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"A new ideal worker in a fluid/flexible/hybrid work environment: Processes and practices of emergence"

Ajzen, Michel ; Izak, Michal ; Reissner, Stefanie

ABSTRACT

In the spirit of critically exploring the processes and practices by which new ideal workers norms emerge, we invite the following types of contributions: • Individual-level analyses, including o The meanings of and implications for work and employment in a post-covid fluid / flexible / hybrid working context (e.g. attitude-to-work and centrality of work) o Flexible and/or hybrid working patterns and practices and their implications for work-life balance and mental and physical wellbeing o Subjectification processes that lead to the development of individual sets of norms shaping working hours, work intensity, outputs, etc. • Group-level analyses, including o The implications of fluid / flexible / hybrid forms of working for social dynamics and identity at and identification with work o Collective shaping processes of the new ideal worker o Critical discussions of autonomy and/or control and in fluid / flexible / hybrid working • Organization-level analyses, including o Spatial and/or temporal perspectives on fluid / flexible / hybrid working practices, including office design and the development of institutional co-working spaces

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The 13th International Conference in Critical Management Studies
Nottingham: 20-22 June 2023

**Sub-theme: A new ideal worker in a fluid/flexible/hybrid work environment:
Processes and practices of emergence**

Stream Convenors:

Michel Ajzen, UCLouvain (Belgium)
Michal Izak, University of Chester (UK)
Stefanie Reissner, University of Essex (UK)

The new flexibility paradigm (Bauman, 2000) marks an era of ‘turbulent unpredictability’ (Smith, 2010) and weakens an individual and collective sense of workplace security. In particular, the spread of flexible working practices – ranging from work schedule flexibility to teleworking but also including office design and the proliferation of co-working spaces – brought new challenges due to the variability in location and time as well as the increasing dependence on technologies (Kingma, 2018, Blagoev et al., 2019; Aroles et al., 2019). More recently, the prolonged ‘social experiment’ involving *en masse* introduction of flexible and distant working practices due to Covid-19 lockdown provided a fitting example of these trends, exposing diverse organizational approaches and practices to ensure productivity of now largely dispersed workforces.

Beyond the pandemic, such practices are expected not only to stick (Barrero et al., 2021; Thulin & Villhelmson, 2021) but to become a ‘new normal’, depicted by hybrid forms of work that are often tied with a particular vision of the ‘Future of Work’ (Schlogl et al., 2021). In turn, taken-for-granted beliefs on remote working patterns and work management practices are deeply shaken and ‘managing at a distance’ becomes a murky ground. Firstly, even before the pandemic, managing remotely went beyond the well-rehearsed direct managerial control achieved through introduction of coercive measures and included tacit controls implied by the introduction of new technologies (e.g. Broadfoot, 2001; Mazmanian et al., 2013). Through managerial rhetoric and socio-material artifacts, workers are expected to be flexible, connected, and empowered (Richardson & McKenna, 2014; Thorne, 2015, Paltrinieri, 2017). As a result, the locus of control may equally be shifting away from ‘the centre’ of the organization towards now self-controlling individuals who may, however, feel ‘constrained by their work despite being able to manage it largely outside of direct managerial and peer control’ (Putnam et al., 2014, p. 416; Michel, 2011).

Yet, secondly, as workplaces become less fixed (Halford, 2005), less clearly defined (Herod et al., 2007) and more virtual (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021), more freedom may be left to self-governing individuals (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021) and less oversight may be desired by organizations to save on effort and expenditure of control. Indeed, in the remote work context the dichotomic construal of control, discipline and freedom requires problematization (Raffnsøe et al., 2019). In this vein, increased spatio-temporal flexibility may ultimately provide a fitting ground for shaping the ‘ideal’ or ‘model worker’ (see Hancock & Spicer, 2011) who goes above and beyond contractual obligations towards their employer. Increasingly absent from the organizational radar, employees working ‘freely’ from an increased distance may feel ‘empowered’ to ‘just keep going’, going beyond what could have been formally expected (Cooper & Lu, 2019). Indeed, they have been found to invest significant effort in remaining constantly ‘visible’ (Leonardi & Treem, 2021), due to the self-regulated need to extend the spatial and temporal boundaries of their work, to ‘stand out’ and distinguish themselves (Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al., 2021), out of fear of being ‘left out’ (Hafermalz, 2021) and craving the recognition of being an ‘ideal’ or a ‘model worker’.

However, the post-crisis normalization of flexible and/or ‘hybrid’ working patterns requires additional scholarly attention. Conceptually, newly labelled ‘hybrid’ working arrangements require clearer definition and distinction from more established concepts of flexible and remote working, which we invite in this call. Empirically, the norms and practices associated with these working arrangements invite us to question how the shaping of this ‘ideal worker’ evolves. For instance, while the spread of spatio-temporal flexibility practices was found to be underpinned by a managerial will to shape a new flexible, connected and empowered worker (e.g., Ajzen, 2021; Richardson & McKenna, 2014), recent studies point at a change in the meaning of and attitude to work more generally (see Adissa et al., 2021), suggesting an individual

quest for more freedom by managing times, spaces and ICTs to improve one's working and living conditions. Simultaneously, enforced remote working may have led to increasing individualization of work and affects social relationships and communities at the workplace (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021), changes in identity at work (Hennekam et al., 2021), and/or the feeling of belonging to a profession or an organization (e.g., Hassard & Morris, 2022).

In the spirit of critically exploring the processes and practices by which new ideal workers norms emerge, we invite the following types of contributions:

- Individual-level analyses, including
 - The meanings of and implications for work and employment in a post-covid fluid / flexible / hybrid working context (e.g. attitude-to-work and centrality of work)
 - Flexible and/or hybrid working patterns and practices and their implications for work-life balance and mental and physical wellbeing
 - Subjectification processes that lead to the development of individual sets of norms shaping working hours, work intensity, outputs, etc.
- Group-level analyses, including
 - The implications of fluid / flexible / hybrid forms of working for social dynamics and identity at and identification with work
 - Collective shaping processes of the new ideal worker
 - Critical discussions of autonomy and/or control and in fluid / flexible / hybrid working
- Organization-level analyses, including
 - Spatial and/or temporal perspectives on fluid / flexible / hybrid working practices, including office design and the development of institutional co-working spaces

Recognizing that it is not always possible to distinguish these levels, we also invite more holistic analyses that critically explore cross-level dynamics, for example where governmentality and subjectification meet. We particularly encourage conceptual contributions, empirical research using innovative methodological approaches as well as interdisciplinary work, especially sociological and/or technology and innovation angles.

Submissions will be in the form of extended abstracts of 1000 words (references not included) and will briefly state in 100 words how the submission is suitable for the sub-theme. Extended abstracts should be submitted to michel.ajzen@uclouvain.be not later than March, 31. Convenors would prefer to favour the 'in-person format' but sub-theme sessions might be run in a hybrid format.

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Convenor biographies

Michel Ajzen, PhD, is a Post-Doctoral Researcher in Organizations Studies and HRM at UCLouvain (Belgium) with an interest in the interaction between the 'New ways of Working' practices, social relations at work, working communities, work-life balance, and sustainable work. His research has been published in several book chapters and journals such as *Information and Organization*.

Michal Izak, PhD, is Professor in Organization Studies at Chester Business School, University of Chester (UK). His research interests include flexible working discourses and their ideological underpinnings, and ethnographic and narrative approaches to organizational analysis. He published academic papers in *Human Relations* and *Organization Studies* among others and organized and co-organized international conferences and conference streams.

Stefanie Reissner, PhD, is Professor of Work and Organization Studies at Essex Business School (UK) with an interest in identity, narrative / storytelling, and interpretive work / sensemaking which she has studied in the context of flexible working. Her research has been published in high-quality journals, such as *Work, Employment & Society*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *European Management Review*, and *Public Administration*.