent digital innovations – was broached when interviewing an experienced human resources manager for a US bank in April 2004. In an impromptu comment, he asked if we knew of a device he and his fellow managers had recently been obliged to use, the BlackBerry. The manager explained that it was a communications tool, but with more far-reaching effects than any he had previously encountered (like bleepers or pagers). The difference was that while the BlackBerry could be carried on the person, it had an integrated facility for email, and thus allowed work to be completed at a distance. During this interview, the informant suggested that managerial work was changing rapidly alongside the uptake of such devices.

However, the discussion suggested there were also many ambiguities and contradictions associated with managers using these new digital technologies for work. The implication was that while the 'connectivity' the BlackBerry offered could be a 'good thing' and 'fun', it was also necessary to 'be free from it' in leisure and family time. In a telling comment this manager identified a key issue reflecting how such devices were influencing the nature of work – 'you just can't escape being contacted'.

As the inquiry progressed, managers increasingly discussed the impact of digital technologies. Often discussions concerned technological surveillance in relation to completing tasks at home. In each country (the UK, the US and Japan), managers suggested that digital devices were extending the spatial context of work, with the processing of more work habitually involving communications via email. The latter technology had exploded as a communications tool in corporations from c.1996–1997, while its use from domestic locations was made possible initially by personal computers (PCs) and later by small and increasingly affordable mobile devices (see Boswell &

Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Cox, Goette, & Young, 2005; Perlow, 2012). In our interviews in Japan, a culture already defined by extensive working, managers suggested that access to email at home had made 'a long (working) day even longer', while in the UK and US managers talked of spatial and temporal changes to working 'being triggered by digital technology', with this affecting 'where, when and for how long' it was possible to work.

Moreover, digital communications systems appeared increasingly to be 'colonising' (Deetz, 1992) managerial work, not only through extending working hours inside and outside corporate premises, but also in providing new means of monitoring performance. Digital technology was providing a greater facility for home-based working and a means for 'being seen' to be working thus, for instance, by sending emails to colleagues early in the morning, late in the evening or at weekends. Although historically managers had often caught up with 'paperwork' domestically, the suggestion now was that the greater connectedness offered by digitalization had amplified not only explicit-functional but also implicit-political reasons for completing work at home.

Indeed, as the inquiry progressed, we received increasing reports of managers 'normal working day' being subject to significant change and notably through breaches to normative boundaries of home and work. Although some managers appeared sanguine about the changing nature of work – suggesting digital technologies could shift home–work boundaries to a manager's 'advantage' – others expressed concerns about work encroaching progressively into domestic spheres. At a large US hospital, a manager suggested that she now regularly worked a 'ten-and-a-half-hour day' on site but would then 'go home and do my emails'. She also suggested her work had been 'revolutionized' in the process – not only by the 'flexibility' offered by devices such as the BlackBerry, but also through the ability to access work at home generally, which could be 'highly beneficial for managers with families'.

At a US utilities company, however, many managers conveyed a very different view. Rather than digital devices enhancing 'flexibility' and 'autonomy', informants suggested that access to them was instead facilitating 'spend(ing) more and more time doing work'. At this former public organization, completing additional work at home appeared to be a sensitive issue. This reason became clear when managers explained they faced increased work intensification due to a merger between the local gas and electric utilities. Based on 'business process' restructuring, the creation of the new organization had seen middle management positions amalgamated and jobs lost.

As the inquiry neared its end, we received increasing accounts of managers voluntarily undertaking additional work at home via digital means. The suggestion was that working more extensively – facilitated by new digital technologies – was proving a source of increasing tension, and especially for managers with young families. Many interviewees talked of trying to regulate the progressively 'blurred' boundaries of work and home, as time spent undertaking tasks at home had increased alongside greater 'connectivity'.

2015–2019: Voluntary homeworking as a hegemonic phenomenon. The second inquiry was a follow-up – motivated again to understand changes in managerial work experience, but notably in the wake of the global financial crisis (2008–2009). While during the first inquiry, evidence suggested managers working at home represented an exceptional circumstance – a way of coping with 'intensified' workloads – when interviewing 10–15 years later, it appeared that spatial and temporal realignments linked to the practice were largely taken for granted by corporations and managers alike. Nonetheless, despite the seeming cultural habituation of the practice, informants were still often reflective, critical or cynical when asked to make sense of homeworking as part of their work routines.

For data collection, the second study was intended to replicate, as far as possible, the first – not only in sectors, industries and organizations, but also the work and employment issues researched.

Many organizations visited had been visited in the first study. We also attempted to contact many of the same managers interviewed in the initial investigation. While several were still working for the same organization (often in the same or a similar role) others had changed employer or retired. Given this attrition, additional managers were recruited. In terms of participation, this investigation saw 148 managers interviewed in 30 companies (primarily UK-based, but also in the US and Japan). Regarding gender, more than a decade on, the balance of male to female interviewees was more equitable, with notably far more women managers available for interview in Japan.

Regarding emerging trends, during the second inquiry we found continuity in managerial work experience but also evidence of significant change. On the one hand, continuity was reflected in the large volume of work managers reported in a 'normal working day', a situation often augmented by downsizing, delayering and outsourcing still being widespread. On the other, change was apparent in newer digital technologies entering the work arena as well as fresh proposals for the organization and control of managerial labour. Managers frequently linked such phenomena to the progressive blurring of spatio-temporal boundaries of work and home as the working day became increasingly 'fuzzy'.

Like our 2002–2006 inquiry, managers recurrently described responding to a prodigious volume of work generated through email. By now, however, they were often offering personal, informal solutions of how to stem the flow. In a variation of Parkinson's Law (Parkinson, 1958), the implication was that 'real' work hours were extensive because digital devices made more of the 24-hour day 'available' for work. Importantly, the practice of completing tasks domestically, or from 'third' places, mirrored a kindred authority change – managers' actions being monitored by algorithmic control rather than traditional bureaucracy, this effecting new forms of corporate control (Mateescu & Nguyen, 2019; Newlands, 2021; Sewell & Taskin, 2015).

What a decade or so earlier had appeared a relatively novel aspect of the managerial labour process – managers working 'virtually' from remote locations – now appeared mostly tacit for employees and employers alike, this representing a major change in workplace ideology (Spicer & Böhm, 2007). Indeed, for managerial labour the extension of work into domains such as the home and 'third' places now seemed a very 'normal' aspect of the 'working day'. Reflecting similar views to counterparts in Japan and the US, an insurance manager in the UK, for example, described how her home-life now embraced 'spending much of the weekend getting rid of my rubbish, my emails'. A colleague of hers likewise reported doing 'lots of emails at home after work' for 'I don't like to have them building up'. Equally, a manager at a UK telecommunications company suggested her domestic life now included 'commonly sending off emails at 8 (p.m.) during the week and at 9 (p.m.) on Sundays', confiding 'I never actually turn [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 explaining the increasing tendency for managers to complete work remotely, a UK financial services manager conjectured that he had become part of an 'ubiquitous acceptance culture' – one reflecting his corporation's expectation that smartphones 'would always be turned on . . . so that direct reports as well as higher-ups can always make contact with you, anytime, anywhere'. Similarly, a manager at a UK automotive plant acknowledged the habitual assumption of corporations that managers would 'always be available'. He went on to explain that while on vacation '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 outside the firm for nothing.' A managerial colleague at the same plant admitted he now completed work at home 'during periods which had previously been family time', suggesting there was 'no alternative' given the 'overwhelming volume of work'. This manager reinforced the theme that, politically, he often liked to send work-related emails 'either very early or very late in the day', to demonstrate to his boss that he was 'showing commitment' [laughs].

The present – managers working at home during Covid-19

The third empirical inquiry commenced in June 2020, a time when managers globally had been instructed to work at home full-time, after corporate offices globally had gone into 'lockdown'. Given the context, we wished to understand not only the changing nature of managerial work under Covid-19 (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020), but also what managers perceived as the prospects for working at home going forward. These concerns seemed crucial to understanding the future of managerial labour, given that commentators suggested the pandemic had the potential to reconfigure work and employment radically, and especially for middle managerial and white-collar labour processes (Kramer & Kramer, 2020; Parker, Knight, & Keller, 2020; Reuschke & Felstead, 2020).

2020–2021: Managerial homeworking as a mandated phenomenon. Given difficulties in conducting research during the pandemic, the third inquiry (June 2020–February 2021) was conducted exclusively in the UK. As previously, managers were interviewed about the changing nature of their work. However, given UK state regulations in March 2020 for managers to work solely at home, this research focussed exclusively on the latter issue.

In comparative terms, whereas the second inquiry suggested that managers undertaking work at home had become a largely taken-for-granted and hegemonic phenomenon, during the third inquiry it once again took on an exceptional quality. This reflected a situation where urgent medical, economic and political necessities saw managerial and other white-collar homeworking suddenly required universally. The widely held assumption, however, was that 'normal' working for managers – predominantly in corporate offices – would resume when the pandemic subsided.

For data collection, the study saw 10 UK organizations previously involved in the research contacted in June–July 2020 to assist in a small-scale survey on managers working under 'lockdown'. The two-page survey was distributed by email and allowed participants to respond in narrative form. For each company, we requested that 10 managers complete the survey, whose questions concerned the experience of homeworking during lockdown; advantages and disadvantages of homeworking arrangements; and the future of managerial work post-pandemic. A final question asked if the manager completing the survey would participate in a subsequent online Zoom or Teams-based interview to discuss issues and findings.

Eight of the 10 companies responded – a drinks conglomerate, an insurance firm, a telecommunications corporation, a management consultancy, a technology consultancy, a utilities company, and two public sector bodies. From these, 42 managers completed the survey, with 29 making themselves available for interview. Given that some respondents interviewed also indicated they could be consulted on more than one occasion, a second interview phase was planned, with kindred forms of information collected approximately six months after the initial inquiry, during November 2020–February 2021. This saw an additional 21 interviews conducted, taking the total number to 50.

The opportunity to interview participants several months later allowed us to document changes of attitude regarding homeworking during lockdown. In terms of gender balance, the percentage of male to female interviewees was approximately 50:50. This inquiry saw our previous descriptions of managerial homeworking – as a formal corporate programme or an informal voluntary undertaking – joined by a third: a practice mandated under state legislation. In this way, the research expanded its conceptual boundaries from strategic and technological themes to include ones relating to national politics and the role of the state.

June–July 2020: Empirically, a major theme emerging from the start of the inquiry was of managers speculating on how long they were likely to be working at home full-time. At the time, many managers suggested they were not expecting to return to corporate offices until 'end-2020', six

months hence, although some speculated rhetorically whether they would 'ever return'. However, as lockdown endured, informants began to revise their opinions on potential future work arrangements, with many proposing that companies may adopt a form of co-location system for managers in the longer term. This could see a 'hybrid' arrangement structure work around the work week, with several managers suggesting that a pattern of two days at home and three in the office might offer a workable compromise.

Nevertheless, opinions differed depending on age, gender, location and sector. An older manager at the insurance company, for example, claimed that talk of a 'new normal' – where homeworking became an enduring form of employment – was 'just hyperbole'. Instead, he confidently expected to return to office-based working 'full-time' post-pandemic. Further, he opined that under homeworking he had 'lost the feel for the business', which he largely obtained from 'walking about' the office floor.

Conversely, many younger managers suggested that work experience under the pandemic – with more autonomy and flexible working – would likely see homeworking, a practice already 'set to amber' by some corporations, increasingly given the 'green light', resulting in a major socio-temporal realignment of the 'normal working day'. Meanwhile a mid-career manager at the management consultancy indicated that her corporation was already considering a variation on the 'hybrid' working theme; with managers operating mainly at home, occasionally visiting corporate head offices, or using a local 'flex space' or 'hub and club' arrangement. These latter forms would see colleagues in geographical proximity, and with linked roles and responsibilities, hire such spaces 'as and when necessary'. One of the advantages perceived for adopting such a system was 'reduced commuting', and crucially reduced undertaking of 'long treks to London'. Indeed, with this in prospect, many managers in the management consultancy firm thought a return to 'normal' office-based working, post-pandemic, unlikely.

In terms of their personal feelings, many managers suggested that working at home during lockdown had been 'liberating', especially through improving 'work–life balance'. Managers in their 30s and 40s often expressed this, notably those with young families. Improvements in work–life balance were often attributed to spending more time with family due to time saved commuting or undertaking travel on work projects. Managers often described vividly what it meant to have more time to devote to family life, personal fitness, or appreciating nature.

In the technology consultancy, an accepted pattern had been for consultants to spend much of the week working at distant locations, UK and overseas. Given this, one interviewee suggested that the changes to work brought about by lockdown had been 'seismic'. With three children under 10 years, his last assignment was at an automotive plant in Sweden. This meant, weekly, leaving home at Sunday lunchtime, driving 150 miles to London Heathrow to catch a flight, working four days abroad, and then undertaking the reverse journey on Thursday. It was no surprise that this informant described the move to homeworking as 'redemptive'.

Meanwhile, we interviewed a telecommunications manager who regularly travelled to meetings at corporate headquarters in London. She explained how this meant a 'six a.m. start and 10 p.m. finish' to her day. Occasionally, it could also involve staying overnight. Describing how such meetings often appeared of 'specious value' – called because 'a particular London-based executive was involved' – she outlined the specific, negative, travel-related consequences for women managers in the firm who resided in the provinces. Indeed, she suggested that some female colleagues had changed employer because of the onerous travel involved, while others had forgone promotion when this involved geographical relocation. Several women managers interviewed proposed that, post-pandemic, 'normal' working should facilitate greater spatio-temporal elasticity, for positive productivity rates under homeworking (Deole, Deter, & Huang, 2023) could oblige corporations to justify their 'presenteeist' human resources policies.

Although at the time of writing (January 2024) prospects for post-pandemic work remain in flux, at the time of our research many large corporations were considering realigning their white-collar employment arrangements, notably in spatial and temporal terms. One potential change signalled was to recruit managers who preferred to work predominantly from 'remote' locations, a policy for which the insurance company in our sample had been an early adopter. Many informants welcomed such possibilities, with a woman manager at the technology consultancy applauding the possibility of 'no longer being subject to the machismo of working at head office'. Similarly, a woman manager at the management consultancy explained the psychological status shift she was experiencing during lockdown, whereby 'the disadvantage I previously felt as a regional employee, remote from my London leadership team, is no longer relevant'. In her dealings with the corporate centre, she sensed a new feeling of hierarchical realignment during lockdown, for politically 'we are now all equal on screen'.

November 2020–February 2021: Nevertheless, after experiencing several months of lockdown, some managers suggested that the much vaunted 'autonomy' and 'flexibility' associated with working at home could be accompanied by negative effects. Notable were potential or actual job losses. A manager at the management consultancy expressed the 'extreme pressure' she was under to 'persuade my UK subordinates to reduce their (contracted) work hours'. She also speculated that, post-pandemic, many UK consulting firms would likely source staff increasingly from abroad, 'from Manila or India or wherever'.

Meanwhile, at the technology consultancy, outsourcing policies had been in place for a while, with managers describing how the firm had a 'KPI of shifting jobs to India'. During lockdown, however, this policy had now been extended to 'off-shoring work to Poland', with one manager describing how 20 jobs in his former team of 90 UK-based consultants had been lost. As the study progressed, and given that the pandemic was persisting far longer than many had expected, many managers reported that their firms were also looking at non-labour cost cutting options, particularly in operating overheads. Notably, capital costs of running sizeable office buildings in city locations were under scrutiny, with managers referring to this as firms seeking to 'reduce their real estate footprint'.

As indicated, after months of mandated homeworking, the initial novelty of the practice was for many managers 'wearing off'. Indeed, some managers even reported 'frustration creeping in'. One of the main frustrations cited was 'social isolation', with a manager from the management consultancy commenting 'I do miss face-to-face contact with colleagues – it's much harder to connect on new relationships virtually.' An insurance company manager, who had recently moved to Wales from a division in southern England, described her problems of being single and homeworking in a city where she knew few people. Meanwhile a middle manager at the drinks conglomerate described being part of online teams including colleagues she had 'not physically met'. Relatedly, managers suggested the fostering of productive co-worker relationships could be more difficult (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020). Further challenges to the new realities of homeworking were imposed by caring responsibilities, and notably by government regulations mandating home-schooling. Managers with older children often admitted 'struggling to cope' with home-schooling regimes. Indeed, some reported work–life balance under lockdown as 'fraught', especially in families with 'two adults working', which commonly involved 'juggling childcare responsibilities'.

While this situation affected both genders, evidence suggested that it had greater impact on women managers and could be an enduring problem in performance terms. A female public sector manager (a single parent, whose former partner lived abroad) experienced her work–life situation as 'horrendous', explaining in our initial interview that 'it was either my kids or the job and I chose my job'. However, in the months between our first and second discussions she had contracted Covid-19, which prompted a decision to reduce her work week to three days. This was despite

awareness of the negative impact the decision might have on her career prospects. Successful, ambitious and hardworking, by the time of our second interview (early 2021) she suggested her view of working at home had changed completely: 'it's not unusual for me to start at 7 (a.m) and they are still on at me at 7 at night, I get calls at all hours, emails at 9 or 10 (p.m.). But I've had enough of these hours. I have two boys aged 8 and 9, and they need some attention.'

Indeed, during the second round of interviews the impression was of some managers finding working at home challenging. In terms of work–life balance, many managers found differences between work and non-work life increasingly unclear. Many highlighted that participating recurrently in lengthy online meetings (via Zoom, Teams etc.) was especially demanding – the latter reflecting a condition one utilities manager described as 'Zoom and gloom'. A manager at the drinks conglomerate related similarly the 'strain' he was under from participating in 'all day, back-to-back, Zoom meetings', while at the telecommunications corporation it was suggested that the day of our online interview was 'normal' because it involved 'nine half-hour virtual meetings'.

In terms of changing work experience, many managers now reported concentration, stress, or even 'mental health' problems associated with prolonged screen-based work (Banks & Xu, 2020; Eurofound and the International Labour Office [ILO], 2017; Office for National Statistics, 2014). Some experienced difficulties in 'switching off' from work while at home, given they were often working longer hours, or in a more fragmented way, than pre-pandemic (Meakin, 2021; Osborne, 2021). Others reported having to move incessantly between states of deep concentration (e.g. when completing reports, preparing statements, or concluding accounts) to ones of distraction (e.g. due to recurrent emails, WhatsApp messages, and texts; Parry, 2021). Reflecting an emerging folklore of work, some managers predicably raised difficulties over their 'office desk' being replaced by the proverbial 'kitchen table'. In one instance, however, this took on a more earnest tone, for the new 'office' for a managerial couple living in a small house, and with an elderly parent, was not the kitchen but their bedroom.

Managers also suggested that virtual working at home could be subject to increased surveillance and control pressures. A recurring theme was of middle managers being required to 'always appear online', especially to senior managers and executives. This could extend to playing 'psychological games' on virtual systems, such as giving the appearance of being 'continuously logged-on' and 'always active', not only during contracted hours but also beyond the normal working day. A young manager at the management consultancy explained the incessant pressure she was under to 'bill the hours' to clients, and to demonstrate this through 'constant evidence of being online'. She also admitted it took her quite a while to 'learn how to cheat' in this regard.

Overall, this inquiry suggested that the nature and experience of managerial work was changing in momentous ways. A regular issue raised was that while, pre-pandemic, homeworking was largely a supplement to office-based work, post-pandemic the reverse might be so, albeit with qualifications. This raised the issue of whether firms relinquishing direct bureaucratic control of employees during lockdown would continue with greater corporate acceptance of flexibility in working patterns going forward. A problem here was managers suggesting it might be hard psychologically for companies to 'let go' of employees in spatial and temporal terms. This potentially represented an exercise in corporations learning to 'trust' managers to work remotely, which could be problematic (Breuer, Hüffmeier, Hibben, & Hertel, 2020; Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Felstead, Jewson, Phizacklea, & Walters, 2002).

The future – whither managerial homeworking?

We have described how the coronavirus pandemic placed homeworking at the centre of academic and media discussions of white-collar work and employment relations. During this period,

attention has focused on what the future for managerial work holds in this regard, or to what extent the managerial labour process will be reshaped under digital innovation and organizational restructuring. For organizational research, the pandemic will likely prove a pivotal moment in our understanding of work and employment, and notably in terms of defining the future form and content of a manager's 'normal working day'. At the heart of such considerations will be discussion of the various options that present themselves for managers to undertake work at home in the decades to come.

Possibilities for greater homeworking. While in 2019 relatively few UK employees conducted contractually their main work at home (Office for National Statistics, 2020a, 2020b), under Covid-19 that figure increased exponentially, as the 'virtual' home-office became the mandated norm. Discussions of work practices during the pandemic suggested that obliging managers and other white-collar employees to work at home served to keep employment levels buoyant (Irish Times, 2020; McKinsey & Co., 2022). Similarly, commentators asserted that managers working at home displayed considerable commitment, resilience and creativity in meeting challenges imposed by the pandemic (Economist, 2021). A much-cited survey by Deloitte (2020) argued that levels of corporate performance during Covid-19 were far better than predicted, citing data from (US) Chief Financial Officers that around 75% of corporations functioned at about four-fifths capacity.

Turning to managers themselves, a PeopleSource (2020) survey suggested that around 80% felt they would like the option of working at home for at least two days going forward, a trend roughly documented in other polls and surveys (World Economic Forum, 2021, McKinsey & Company, 2022). There have also been arguments suggesting that working at home offers an avenue for greater equality, especially for women managers with children, for whom flexible working may allow better career progression (although we recognize divergent views here; Chung, Seo, Forbes, & Birkett, 2021; Fawcett Society, 2020; Warren & Lyonette, 2021; Women's Budget Group, 2020; Working Families, 2020). Other factors reported in a positive light in academic and consulting reports on homeworking include an increased sense of responsible autonomy, greater task flexibility, and perceptions of better work–life balance for managers when working at home (Choudhury, 2020). Drawing upon such arguments, business academics and management consultants have proposed development programmes illustrating how firms can profit from increased managerial homeworking (Bernstein, Blunden, Brodsky, Sohn, & Waber, 2020; Larson, Vroman, & Makarius, 2020).

In addition, reflecting a potential shift in post-pandemic employment practices, the media has commented extensively on the actions of corporations switching grades of employee to working remotely or virtually on a permanent basis (Gifford, 2022). Prominent have been reports on large US corporations (e.g. 3M, Airbnb, Facebook, SAP) promoting homeworking policies, this sending a signal that such arrangements may endure for certain employees. In the UK, in 2021 asset management corporation Schroders was possibly the first to make such an announcement, while consumer goods firm Unilever and telecommunications giant BT subsequently declared staff could work remotely post-pandemic, albeit the latter has oscillated on this issue recently. During this research, some participating companies announced similar policies for increased 'flexible working', with the UK insurance company being the first.

Pitfalls with increased homeworking. There are also, however, many reasons to be cautious when advocating arrangements for anything approaching full-time managerial homeworking post-pandemic. Although television and other media images during the pandemic highlighted the socio-technical advantages of working in home-based offices (e.g. picturing employees transitioning effortlessly from home-schooling to virtual corporate meetings) the literature suggests that there

are significant disadvantages too (Al-Habaibeh, Watkins, Waried, & Javareshk, 2021; Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020; Stringer, Dundon, & Mustchin, 2020). The PeopleSource (2020) survey, for example, suggested just one in 10 respondents wished to work at home full-time post-pandemic, a trend reflected in other polls. Further, a survey by the Office for National Statistics (2021) noted that managerial and white-collar employees working at home were less likely to receive promotion while, as discussed, managers have frequently undertaken significant amounts of unpaid overtime since the millennium, as described in our empirical accounts. We also note reports of how many large corporations (e.g. Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, Tesla, Toyoto) have signalled that they expect the vast majority of their managerial staff to return to corporate offices in the post-pandemic era (Cappelli, 2021; Sarkis, 2021), sometimes issuing strict edicts to this effect, as expressed, for example, in our epigraph quote from Elon Musk.

In addition, our own research has identified a range of problems reported by managers experiencing working at home permanently during the pandemic, with this analysis suggesting the longer-term prospects for the practice may have to be tempered. Among the adverse factors identified have been increased and intensified workloads, feelings of isolation and stress, and physical and psychological problems associated with extensive virtual working (Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Wiesenfeld, 2012; Golden & Veiga, 2005; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 2001). Even with the claimed 'benefits' (Alipour, Fadinger, & Schymik, 2021) of extensive homeworking, we found suggestions that this form of employment does not appeal to all, with some managers – notably those with young children – often finding such arrangements difficult to accommodate (Sevilla & Smith, 2020).

Further, we have noted that while from the beginning of the millennium, and before, digital technology provided the means to facilitate staff working increasingly at home, this has often brought with it the closer monitoring of actions through progressively sophisticated forms of surveillance (Sewell, 2019, 2021). Until the advent of extremely resourceful means of digital control, relatively few corporate employees were privileged to work at home; basically, those deemed 'appropriate' in terms of character and status (Felstead et al., 2002; Felstead, Jewson, & Walters, 2003). This suggests, even with greater power to influence or direct employee behaviour through digital means, corporations may still find securing the 'remote' control of their managers something of a challenge in psychological terms (Stringer et al., 2020).

Indeed, in speculating on the future of the 'normal working day' for managers, we have identified many issues potentially mitigating a drive for anything approaching full-time homeworking post-pandemic. An important issue here is whether such working is desirable in the long term for maintaining work–life balance. Despite the business and consulting media often making bold assertions for homeworking arrangements, our research suggests that prospects are nuanced and far more ambiguity exists than reports suggest. Working at home is an area fraught with ethical challenges while, as noted, tensions can arise from the effects of work intensification, social isolation and employment instability. This suggests that much uncertainty exists over what the new 'normal working day' of the managerial labour process will look like going forward.

Consideration of future uncertainty over managerial homeworking raises another possibility – the prospect of corporations increasing the outsourcing of managerial work post-pandemic, a situation that may bring fears of large-scale unemployment, given nations globally may face economic downturn. There has recently been an upsurge, for example, in digital platforms offering online outsourcing of white-collar work (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2019). Indeed, the potential for outsourcing managerial functions to third-party digital providers, amid a context of persistent restructuring and rationalization, may present corporations with clear opportunities for transforming permanent mid-level employees into less secure 'gig-workers' (Kuhn, 2016; Peetz, 2019).

Additionally, trade unions have traditionally been sceptical of growth in practices such as home-working, principally because this may presage attempts by employers to cut wages and erode employment rights (Adams & Prassl, 2018). In fact, the spectre of managers potentially becoming a cadre of self-employed contractors working exclusively at home, perhaps brings with it historical images of firms evading obligations for pension rights, illness benefits, and maternity and paternity leave, as well as attempting to circumvent health and safety regulations (Graham, Hjorth, & Lehdonvirta, 2017).

Nevertheless, the predominant view in academic literature and the mass media currently is for some form of 'hybrid' arrangement to define the terrain of managers' 'normal working day' going forward. Similarly, a common proposition in our later interviews was that managers will likely spend at least part of their work week (perhaps one or two days out of five) completing tasks at home. As noted, discussions of hybrid working often include the suggestion that managers should be encouraged to interact physically with colleagues during the work week – perhaps in hubs, pop-up offices, or other co-working spaces – to satisfy various social as well as technical needs in the interests of productivity (Bouncken, Ratzmann, Barwinski, & Kraus, 2020; Jeske & Ruwe, 2019; Spreitzer, Bacevice, & Garrett, 2015). As noted, however, there are also increased signs of companies instructing managerial employees to 'return to the office', this perhaps reflecting an innate need on the part of corporations to maintain direct surveillance and close control of employees (Partridge, 2023; Royle, 2023; Sweeney, 2023).

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

A premise of this critical discussion of managers' experiences of working at home is corporations' desire to control white-collar labour primarily in the interests of capital accumulation. To this end, we have explored managerial homeworking considering, for example, the greater intensification and extensification of work, the rise of increasingly sophisticated digital surveillance in performance monitoring, and numerous restructuring strategies for delayering, downsizing and outsourcing labour and operations. We have traced the development of these and other issues over time, including the period of the pandemic, and speculated on future arrangements for managerial homeworking by debating the potential ending, extending or hybridizing of the practice. Central to this analysis is the assumption that, in seeking to extract surplus value from indeterminate labour, corporations have experimented with a range of options for organizing and directing employment (working in the office or at home; controlling through bureaucratic or virtual means; administering through centralized or decentralized authority, and so on). We have also discussed uncertainty over how homeworking arrangements will play out in the future, noting possibilities for research on this issue and highlighting the need for information on corporations' motives for encouraging or discouraging managers to work at home in the coming decades. The argument has been made that to achieve a sociologically rounded analysis of managerial homeworking we must understand the interaction and evolution of a range of strategic, technological and political forces in the context of shaping the labour process of middle managers. This has involved examining, in comparative-historical perspective, both explicit and implicit issues affecting the experience of managerial homeworking. For the former we have highlighted, for example, the influence of digital communications, work restructuring and employee surveillance, while for the latter, issues of autonomy, habituation/resistance and work–life balance.

Theoretically, the research has explored homeworking in relation to managers' 'struggle for a normal working day' (Marx, 1887). Given the inherent social, economic and political dynamics of this study, we have silhouetted our analysis against a backdrop of relations between managers, corporations and to a lesser extent the state. Our empirical studies have explored changes and developments in the ways managers experience their work, how their work is monitored, and the

locations in which they undertake tasks. Findings from these comparative-historical narratives are analysed in the context of recent trends in neoliberal employment policies and various preferences for restructuring. Themes depicting the nature and experience of managerial homeworking in such contexts reflect, for example, the colonizing effects of digitalization; the breaching of traditional (home/work) spatial and temporal boundaries; 'beyond contract' (Fox, 1974) task completion; and the normalizing of intensified work within an incipient 'acceptance' culture – a situation where 'flexibility' can be a by-word for job loss.

In developing this inquiry, however, our analysis of labour process trajectories is qualitatively different from either Marx's 19th-century analysis or Braverman's extension for the early/mid-20th century. While for Marx the theorization of intensified labour is a reaction to work extensification being progressively restricted by factory-based legislation regulating employment conditions, in Braverman's work it is realized through a range of 20th-century workflow technologies for reducing 'porosity' in the working day, for example, Taylorism, Bedauxism and Fordism, and more recently just-in-time, lean production, and agile management (Benassi, 2024; Kenney & Florida, 1993; C. Smith & Vidal, 2019). However, the coming of digitalization, we argue, brings with it new spatial and temporal opportunities for extending the working day, and often by implicit means, as corporations succeed in hegemonically extending work into new domains and having it undertaken voluntarily by managerial labour. In our study, this analysis lays the ground for consideration of how debates on the nature of managerial work will play out in the decades to come, especially how corporations will likely exercise control and monitor performance.

In sum, this research has developed a comparative-historical approach to understanding an increasingly contentious issue for the managerial labour process – the practice of managers conducting part, most, or all their work at home. We have described how recent research studies have often framed the issue of managerial homeworking as a characteristically existential phenomenon. Here the tendency has been to focus on the mandated nature of the practice under the recent coronavirus pandemic, rather than to situate it within a broader historical and sociological context, one reflecting a network of contested influences evolving and interacting over time. While suggesting managerial homeworking is not as exceptional as many academic and media commentators imply, we make a case that it is nevertheless a crucial one for contemporary work and organizational research. Framed theoretically by labour process analysis and a 'critical' perspective on managerial work, and describing issues related to managers' contemporary 'struggle for a normal working day', we have argued that a detailed understanding of the reasons for managers to work at home requires appreciation of overarching strategic, technological and political forces, and notably in spatial and temporal perspective. In developing such an approach, we have described how the recent history of managerial homeworking is influenced by both explicit (e.g. strategic restructuring; digital technology; state intervention) and implicit (e.g. cultural resistance; responsible autonomy; work–life balance) factors in an analysis which also acknowledges, contextually, the dynamics of capital accumulation, the indeterminacy of managerial labour and the contested nature of employment relations. Finally, we have considered the role that homeworking may take in the middle management labour process of coming years, an argument that sees us evaluate various options for extending, ending or hybridizing this aspect of employment. In this regard, the paper concludes that while, presently, some version of the latter appears likely to frame many managers' 'normal working day', the issue remains highly contested in terms of the strategic, technological and political dynamics impinging on sectors, industries and economies.

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