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Performing work: The drama of everyday working life

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Abstract

In this article, a perspective on work time patterns is outlined; a perspective that emphasizes the importance of observing how work time is subject not only to task and contract agreements but also to social norms and individual needs to express identity. The article takes its starting point in Goffman's dramaturgic approach. From this perspective, the workplace is viewed as a stage where a satisfactory work performance is judged not by the actual *work* performance but by the *performance* of work; or rather, perhaps, by how a morally good working day is enacted through text, words, and gestures. Depending on social context work, time patterns can be seen as an expression of commitment, dedication, professionalism, and masculinity. The article concludes with a discussion on the potential implications of these issues regarding stress and health, as well as the possibilities of participation in the labor market under equal conditions.

Keywords

Symbolic interactionism, working time, knowledge intensive work, organizational culture, symbols

Introduction

It should be noted that, given the markedly distinct temporal profile of the professional commitments associated with high social status, high-ranking

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officials very often arrive at work “early” and leave “late” for the purely symbolic purpose of displaying their high status! (Zerubavel, 1985: 153)

This article focuses on how work time can and should be seen as an important symbolic marker. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of understanding how temporal strategies are formed and become endowed with symbolic meaning in the borderland between social norms and material reality (Barley et al., 2011). It does not take much imagination to realize that a high salary, a personal secretary, a large office, and an expensive suit function as important symbolic markers. This likely continues to be the case in many places around the world, but as society and working life change, so too does what we value highly, as do the related attributes and symbols. A new perspective on work time and work-time patterns is outlined in the article: a perspective that emphasizes or focuses on the importance of observing how work time is subject not only to its task and contract agreements, but also to social norms and individual needs to express identity. This becomes particularly relevant at a time when how to assess, evaluate, and control work is becoming increasingly ambiguous. In this context, it follows that certain temporal patterns serve as guidelines for signifying a satisfactory work performance.

How work is interpreted and evaluated is not a given concept; rather, it undergoes a continuous process of reassessment. This applies both to the question of what constitutes a satisfactory work performance within the relationship between buyers and sellers of work, as well as to how work and work performance is judged and evaluated by individuals and society at large. To judge and evaluate work, norms develop that inform various actors of the various expectations of their behavior in the labor market and in organizations: norms that are also to be found in labor legislation and contracts, but also less articulated, in culturally rooted norms. Where labor regulations are weak or absent, culturally rooted norms become increasingly important (Alvin, 2011). A key component of these norms concerns the issue of time. According to Epstein et al. (1999), “time norms” develop in all forms of work. Time norms are seen here as socially formulated expectations of behavior relating to, among other things, expectations on “patterns of the day”; i.e., being at the “right” place at the “right” time of the day (Epstein et al., 1999). Therefore, time norms act as a steering mechanism in the relationship between the individual and work life and inform the individual when, how often, and how fast it is appropriate to work (Epstein and Kalleberg, 2004).

Within the large degree of labor division that was a feature of classical industrial labor, the relationship between time, performance, and salary were well formalized and easily overviewed. Therefore, satisfactory work

performance could be judged by the time spent in the workplace, as well as by the amount and quality of the produced units. The question, then, is what happens to these conditions when the content of commodity and service production changes. What happens to the time norms in those sections of the labor market where the content becomes more knowledge intensive? What happens to the production of knowledge, which to a large extent is based on creativity, knowledge development, and communication, processes which are difficult to control and time manage? A satisfactory work performance may not always be possible to exhibit at the end of the day in the form of a pile of tacked shoe soles or punched metal plates. As the introductory quote is intended to underline, this is a situation which presumably makes it all the more important to study how employees signify their commitment and dedication to their work in other more symbolic ways. In this context, it is also relevant to consider the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which make it possible to work in different locations and at different times: a development that has contributed fundamentally to changing the temporal and spatial dimensions of work (Chesley, 2014; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008). Work that previously was confined to the employer's facilities can now, via digital technology, be carried out in other spaces, such as trains, libraries, cafes, and even in the employee's home (Perrons et al., 2005). When neither the boundaries of work nor its contents are clearly specified, there is always the option to work more and harder.

In other words, various technological systems create the conditions for certain behaviors, while the surrounding social norms influence how this technology is used. For example, digital technology allows work to be conducted from home, but it is the social expectations on behavior that determines whether we reply to emails and phone calls in the evenings or weekends (Barley et al., 2011). To understand when and how often work is conducted from home, we need to add social norms and agency into the equation. At the same time, it is important to underline the role of materiality in studies of organizations: that various forms of technology create different conditions for how work is performed, as well as how it is monitored and controlled. To avoid lapsing into a technodeterministic perspective it is argued, in line with Leonardi and Barley (2008), for the importance of studying how the use of technology is largely formed through social practices. It follows, then, that the use of new technology is borne from earlier methods of carrying out tasks.

This is particularly relevant as previous studies show that new ICT has proven to contribute to poor mental health (Barley et al., 2011; Murray and Rostis, 2007; Schabracq and Cooper, 2000). Weaker regulation of the

temporal and spatial aspects of work increases the individual's options to decide for themselves when and where to perform work tasks, which provides opportunities to combine work with family life not previously available (Tietze and Musson, 2003). Further, increased options for independence and influence in work conditions are seen to decrease the risks of negative stress and psychosocial poor health (Karasek and Theorell, 1990; Teo et al., 1998). Brannen (2005), however, argues that flexible work conditions tend to generate conflicts between work and family. Brannen's model sees the individual's difficulties in relating to vague, unspoken, and sometimes incongruent norms as crucial.

A morally good workday

With regards to the blurred boundaries of work and an accompanying obliqueness concerning behavior, previous research argues that labor legislation and entered agreements have acquired a subordinate meaning to less outspoken, culturally rooted norms (see, e.g., Allvin, 2011). The German sociologist Ulrich Beck (2000) argues that the fixed structures that characterized the industrial-capitalist society are disintegrating and being replaced by fluid and blurred structures. Therefore, the focus, here, is on the less outspoken social expectations of culturally rooted behaviors. Norms, defined as the social expectations that circumscribe work time, are the glue that both enables and places boundaries on our relation to working life. The importance of noting that change occurs at different paces is also underlined. When the content of production changes, the view of the relationship between work and work time may not necessarily change automatically. There is a distinction between technological and organizational developments and more cumbersome structures such as culturally conditioned perceptions of gender, class, and identity, for example. What is seen as a morally good workday might, therefore, not have all that much to do with the particular activities at hand. In the same manner, behaviors and symbols in the workplace can be inspired by other eras and contexts. By focusing on these questions, the present article thus seeks to understand how various power orders are maintained, as well as the more specific implications of this development for the individual. In line with Hassan (2003) and O'Carroll (2008, 2015), I urge for discussion and an increased awareness of different, multiple, and contradictory time norms related to knowledge work. An increased understanding of work life's temporal rhythms could contribute to an understanding of the experiences of stress and open up for a dialogue on the requirements and expectations of workplaces.

Symbolic interactionism

The article takes its starting point in the sociological school that studies symbolic interactionism (SI) and particularly Goffman's dramaturgic approach. From this perspective, the workplace is viewed as a stage where a satisfactory work performance is judged not by the actual *work* performance, but by the *performance* of work; or rather, perhaps, by how a hard-working individual is portrayed through text, images, words, and gestures. The article consistently underlines that the length and location of the workday has symbolized different things in various cultural contexts. The overall purpose of the article is to highlight the relationship between work, norms, and the construction of the workday. There are fairly comprehensive studies on culturally rooted perceptions of time (Adam, 2004; Ancona, Okhuysen and Perlow, 2001; Zerubavel, 1985), but few have paid specific attention to the role played by time norms and temporal strategies in structuring social actions, particularly within the framework of knowledge intensive service production. Therefore, the aim and focus of this article is to contribute to an understanding of the conditions that exist in knowledge intense work by illuminating and problematizing the norms that circumscribe and are active in work time: how norms are constituted, how they relate to historical changes, and how they both enable as well as place boundaries on social actions, thereby maintaining and amplifying social differences.

This article commences with a discussion on the concept of symbols and symbolic actions. This is followed by a discussion on temporal strategies in the context of social change, status and professionalism, power and influence, and social exclusion and gender. In conjunction, a number of empirical examples will be used to illustrate the theoretical discussions. The empirical data have been gathered from various contexts and in part from different starting points, which is why a more in-depth empirical review is not presented here. The article concludes with a discussion section on the potential implications of these issues regarding stress and health, as well as the possibilities of participation in the labor market under equal conditions.

Symbols and symbolic actions are key cultural components and play an important role in our everyday lives. Studies of symbols and symbolic actions are usually dated back to George Herbert Mead's work on the interactional relationships between self and society; thoughts that later became the basis for the school in sociology known as SI (Stryker, 2008). SI can be described as a school within sociology which takes its starting point in viewing people as active creators of the social world. Although this school also accepts social structures and norms, these are not seen as

determinative for the direction each individual's actions take. Instead, SI's focus lies not only on the individuals' interpretative process of their environment and expectations, but also on how the individual actively chooses to present themselves in various social contexts. There was early criticism from other sociological schools that pointed to a lack of attention to, and incorporation of, social structures, power, and institutions (and how they were reproduced) in the interpretation of society and social interaction (Meltzer et al., 1975). Since its birth, however, SI has come to evolve toward a middle-ground approach to power and agency (Musolf, 1992), within the field of tension between those who argue that human life is controlled solely by structures and processes and those that just as one-sidedly argue for freedom and creativity as the starting point for human action (Musolf, 1992). By focusing on everyday actions and meaning making, SI can contribute to an understanding of how power relations are maintained in everyday life. In the article, "Symbolic interactionism and the concept of power," Dennis and Martin (2005: 208–209) state:

Consequential power relationships, and gross inequalities of income, can be seen to be sustained by networks of reasonable people all doing perfectly normal and routine things, sustained by a symbolic discourse which legitimates some actions and denigrates or prohibits others.

Ervin Goffman's (1990[1959]) dramaturgical approach to social action, is of particular interest here. This perspective views social action as acts carried out according to "social scripts," where social actors play different roles in these scripts. Pertaining to the earlier discussion on structure and the actor, social scripts may then refer to the social structures and the actual performance to agency. When we "perform" in everyday life, we try to express ourselves relatively to expectations through various expressions and mannerisms, a process described as "impression management." In this context, it is of interest that Goffman pointed out that social actors rarely create new forms of expression, but rather tend to select from an already existing set.

To summarize, we see that the labor market is moving toward a state in which inputs, outputs, and rewards are becoming increasingly blurred and complex to overview. In this situation, culturally rooted conceptions gain greater influence on the actual execution of work and particularly when and where it is executed. In ambiguous situations when judging and evaluating labor is hard, Impression Management gains in influence. It is in this context that Kondra and Hurst (2009: 49) state that "Lack of clarity leaves individuals little choice but to mimic others to behave in a manner deemed acceptable to receive desired rewards." Consequentially, it is of relevance to

note the symbols and expressions that in different contexts come to express satisfactory work performance.

The symbolic significance of work time

As the title of this article suggests, the symbolic value of work is viewed as key; in other words, the values attributed to work in general and work time in particular, in addition to the economic value produced in the form of goods and services. It is symbolic in the sense that a symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else; it conveys socially constructed meanings beyond its intrinsic content or obvious functional use (Zott and Huy, 2007: 72). Moore and Meyerhoff (1977: 5) provide a similar definition when describing a symbol in terms of “having a purpose that refers to more than what is said, and that has several meanings at the same time.” Consequently, a symbol conveys a socially constructed meaning that lies beyond its intrinsic or obvious functional purpose (Morgan et al., 1983). Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) argue that as symbols can be loaded with values that are highly esteemed in society, they can serve to communicate in subtle ways. For example, an expensive business suit probably serves a function beyond its intrinsic purpose (to protect the body), for example, to express a desired image of success and respectability (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997). Similarly, symbolic actions aim to serve a broader purpose than that which is initially obvious. In describing work time as a symbolic action, it follows that the length and scheduling of the workday are not only determined by employment contracts and the nature of the work but also by other meanings. For example, in the same way as the suit expresses success and respectability, the temporal pattern of the workday should, at least in part, be seen as a way of presenting ourselves in everyday life. As Zerubavel describes in the opening quotation, throughout history, we see that different temporal profiles have had different statuses in society. The degree of symbolic value that determines the action varies, of course, according to the individual’s need to express identity and belonging, but also according to the social context.

Temporal strategies

In line with Schutz and Luckmann (1973), the design of the individual’s work time is seen here as the result of an intersubjective process in which the individual formulates temporal strategies in relation to the expectations of their environment; in this case, in the form of time norms. Based on Goffman’s terminology, these can be described as social scripts which provide a backdrop against which the individual plays. By viewing symbolic

actions partly as a temporal strategy, intentionality or agency is emphasized. That is, the individual is seen as an active cocreator of culture. These strategies are accordingly formulated in relation to societal norms, which are expressed, for example, through language. Schutz (1971) further argues that social norms frequently continue to exist without reflection and are created over long time spans. The temporal strategies that the individual formulates in relation to the expectations of their environment can be seen partly as a direct response to contract agreements and the nature of the work task, and partly as a symbolic act performed in relation to surrounding norms—as the initial quote intends to highlight. In the perspective of social interactionism, the individual actively relates to prevailing norms; she makes a statement about who she is and what she represents.

Consequently, temporal strategies are viewed here as partly symbolic actions. In this manner, the individual is united with surrounding norms, as she signifies, maintains, and strengthens her identity and expresses herself by relating to prevailing norms (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). It follows that on the one hand, work time is entirely dependent on the task requirements and existing contracts between employers and employees. But on the other hand, work time is also loaded with other values. This is exemplified by the boss who works late, solely to underline his commitment:

I can do this job in fewer hours. But it will be seen as not giving the commitment. Being visible is a way of drawing attention to yourself. You are noticed more by being here at 10 at night than by consistently producing a good product. (Senior executive quoted in Rutherford, 2001: 273.)

Tasks are not carried out at the pace they could be performed, but at a slower pace—not to earn more—but to remain at work longer: a behavior sometimes referred to as “Face-time” (Elsbach et al., 2010). Here, work time is a purely symbolic act, the purpose of which is to symbolically demonstrate commitment. Depending on the context, the duration and scheduling symbolize different things. Different norm sources load work time with different content. For example, a long workday can symbolize different things depending on social context. At the same time, the norm sources may also compete internally with each other. There are different interests involved and different actors have different goals. Furthermore, one could question the individual’s independence of the norm sources. This can be further linked to the issue of symbolic actions: To what extent should an act be seen as (a) an expression of identity or (b) an expression of a social norm? There are no simple answers, but in each case it is relevant to question how much freedom and ability the individual has to choose different courses of action, as well as the level of awareness concerning the norm source.

Temporal strategies—Power and influence in organizations

(...) symbolic resources can be leveraged to legitimate authority in a context in which traditional authority structures have collapsed. (Suddaby et al., 2010, with reference to Rojas (2010))

A key point of debate that was touched upon in the introduction concerns the power of culture over the individual's actions. That is to say, temporal strategies are often seen as an expression of identity or rather an embodiment of surrounding norms. Or as Zerubavel notes, they both reflect and regulate "social rhythms" (Zerubavel, 1976: 87). Translated into Goffman's dramaturgic view of human interaction, the question becomes to what extent people should be seen as puppets controlled by the invisible strings of social structures, unfree to interpret the script or improvise. The issue concerns whether culture can be designed and controlled by any group or individual, who thereby can exert power over others. Schools within neo-Marxist theory argue that certain classes of society exercise power by defining what is "normal." The idea that culture can serve as an instrument of control was developed in Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of "hegemony." Gramsci, who cofounded the Italian Communist Party in the 1920s, was driven by why the working class, despite widespread repression, failed to rebel against the bourgeoisie. He argued that control largely functions through culture and that it is the social class that controls the means of production that owns the preferential right of ideological interpretation. This conveys a worldview of a natural or normal state. By shaping and formulating public interest, "domination by consent" as Gramsci calls it, is created and maintained. These thoughts can be found in later developed fields such as in discourse analysis, where Foucault's (1991) theory of "Governmentality" remains perhaps the most influential. The struggle, then, stands between different concepts of reality, where what is considered natural or normal in different contexts becomes a key issue. Foucault describes this type of control through the manipulation of culture as part of a more refined process of disciplining people.

From a critical perspective, Hugh Willmott (1993) describes the development as a movement away from "Fordism's" direct supervision to a more subtle control of the worker. The evolution of work could thus be seen as a movement away from an outer, visible coercion toward an inner regulation administered by the individual himself; a regulation that emanates from the individual himself. Willmott views culture as a reasonably uniform and controllable system of norms that unilaterally provides the individual with action instructions, a perspective that, interestingly enough, highlights the various expressions of power. However, the

individual's options to actively respond to and cocreate culture are seen as limited. Here, the (power) structure can be said to determine the individual's actions. The lack of attention paid to the individual's agency is a line of criticism that was also leveled at Foucault (Alvesson and Deetz, 1996).

As mentioned earlier, a less deterministic approach can be found in the sociological school of SI, as well as among other sociologists such as Weber and his focus on social action. Here, the subject is seen as more active in relation to social structures. These ideas were later developed, for example, by Swidler (1986), who instead views culture as something that offers a selection of options that the individual must relate to. From this point of view, culture provides the "tool kit" or repertoire of habits and symbols with which its members construct strategies of action when dealing with everyday life. By actively relating to the norms of the social system, the individual creates and expresses her personal identity and also contributes to the dynamics necessary to explain the constant transformation of cultures. Within this presumption of the nature of culture lies a view of human nature as an active agent in relation to surrounding norms. The discussion on the relationship between structure and actor has been a matter of debate within a number of social and behavioral disciplines for many years. I do not presume to resolve that discussion here, but I wish to emphasize the need to observe larger structures in the smaller context. Individual actions can be understood in light of a larger context. At the same time, I subscribe to Swidler's view of the actor as a cocreator of culture and not solely its bearer. In line with these theoretical presumptions, it then follows that the same normative system may generate different actions depending on how the individual relates to them.

Temporal strategies and social change

As mentioned in the Introduction section, "time norms" develop in relation to any form of work. However, this does not mean that they change at the same pace as production. In other words, it is necessary to clarify and problematize the relationship between the norm and its source. This is because research shows that norms tend to detach themselves from their original context and continue to be perceived as relevant. This argument can be found as early as in Weber's (1930: 175) description of work ethics in relation to Protestant ethic, in which this ethic persists despite religion's (seemingly) decreased influence over our lives: "The idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs."

Norms can thus fetch nourishment from other eras and other spaces than those immediately at hand. On closer analysis, they rather tell us something about the order of things over long periods of time. This makes it important

to distinguish between visible or superficial structures such as premises, technology, and work organization, and deeper structures such as concepts of work, gender, class, and profession. Although these two structural levels naturally interact, they do not always move at the same pace. New organizations are launched, new technologies are introduced and new houses are built. Meanwhile, the deeper structures are often more cumbersome. When changes occur, incongruences between the levels may emerge, which can lead to tensions that ultimately may contribute to poor health in individuals, as well as to inefficiencies (Toffler, 1980). Bolman and Deal (2013) argue that in times of great uncertainty and ambiguity, symbolic actions become vital for reducing confusion, increasing predictability and allowing for purpose and meaning in life. When expectations of behavior are unclear and the results of the work performance are ambiguous, the symbolic action of “working late at the office” becomes a signifier according to the norms of the social environment. Particularly, as new technology makes it possible for work to be performed outside the office.

This interpretation is supported by studies that show that as work performance becomes increasingly difficult to assess, evaluate, and judge, the symbolic value of various temporal strategies comes to directly influence how work performance is rewarded. More concretely, we are judged and evaluated not so much by what we do but by our presence and visibility in the workplace. Currently, we see a clear trend in work within the knowledge-intensive service production sector increasingly being carried out remotely via technological means, beyond the employer’s premises. Recent research now shows that spending much time outside the office can affect both your income and career prospects negatively (Elsbach et al., 2010). Here, the researchers examined how different behaviors in the workplace are judged and valued, and in particular, what they call “passive facetime” (which they define as “merely being seen at work”). The authors argue that many wage and bonus systems undeservedly reward those who are “willing and able to hang around the office a lot.” Being seen and heard at the office creates the impression that one is a reliable and committed employee. One respondent in the study states:

I think it’s easier in some ways to sort of think that somebody is doing their job if they’re always there. It’s more of a perception, but I think it’s easier for a manager to think that somebody’s dependable if they physically see them there. Especially when they’re doing things that aren’t immediately visible. Like someone who most of their job is sort of creative and you really can’t see that. But if you see them sitting at their desk then it’s easier . . . for a manager to see that person as dependable (Elsbach et al., 2010: 746).

One of the conclusions of the study is that by being visible in the workplace—and preferably after regular office hours—one can create an image of a reliable and dedicated employee. According to the study, certain character traits are linked to specific patterns of behavior. If you want to appear reliable, make sure you are seen either at your desk or in meetings. If you also want to be seen as dedicated, come to work early and stay late. A notion well in line with Woody Allen's famous quote: "Eighty percent of success is showing up."

How much individual success is based on attendance is obviously difficult to assess. However, visibility can be an aspect worth considering, in particular if the work is characterized by tasks that are not easily measured and quantified. Especially for those who aspire to climb within hierarchies. Or, as another of Elsbach's respondents expresses it:

There seems to be a norm that anyone hoping to move up in the management ranks needs to be here late at night and on the weekends. If you're not willing to do that, you're not going to be seen as dedicated enough to get promoted. It's definitely one of the tests of management material (Elsbach et al., 2010: 748).

Perhaps there is something to the old adage, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." The term generally denotes that, often, being seen and taking space gets rewarded undeservedly. That is, *being heard* is more important than what is *being said*. At the same time, it is apparent that this is an effective method of distancing certain people from important positions. There is, therefore, a power perspective to the symbolic value attributed to an action. In other words, it becomes important to underline the distinction Goffman makes between any intentional and conscious expression of an action and the meaning and value that is then attributed to it by the social environment. Here, then, lies a power structure, both with respect to the preferential right of interpretation of various actions and also the right to interpret which actions can be performed based on the individual's social position. In other words, it becomes difficult to make sense of the field if we fail to take into account factors such as class and gender.

Temporal strategies, status, and professionalism

Symbolic action and myth making are important means by which individuals and groups seek to legitimate their privileged power relations and actions, and indeed, to guarantee their organization's continued successful existence. (Brown, 1994: 863)

Murphy (1984) describes social closure as a process in which different groups in society monitor and defend mutual options and resources by excluding others. Closure can occur due to both material and cultural motives. Hochschild describes how concepts of time, and access to certain temporal strategies, can serve as social closure in this context.

Time has a way of sorting people out in this company. A lot of people that don't make it to the top work long hours. But all the people I know who do make it work long hours. (Manager, quoted in Hochschild, 1997: 56)

Research on work-time related norms and concepts from a gender perspective shows that there are different perceptions linked to gender. For example, Hochschild (1997) points out that there is a positive link between concepts of masculinity and the "long hours" norm. The link between long hours and masculinity is well documented (see also Massey, 1995; Ottosson and Rosengren, 2007).

Here in the plant, we have a macho thing about hours. Guys say 'I'm an eighty-hour man!' as if describing their hairy chests. (Manager, quoted in Hochschild, 1997: 128)

Here, long working hours have become synonymous with hairy chests—and, one presumes, some sort of masculinity—which ultimately is associated with being management material. In an interview with a woman working in the public sector at municipal council, this presence and visibility culture is portrayed as devastating for combining work and family. According to her, this is due to no one being interested in her work, only her attendance.

Sometimes it feels like that's the criterion to get your wage, that you show up and get seen As long as you've punched in on that damn time clock, you can do what you want It's ok to sit and pick your fingernails . . . as long as you're there (Municipal council worker, interviewed by the author, 2013).

One interpretation of her impression is that other individuals at work felt that their positions were threatened by a focus on performance. By defining "real work" as presence during specific hours, certain forms of behavior come to be seen as deviant. Goffman describes this process as labeling, i.e., certain behavior patterns are interpreted and defined by the majority as deviant and marred by negative traits (for further discussion regarding labeling and work time, see Ottosson and Rosengren, 2014).

Zerubavel (1985) argues, however, that working long hours can be a way of signifying professional commitment. Here, the individual signifies a dedication toward their profession by coming to work early and leaving late. In this context, long hours are pitted against the alienated worker who just wants to “punch out” and go home. Thus, a doctor does not leave a dying patient.

Similarly, the manager, or whoever else desires to emulate the same temporal pattern, signifies this by arriving early and leaving late.

In a large, complex organization such as this it is easy to be invisible—only their presence at early-morning meetings and late at night marks out a manager from a non-manager. (Rutherford, 2001: 265)

The order of subordination can be signified symbolically by various forms of external attributes. But how this order is signified largely depends on the opportunities made available by technology. The manager who emphasizes the need to come early and leave late also signifies to their subordinates the importance of time and, perhaps, by extension, a “long working day culture.” Meanwhile, not everyone has the option to adopt this temporal strategy. For example, bearing the main responsibility for home and family may have an impact on this option. Thus, we can speak in terms of social closure.

Conversely, it is of interest in this context to ask whether a “real woman” works long hours. Is it seen as a demonstration of loyalty and commitment to colleagues, managers, and other members of society, or is it seen as an expression of failing the duties of the homemaker? One may manage to dodge the question: “Going home already?” at the office, but, often, there is an equally tricky question to be faced at home: “So, this is when you come home, is it?” In line with this, organization researcher Sarah Rutherford (2001) argues that long working hours are basically a way of keeping women away from managerial positions. This, as time is seen as a resource that men have at their disposal to a greater extent, as they do not share the same responsibilities for housekeeping.

Temporal strategies in digital life

The increasing use of digital technology has fundamentally changed not only what is produced, but also how work is organized in contemporary working life. This is a phenomenon that has profoundly come to influence working conditions in a number of ways (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008). A key component of the digitization of work is that technology has challenged the boundaries of work and enabled work to be carried out in many places and at many hours via, for example, laptops and smartphones.

Less regulated temporal and spatial aspects of work increase the individual's ability to control when and where to work, which provides new options to combine work with family life (Bradley and Bradley, 2001). This line of argument is also supported by the study of work extending technology (WET) in relation to work-life balance by Towers et al. (2006: 13):

WET gives more choice about when and where an employee can accomplish their work. This increased flexibility makes it easier to accommodate both work and family, and by giving employees more control over when and where they work, WET contributes to reduced stress.

In relation to accessibility and lack of boundaries in digital space, it becomes relevant to ask what actions signify dedication and commitment, but also what types of actions are to be regarded as symbolic actions, in general. Another and increasingly common way to symbolically express commitment to work is to bring it home or to be constantly available on the phone (Towers et al., 2006). This is naturally done to manage workload and the balance between work and leisure (Kossek et al., 2006). But at the same time, always being available can be a way of expressing commitment in the same way as spending long hours at the office. According to previous studies, to always be available, or rather, to show a demonstrable willingness to be loyal to the work task, fetches its normative nourishment from a concept of professionalism. It can be a way of signifying commitment within an opaque system, for instance. Professionalism entails that one will always be on the job, or in other words, professional time is all of the time (Epstein and Kalleberg, 2004; Zerubavel, 1985).

As an illustration, I present an excerpt from an interview with a CEO, working at the time within a global company involved in medical equipment. The interview focused mainly on the opportunities and difficulties of communicating across time zones and following up results and also touched upon how attendance and commitment have come to be symbolic markers in a digital context:

You send off a mail in the morning when you get up. Preferably as early as possible. Punch in, you know. Then around lunch, you send another couple. Preferably about 15 minutes after lunch. To show that you're busy. Then, another at six o'clock. And that's a days work. [...] Get up early and send off some mails to signify visibility. Then turn off the computer and go and have breakfast (CEO interviewed by the author, 2013).

The mail was not sent because the working day officially began at that moment, or because circumstances required it, but mainly to signify

"I'm working!" In other words, it is not the action itself—sending a mail at a certain time—but its stated motive, to express something, that in this context qualifies it as symbolic. It is of interest that the time clock continues to metaphorically symbolize work boundaries even in a digital context, and that emails are constructed in terms of "punching in" and "punching out." This is in line with previous research that points out precisely such delay issues where symbolic representations of work are concerned (Larsson, 2013). For example, Goffman notes how conventional attributes and mannerisms are used in ambiguous social situations. However, such actions can be viewed as an expression of a temporal strategy to create a temporal rhythm that breaks up the day into work and leisure, as well as the week into weekend and weekday (see also Adam, 2004: 98–100). By "punching out," the worker attempts to create a mental space for recovery and relaxation. A temporal zone that is exempt from the duties of working life.

Discussion

The article takes its starting point in the question concerning how to define satisfactory work performance in different contexts. This has become increasingly complicated and open to different interpretations as the knowledge content of work increases—knowledge production that is largely based on creativity, knowledge development, and communication, processes that are inherently difficult to control and schedule. A workday might consist of meetings and discussions with colleagues. In other words, sometimes there is no tangible evidence of the work performance to display at the end of the day! At the same time, the emergence of ICT has brought new possibilities to perform work in different places and at different times: a development that has contributed to fundamentally changing the temporal and spatial dimensions of work. Within the research community, this is known as "work without boundaries" (Allvin, 2011). However, the fact that work has lost its boundaries does not mean that we work constantly, but rather that more time and space has been opened up for work. Neither does it entail that the work task in itself lacks a spatial and temporal frame. What it does mean is that the framework for what constitutes a satisfactory work performance is not always explicit, but is often ambiguous and equivocal. Therefore, gray areas have emerged that circumscribe work and its boundaries which, in extension, have led to judging what constitutes a satisfactory work performance according to symbolic actions. Based on Goffman's dramaturgical approach to SI, this explains that the *performance* of work, or maybe rather the enactment of a morally good workday, is more important than the actual *work* performance. In this context, it is argued that an increased awareness of the various, multiple,

and contradictory time norms related to knowledge work should receive higher priority.

An increased understanding of working life's temporal rhythms can contribute to an understanding of the experiences of stress and open up for discussions on the requirements and expectations of the workplace. There is, as mentioned, a need for a vibrant debate on the expectations of availability we place on each other within the workplace: how can new technologies be used to create stimulating and sustainable work environments that do not take over and consume the individual?

Based on Zott and Huy's (2007: 72) definition of symbolism as "something that stands for or suggests something else... a symbol conveys socially constructed meanings beyond its intrinsic content or obvious functional use," how different actions in work life can and should be seen as symbolic has since been a matter of debate. A long day at the office has, of course, an "intrinsic and obvious function"—to carry out work—but at the same time it conveys a socially constructed message. The content of the message naturally varies depending on social context, but it can often be seen as an expression of commitment, dedication, professionalism, and masculinity. Similarly, an e-mail signifies an obvious, or as Morgan et al. (1983) put it, an intrinsic function, while at the same time symbolically communicating the beginning and end of a workday. The time clock lives on as a metaphor and gives new digital technology both meaning and purpose, as well as direction. Here, it is of interest to note how established behavior patterns serve to describe a satisfactory work performance. Although the time clock is no longer a feature of our era to the same extent, it remains as a metaphor and continues to give meaning to social situations, thereby also controlling actions: punch in and out by sending off emails. The problem, as we have seen, is that these patterns fetch their sustenance from another era and favor certain groups in the labor market. This leads to problems, not least as being available by e-mail and phone is seen as equally important to being at the office. This occurs at the expense of creative processes that require uninterrupted time for thought and reflection. It is also a system that allows for arbitrariness and does not promote work performance and dedication but, rather, conflicts of interpretations. The difficulty of assessing individual work performance needs, instead, to be addressed through increasingly focusing on following up and evaluating work performance.

Disciplines most likely to be interested in the article

Organizational theory, sociology of time, and human resource management.

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