Experiencing the New World of Work

Exploring the different facets of the new world of work (including the hacker and maker movements, platform work, and digital nomadism), this edited volume sets out to investigate and theorise how these new work practices are experienced by various actors. It explores such changes at both the micro- and macro-levels and endeavours to link them back to wider social, managerial, and political issues. In doing so, it aims to reflect on the similarities and differences between new and 'old' work practices and problematise discourses surrounding the future of work. This volume is characterised by the diversity of methods mobilised, the plurality of concepts, lenses, and theories deployed, as well as the richness of the empirical accounts used by the authors. It will appeal to a broad readership of management and organisational scholars as well as sociologists interested in current changes to the world of work.

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Foreword

JOHN HASSARD AND JONATHAN MORRIS

In these incredibly turbulent and unpredictable times, the worlds of work, employment and organisation are facing a myriad of pressures to change, restructure and reform. This excellent book presents a critical social analysis of the types of transformations occurring in these 'new' worlds. Specifically, it focuses on three issues crucial to making sense of contemporary work, workplaces and their management: the *experience* of working; the effects of *digitalisation* on work; and the changing *politics* of work and the workplace. In the remarks that follow we lay personal (and hopefully provocative) ground for the many and varied discussions of 'new' work, ways of working and forms of organising presented in the chapters to come.

In contextual terms, work organisations, especially large ones, have in recent decades faced a range of pressures arising from international competition under neo-liberalism, a situation that many argue has placed 'shareholder value' central to the management of organisational affairs. In order to deal with these pressures, organisations have often responded by restructuring their operations in seemingly innovative ways. The espoused aim is often to make large organisations more 'agile' or 'flexible' – although minimising costs has arguably been the central theme of strategy-making during this era of 'investor capitalism'.

In such a context, workers, managers and other employees have generally come to experience increasing pressure when carrying out their activities, with commonly fewer personnel undertaking a far broader range of tasks. Several consequences have emerged from this work experience: not only of greater time and task pressures being placed upon individuals but also feelings of work insecurity allied to career uncertainty. Additionally, the escalating use of new forms of digital technology has often led to increased stress when working;

notably, through the obligation for workers and managers to work outside of the organisation and at times not traditionally rewarded in the employment contract. Those at the commanding heights of organisations, however, recurrently claim such technologies provide for greater work elasticity, notably in optimising the use of time and space, and with many employees now completing work wherever and whenever possible.

Nonetheless, such changes to the experience of work, and commonly those brought about in recent decades by digitalisation, can have perverse consequences, or paradoxes, in terms of working practices, particularly where employees are already under significant work (especially temporal) pressures. Digitalisation can serve to blur for example the locational boundaries of where work takes place, and when it starts and stops. This poses additional questions for workplace control in situations reflecting the confluence of new work practices and organisational systems. This is allied crucially to the emergence of technologies facilitating new ways of working, ways that can result in seemingly contradictory experiences for employees – making it easier for them to claim temporal control over when work is to be done, but also seeing their work extended into virtually any space where a smartphone, tablet or laptop can be operated.

We would argue that this propels the study of 'new' work and work experience into more nuanced areas. While formerly explorations of surveillance, for instance, have been influenced by Benthamite politics allied to Foucauldian histories – exemplified empirically in studies of new forms of shop-floor production – increasingly the context of 'new' means of organisational control reflects the spread of *self*-surveillance at work. Arguably, the economic context has been transformed too – principally to one where competition has internationalised and workers, managers and other employees are experiencing increased perceptions of job precarity.

Meanwhile work organisations often claim restructuring is directed at achieving 'leaner' forms of working. In such a scenario, employees must often deal with a significant increase in expected working hours, with this new 'normal working day' also being underpinned by recourse to innovative digital technologies. In realising the potential of using such devices, and in working, for example, from non-workplace locations, we see emergent work practices increasingly reflect qualities of 'distantiation' and 'dispersal', which can reflect

moves to more diffuse and fragmented social relations. In such scenarios, organisational surveillance can be transformed into more subtle – self and peer – forms of control, as realised in situations offering workers ever more elastic opportunities for carrying out tasks.

However, digitalisation, which can often be welcomed by workers and managers, has often been singled out as responsible for generating adverse occupational outcomes, not least in terms of self-exploitation. In modern work organisations, there is often political pressure to shift the locus of control from employer to worker, as witnessed in demands for those working from home to 'prove themselves'. It has been argued that workers in such situations can be drawn increasingly into the all-embracing 'gaze' of such technologies. Moreover, the potential for greater autonomy and collaboration – which workers and managers have tended to assume in relation to the use of digital technology – is arguably reflective principally of occupational status and the ability to exercise control over the type of work such technology facilitates. Digital communication devices, for example, initially seemed to offer employees significant opportunities for redefining the temporal and spatial boundaries of their work, and notably to extend these boundaries at their personal discretion. There is, in fact, considerable evidence pointing to employees initially welcoming not only the flexibility such technologies presented but also the increased influence they appeared to be bestowing in terms of work routines and practices. It must be stressed, however, that increased autonomy at work can also be accompanied, politically, by increased control, notably as employees attempt to 'use' these technologies to demonstrate organisational commitment. Researchers point to workers, managers and other employees experiencing pressures to 'conform' temporally in organisations, and of digital technologies being used by workers politically to signal organisational loyalty in this regard. This can lead to workers and managers becoming caught in a collaborative spiral of escalating engagement – one that results in them working at all hours and in virtually any location. It has been argued that this reflects an autonomy paradox in relation to what elsewhere has been termed 'concertive' forms of control.

Digitalisation can therefore alter considerably the experience and politics of presence/absence in work and the workplace, and in turn the 'new' control of work. Political questions of organisational control are

thus evident, and notably regarding so-called collaborative forms of working, which extend beyond direct visual observation and control. Autonomy can become a synonym for self-governance; one that can reflect major changes to the spatial packages of working life. Early studies of professionals using the BlackBerry, for example, found they viewed the technology positively, and that the device enhanced their sense of competence and influence. But conversely researchers also suggested its use could indicate expectations of increased responsiveness, as well as a degree of compulsion to be continuously accessible amid shifting norms of engagement. In their leisure time during the workweek, such professionals still checked their devices continuously, and up to once an hour on weekends. In other research, researchers reported professionals checking their email even on vacation.

Digital technologies have been viewed, therefore, as capable of escalating work engagement, raising work expectations and increasing work stress. Investigations have linked the use of digital technologies with work overload, expectations of worker availability and changes to the home–work boundary. The distorting of traditional work and non-work boundaries – in ways that appear (temporally, spatially and technologically) to be evermore 'permeable' – can certainly be viewed as reflecting important changes in the 'new' ways we define what it means to be 'working'. However, many of the descriptions and explanations of changes to contemporary working can arguably be considered as overly linear, deterministic and decontextualised. We would argue that much research in this area often underplays the amount of political choice and personal agency in the contemporary organisation and control of work. For us this represents a missing ingredient in the extant literature: identification of case examples that run counter to – or 'against the grain' of – linear and deterministic explanations.

This book seeks to remedy this situation by going deeper and more critically into the 'new' worlds of work, employment and organisation. It is a volume that very much fits the bill of presenting 'against-the-grain' arguments when analysing the experience of working, the effects of digitalisation on work and the changing politics of the workplace. Taking recourse to a range of methodological approaches, theoretical lenses and empirical cases, the book provides detailed and reflective analysis of new ways of working, new forms of employment and new

modes of organising. In what is an extremely rich and varied set of contributions, the focus of work inquiry ranges from 'hackerspaces' to 'makerspaces', from 'peasantry' work to the 'post-work imaginary', from 'third-place' working to the lifeworld of 'digital nomads'. In sum, this is an important and thought-provoking book that offers nuanced and fine-grained explanations of the 'new' work experience.