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## **Barriers to Workplace Flexibility: The Contribution of Path-Dependence Theory for Explaining the Persistent Working Time Regime in a Knowledge-Intensive Firm**

Blagoy Blagoev  
Freie Universität Berlin  
School of Business & Economics  
Doctoral program 'Research on Organizational Paths'

Garystr. 21, 14195 Berlin  
Tel.: 030/838-57184  
Fax: 030/838-57186  
Email: blagoy.blagoev@fu-berlin.de

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### **Abstract**

Knowledge workers and professionals working in knowledge-intensive firms such as management consultancies, engineering and IT firms, or financial services are known to be confronted with a working time regime marked by long working hours, constant connectivity, and an ever increasing pace of work. Research findings show that various organizationally supported initiatives to increase the workplace flexibility in order to challenge this working time regime often fail or even prove to be self-defeating. This research often calls for cultural change in firms in order to better accommodate flexibility initiatives, but has little to say about how such change can occur and why initiatives fail. This paper addresses these questions by suggesting that in order to understand how to change a persistent working time regime, we need to first examine in more detail the sources and drivers of its persistence. Building on the growing body of literature on the communicative construction of work in organizations and the theory of organizational path-dependence, the key argument will be that the patterns characteristic for this working time regime might be a sign for a path-dependent processes of ordering and structuring time in a given an organization. In order to fully understand the dynamics of such processes, first findings of an ethnographic study of management consultancy's firm efforts to change its working time regime will be presented.

## **Introduction:**

### **Shifting the research focus from calls for change to the exploration of persistence**

Understandings of the character of work has shifted considerably in post-industrial societies. The decline of manual labour has blurred boundaries between work and non-work and a greater share of dual-earner couples and single parents as well as demographic ageing and globalization have increased workforce diversity. At the same time, employees are increasingly vocal about their needs and expectations regarding work-life support and flexibility provisions by their employers (Kossek et al. 2010; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Achieving workplace flexibility – “the ability to adjust the where, when and how of work” (Putnam et al. 2013, p. 2) in order to accommodate the demands of various work and non-work roles that individuals hold (i.e. life, family, personal needs) seems to be of vital importance for organizations seeking to adapt to the new world of labour. Adaptation is arguably crucial for so-called knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs) which compete not only in an output market for their products and services but also in an input market for highly-qualified personnel (Alvesson, 2002; Maister, 1982). As both markets can affect each other, the key to success for such firms lies in securing a qualified, loyal, and committed workforce. Not surprisingly, many KIFs are experimenting with a variety of arrangements that aim at enhancing workplace flexibility. However, the success of these initiatives is questionable.

Research across a variety of academic disciplines (for recent reviews, see Kelly et al., 2008; Kossek et al., 2010; Putnam et al. 2013) continues to reveal numerous tensions and contradictions surrounding workplace flexibility initiatives (WFI). In spite of their wide availability, employees often fail to make use of organizational flexibility arrangements such as flex-time, teleworking, or reduced working hours (Bailyn, 2006; Blair-Loy, 2009; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Whittle, 2005). What is more, some of the studied initiatives paradoxically seem to lead to longer working hours, stress related to multitasking, and an intensification of labour (Evans et al., 2004; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Michel, 2011). Of all studied professions, it is well-paid and high-status knowledge workers such as lawyers (Epstein, 1999; Kuhn, 2009; Wallace, 1995), accountants (Grey, 1998), investment bankers (Michel, 2011) or management consultants (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; 2009; Muhr et al. 2013) who show the greatest reluctance to make use of WFI, and by doing so, it is argued, “act against their conscious values, such as work-life balance” (Michel, 2011, p. 355). They

work excessive hours (up to 120h a week), remain continuously connected to their jobs through their mobile phones (Mazmanian et al., 2013), work in ‘extreme’ situations (Gregg, 2013), underreport their working hours (Deetz, 1998), and resist organizational efforts to reduce their workload (Kellogg, 2009; 2012). Puzzlingly, those who would benefit most from workplace flexibility seem to be “trapped” (Michel, 2011; Putnam et al., 2013) in a working time regime that *persists* regardless of how strong efforts to change it may be.

A large literature on work-family conflict (Bailyn, 2006; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Hochschild, 1997; Lewis, 1997; Maertz & Boyar, 2010), organizational control (Alvesson, 2006; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992), and the use of communication technologies (Barley et al. 2011; Mazmanian et al., 2013) routinely describes the *existence* of this phenomenon but it is at a loss how to explain the *persistence* of working time regimes. Researchers working with these perspectives usually suggest that, in order to achieve workplace flexibility, companies need to adjust their culture; they need to revise the psychological contracts they make with their employees in order to overcome double binds and paradoxical messages (Putnam et al., 2013). For instance, Kossek et al. (2010, p. 6) argue that “[w]ithout enhanced cultural integration, work-life initiatives risk becoming bureaucratic structures, lacking mainstreaming into complex employment systems.” These calls for change are undoubtedly legitimate, however the focus of these authors on the need for change leaves them blind for the powerful forces that make such change in KIFs extremely difficult, although perhaps not entirely impossible. In this paper, I show that it is not merely the *existence* of a regime of ‘extreme work’ but rather the social and organizational *dynamics causing its persistence* that are key to understanding the failure of WFIs.

Following a recent renewal of interest in work and working (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Okhuysen et al., 2013) and calls for more phenomenon-driven research in management and organization studies (Krogh et al., 2012), this paper seeks to address the shortcomings of existing research in two ways. First, I will develop the notion of working time regime and propose a theoretical framework to analyse their persistence. This framework combines insight on the communicative construction of work and working time in organizations and occupations with the theory of organizational path

dependence. Second, I will report first findings from ethnographic fieldwork in a leading management consultancy firm. This firm's failing efforts to introduce workplace flexibility allow to empirically substantiate my theoretical arguments. This study therefore not only contributes to the literature on workplace flexibility, it also deepens our understanding of how work is constructed through communication at the intersection of organizations and occupations. Furthermore, it extends our knowledge of path-dependent and self-reinforcing processes in organizations and their social and cultural dynamics.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, I will provide a brief overview on literature on working time patterns in KIFs and their persistence from an organizational point of view with special emphasis on dynamic approaches. I will not discuss individual-centric approaches on workaholics and work-addiction as they essentially "take an individualistic perspective on what is inherently a relational dynamic" (Mazmanian, 2013, p. 47). I will then present the theoretical framework for the empirical analysis, briefly discuss methods, and close with first findings from the ethnographic study.

### **Working time regimes in KIFs and their persistence**

Organizational scholars and sociologists stress the socially constructed nature of working time in organizations (Ancona et al., 2001a; Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001b; Bluedorn, 1988; Giddens, 1987; Hassard, 1991; 1996; Lee & Liebenau, 1999; e.g. Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Formal temporal structures such as schedules, timetables and deadlines "guide, orient and coordinate" the members' activities (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002, p. 684) in a way that enables organizations to "bracket time-space" (Giddens, 1987, p. 153). Informal temporal norms that define "shared, expected patterns of paced activity" (Ancona et al., 2001a, p. 648) also serve as a way to coordinate activities and to make action meaningful. In other words, organizations rely on what I call a *working time regime* – a shared set of socially constructed temporal structures and norms – that "imposes a social order" (Schein, 1992, p. 114) and serves as a coordinating mechanism for social interaction (Hassard, 1991). The working time regime of an organization also generates a distinct pattern of time use, temporal experience (i.e. experience of urgency, 'timeliness', scarcity etc.) and orientations (e.g.

long vs. short-term; past, present or future orientation) (Ancona et al., 2001b; Mainemelis, 2001).

### **Characteristics of extreme jobs**

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Unpredictable flow of work

Fast-paced work under tight deadlines

Inordinate scope of responsibility that amounts to more than one job

Work-related events outside regular work hours

24/7 availability to clients

Responsibility for profit and loss

Responsibility for mentoring and recruiting

Large amount of travel

Large number of direct reports

Physical presence at workplace at least ten hours a day

**Figure 1: Characteristics of extreme jobs (Hewlett & Luce, 2006, p. 51)**

The discussion of excessively long hours, constant connectivity, blurred boundaries between work and non-work and an intensification of work effort in KIFs is hardly new, however dynamic approaches to the persistence of working time patterns are surprisingly rare. The notion of “extreme jobs” has been coined not long ago to describe the phenomenon of people who “work 60 hours or more per week, are high earners,” and fulfill at least five of the criteria listed in Figure 1 (Hewlett & Luce, 2006, p. 51). The term covers the different aspects of a job, time being one of the most salient ones. It has been contended that management consultancies, for instance, have a “cemented high-performer culture” (Muhr et al., 2012, p. 196) and that they are therefore similar to investment banks (Michel, 2011), architecture offices (Brown et al., 2010), accounting (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Covalleski et al., 1998) and engineering firms or hospitals. All of these exhibit working time patterns typical for “extreme jobs”. The existence of such working time patterns is usually attributed to techniques of social control, to gendered assumptions about the ideal worker (Acker, 1990), to the continued existence of the “myth of separate worlds” (Kanter, 2008) between work and non-work, and to discourses on professionalism and careerism (Fournier, 1999; Grey, 1994) that formulate social and organizational expectations about how much time employees should dedicate to work (Merton, 1984). From this perspective, “concepts as the

'workday,' 'overtime,' and 'night shift' designate not only a time period but the attitude that should accompany it" (Epstein, 1999, p. 18). Such attitudes, norms and rules of professional conduct are increasingly learned and internalized by individuals wishing to join a profession, not least because they are "enforced by surveillance, as well as through the profession's system of rewards and punishments" (ibid., p. 20).

However the research cited above is less instructive when it comes to the questions why these assumptions and norms persist and how organizations can change them. These studies rarely attempt to explain the persistence of working time patterns per se but are mostly interested in mechanisms of social control and identity regulation that seek to conflate employees' thoughts, beliefs, feelings and their concepts of self with organizational values and goals and extract as many work hours as possible from individuals (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). Moreover, the theoretical focus on power and control tends to "exaggerate the ability of management to shape organizations rationally and intentionally" (Rennstam, 2012, p. 1073). Such approaches remain silent about the fact that knowledge workers rarely feel controlled (Robertson & Swan, 2003) and often experience their workload as "self-chosen" (Michel, 2011, p. 336). Most importantly, they cannot explain the paradox that while managerial control and power is said to be omnipresent, organizational WFIs routinely fail, making working time regimes appear ultra-stable and persistent to change.

Only a small number of studies have explicitly addressed working time patterns in organizations from a change perspective. Kellogg (2009; 2012) shows that only a few U.S. teaching hospitals managed to comply with a new regulation that limited working hours for surgical residents to 80 per week. Drawing on institutional and social movement theory, she demonstrates how status behaviour and political processes within organizations can block change that is demanded by state regulation and officially supported by the top management. Kellogg's research highlights a number of important dynamics along the status-identity axis, however, her primary interest remains explaining change and not persistence. Accordingly, the author focuses strongly on individual and group level of analysis, emphasizing agents of change and defendants of the status-quo, at the cost of neglecting more system-level dynamics. Perlow (1999), on the other hand, discovered a specific self-reinforcing dynamic

between the temporal patterns, work practices and the social context of the organization (i.e. reward and incentive systems that promote individual heroics). Interestingly, Perlow's (1999) own field experiment that sought to introduce separate blocks of "quiet" and "interaction" time failed in spite of its positive impact on the productivity for those who participated. In line with a more general argument that temporal norms in organizations "can be very difficult to change deliberately" (Bluedorn & Waller, 2006, p. 384), the author concludes that "changes [...] are not sustainable if the vicious cycle itself is not altered" (Perlow, 1999, p. 75). However her research remains largely on the group and dyadic level of analysis, focusing primarily on interactionist dynamics and remaining silent on specifically organizational mechanisms.

Building on this research, I want to develop a more theory-driven approach on the mechanisms that drive the persistence of working time regimes in KIFs. Instead of focusing on 'crisis culture' and 'firefighting' as causes of 'extreme work', this approach is geared towards the more fundamental organizational processes. As will be shown, the 'nature of work' and the identity of an occupation are subject to communicative construction that can assume a path-dependent dynamic and become inscribed into the 'deep structure' (Bowles, 1990) of an organization.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Theory of organizational path dependence*

Originally developed in economics and economic history to reveal how inferior technological solutions prevail despite the existence of superior alternatives (Arthur, 1989; David, 1985), the theory of path dependence has been applied to the study of political institutions (Pierson, 2000) and organizational processes (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2011; Sydow et al., 2009). It deals with situations in which a 'small' (or big) event can trigger a tapering process that can ultimately lead to a 'lock-in' in which the discretion of the actors is extremely narrowed down. The outcome of path-dependent processes is a specific "pattern of action *and* reflection" (Koch, 2011, p. 339, italics added) which is 'inscribed' in organizational routines and resources and can prove difficult to change or, in other words, is 'locked-in'. Key for explaining the (potential) rigidity of path-dependent processes are so called 'self-reinforcing mechanisms' (Dobusch & Schüßler,

2013) that usually assume the form of positive feedback loops in organizational settings. In short, self-reinforcing mechanisms can trigger an escalatory dynamic that results in the increasing stabilization of a given pattern. The notion of 'path inscription' is crucial for understanding the organizational nature of such lock-ins (Koch, 2011). Paths and self-reinforcing mechanism become inscribed in organizational routines and resources – in the 'organizational body' – and not only shape them, but also "adjusts them to the way in which that mechanism functions" (ibid., p. 342). Thus, there is a reciprocal relationship between self-reinforcing mechanisms and organizational routines and resources.

In organizational settings, positive feedback loops are often strongly reliant on the broader organizational – and even on the occupational – context. Since certain aspects of this context suggest that a certain ways of using time is more preferable than another, actors may adopt this norm because they expect that others would have done the same. Temporal norms can therefore become interlocked with other aspects of the broader organizational context to form a 'vicious circle' that resembles a positive feedback loop (Masuch, 1985). A similar dynamic of "cultural entrapment" has been described by Weick and Sutcliffe (2003, p. 73) as "the process by which people get locked into lines of action, subsequently justify those lines of action, and search for confirmation that they are doing what they should be doing." As a result the organization and its members become increasingly blind to negative feedback from the environment and eventually get "entrapped in cycles of behavior that preclude improvement" (ibid., p. 74).

The notion of path dependence suggests that underneath the surface of a persistent pattern of action and reflection there are hidden dynamics and processes that follow a self-reinforcing logic which need to be exposed and 'broken' for change to occur. In other words, beneath a persistent regime of 'extreme work' there may be a path-dependent process continuously stabilizing and reinforcing the observed working time pattern. I expect that such a process is 'inscribed' into the 'organizational body' – in the routines and resources that constitute an organization's structure, culture and strategy. I will argue that processes of communicative construction of work and working time can assume a path-dependent logic and therefore be key for explaining the persistence of working time regimes.



*The communicative construction of work and working time*

Scholars who stress the constitutive role of communication for organization (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011) have shown that communication “generates, rather than merely expresses or transmits, work realities” (Okhuysen et al., 2013, p. 499). From this perspective, what is often misperceived as a pre-given “nature of work” is actually the result of processes of communicative construction (of identities of people and occupations) and is continuously reproduced and re-enacted through the very work practices that are seen as necessary in order to cope with this perceived pre-given nature of work (Ashcraft, 2007; Leonardi et al., 2009). Occupational communities (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984) develop occupational identities (even stereotypes) that are enacted in work practices. Literature on professionalization dynamics (e.g. Abbott, 1988) underlines that the identity of an occupation is “an object of intense social construction precisely because the answer on which we settle is so consequential for the organization and valuation of occupations” (Ashcraft, 2012 p. 14). This encouraged scholars to problematize and trace “the construction of so-called targets themselves” (Kuhn, 2009), instead of looking at how people identify with and internalize pre-given ‘ideal identity targets’. Leonardi et al. (2009), for instance, show how engineering students entered college with pre-defined stereotypes about what constitutes a ‘good engineer’ and engaged in a number of dysfunctional work practices that were perceived as necessary in order to cope with the ‘nature of the engineering job,’ but were in fact also crucial to constructing and reproducing this very nature. This externalization dynamic (i.e. rationalizing the necessity of a work practice with an external ‘nature of the job’) resulted in students using dysfunctional practices with increasing frequency. Thus a socially constructed “character of work can take on a life of its own, regardless of practitioner efforts [...] and [...] profoundly affect collective and individual occupational identity” (Ashcraft, 2012 p. 14).

Invariably, these identity targets have implications for the temporal commitment that members of a given occupation are expected to make to work and non-work (Kuhn, 2008). They can be conceptualized as a result of the interplay of communicative construction processes along three axes: the identity of an occupation, i.e. the socially constructed nature of work; the work patterns prevalent in this occupation; and the time use patterns of occupational members. Integrating this framework with the

insights gained from the theory of organizational path dependence clearly directs the attention of empirical research to feedback loops, vicious cycles and other self-reinforcing dynamics along these three axes. Essential for explaining the underlying mechanisms of a persistent working time regime is the notion of ‘path inscription’ (Koch, 2011). This term denotes the ways in which self-reinforcing dynamics become inscribed in the strategy, structure, and culture of an organization and how “[i]n turn, that mechanism is driven by the very resources and routines that it frames, shapes and adjusts” (ibid., p. 342). Against this background, the research questions that shall guide the empirical study are:

1. *How has Consult come to exhibit the currently observed working time regime?*
2. *How is this regime stabilized and reproduced on an ongoing basis?*

## **Methods**

This research is based on an ongoing ethnographic case study (Riain, 2009) of the working time regime at *Consult*<sup>1</sup>, a leading management consulting firm with offices on five continents and several thousand employees worldwide. Consult was selected as a research setting for a number reasons. First, management consulting firms provide an excellent context to study persistent working time regimes in more general terms. Management consultancies are often seen as a telling example of KIFs (Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Robertson & Swan, 2003). They exhibit a “cemented high performer culture” (Muhr et al., 2012, p. 196) in which long working hours and constant connectivity to work are the norm. In this regard, they are similar to other professional service firms, such as auditing and law firms that have all been shown to exhibit comparable working time patterns (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Coffey, 1994; Landers et al., 1996). Second, as it will be shown below, long working hours remained a defining characteristic of the consultants’ everyday work-life in spite of Consult’s multiple initiatives that sought to improve work-life balance and break the persistent working time regime. Consult has even been certified as a ‘family-friendly employer’ by an independent work-family institute in 2005, the certificate having been reissued two times since then. However, most of these initiatives have failed to significantly affect the firm’s working time patterns. Finally, Consult was also chosen because of the quality of

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect the identity of those involved in the study.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, many consultants experienced it as a significant shift to adjust to the working time regime at Consult and reported on the ways in which they have changed as persons as a result. This supports the argument that it is not just a psychological pre-disposition to ‘workaholism’ that is decisive here.

the access granted. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, finding a company willing to participate in this project proved difficult. Initial contact with Consult was established through a personal contact with a member of the firm's top management by one of this thesis' supervisors. The topic of the study was framed to be about "working time regimes and workload management" in KIFs with a special interest in the implementation of WFIs that seek to challenge traditional working time patterns. After several telephone conversations, in which high-level representatives admitted that the company was still facing difficulties in implementing the initiatives, Consult enthusiastically agreed to be studied.

#### *Data collection*

As most ethnographic research, this study is grounded in a combination of interviews, observation and documents analysis. Since April 2013, forty-one semi-structured interviews have been conducted with consultants on all career levels, HR representatives and the CEO of the firm. These interviews were designed to gather data on the informants' professional background, consultants' work identities, the working time norms at Consult, various flexibility initiatives and HR management systems, definitions of success, work (dis-)satisfaction, and private lives beyond consulting. So far, twenty-one interviews have been transcribed verbatim and entered into the research database.

In early October 2013, I joined one of Consult's project teams as a 'research intern' to work on site on a project for the period of 10 weeks. The first weeks were eventful and helped me immerse myself in the day-to-day life as a consultant. During the fieldwork I am taking extensive field notes on working time patterns, work practices, formal meetings and the informal conversations I listened to and/or participated in. In addition, *ethnographic interviews* (Spradley, 1979) were conducted with all eleven team members. During my stay at Consult, I participated not only in everyday work tasks. I also repeatedly joined Consultants on more informal occasions, such as eating lunch together every day, going out for dinner several times, the division Christmas party as well as the team-internal Christmas party.

Furthermore, a number of official and semi-official documents have been collected and prepared for analysis. These include internal documents, such as behavioural codes,

power point presentations, HR evaluation forms, but also the web-sites of, and newspaper articles on, Consult. Such documents consist primarily of textual representations and self-descriptions (Alvesson et al., 2008) which notwithstanding can be constitutive for the organizational reality (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004).

### *Data analysis*

So far, empirical material has been analyzed in a timely manner in order to dynamically adapt data collection to emergent findings. To tackle the large amounts of data that need to be reduced to a smaller number of meaningful concepts, category-building techniques for coding the data have been employed. These aim at identifying and synthesizing related text passages to themes, grouping those to superordinate concepts and theorizing the relationships between the latter (see also Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The different aspects of the organizational context (i.e. strategy, structure, culture) as well as the dimensions of the communicative construction of work (occupational identity, work practices, working time pattern) were used to build a theoretically informed coding scheme. However, throughout the coding process I have remained particularly attentive to unexpected and surprising results that challenge the assumptions of the theoretical framework of this study (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). All data was entered into a research database and subsequently coded using the software MAXQDA.

### **First Findings**

In this section I present some important findings that have so far emerged from the ethnographic case study. As data collection and analysis are still underway, the findings presented in this section give a direction for the paper in the future.

Management consultants at Consult are confronted with a distinct form of temporal and spatial organization of work. On Mondays, they get up at around 5 AM in order to catch the first flight to the site of the client firm. Days on projects tend to be very long. When not travelling, most consultants arrive at the client's office at around 8:30-9 AM, and rarely leave before 11 PM. When a 'crisis' occurs – an unexpected task which requires immediate attention – working days can extend well into the night. Since all of them have a laptop and a BlackBerry, work tends to 'overflow.' For instance, often times I witnessed consultants working on their laptops while driving, on airports and on planes.

Calls and emails are received at unusual times, for example after midnight or on weekends. Unsurprisingly, some consultants feel bitter about this mode of work, especially when they are in junior position, have recently joined the firm<sup>2</sup>, or have a family.

### *Consult's failing flexibility initiatives*

Over the past couple of years, Consult launched a number of initiatives to improve workplace flexibility and enhance employee work-life balance. Some of which explicitly address this particular working time regime. Consult's interest in improving its "family friendliness" grew in the early 2000s when the company felt that it needed to access "new talent pools", especially women. In the mid-2000s, Consult was awarded a "family friendliness" certificate. This certificate was part of a "work and family" programme run by a non-profit organisation and supported by the German government and the European Social Fund. It is described as a "quality sign for a family-friendly personnel management" and covers eight areas: working time, work organization, workplace, information and communication practices, leadership, training and development, compensation, and service for families. Consult was re-audited and re-certified in 2008 and 2012. During the certification process a number of initiatives such as part-time work, home office, 'Office Friday' and support for finding daytime childcare were introduced. One senior consultant underscored the general importance of such initiatives:

"You know that we don't get enough good people anymore? I had two interns this year, both of them received attractive job offers and both of them refused for the same reason – work-life balance. Same with people leaving the firm – work-life balance. We won't get out of this if we don't change the working time regime."

In fact, it was a common perception among consultants and HR executives at Consult that the consulting job has lost its attractiveness compared to similar career options in other industries which also offer good pay, stimulating work, and steep career paths. While "getting enough good people has always been an issue" (former Head of HR), Consult has also observed a profound change "A general trend in the world of work in the last five or ten years", as one partner put it, is that job applicants demand much more in terms of workplace flexibility and work-life balance:

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, many consultants experienced it as a significant shift to adjust to the working time regime at Consult and reported on the ways in which they have changed as persons as a result. This supports the argument that it is not just a psychological pre-disposition to 'workaholism' that is decisive here.

Consultant: “[...] many people that come to us from school, the ones that are born in the 80s, are not really willing to give up on so much life in order to build a career for two, three, four or five years.”

Interviewer: “How do you notice that?”

Consultant: “You know... we have a lot of interns who are really, really good and who we’d love to hire. But then they say ‘I’m not stupid to exploit myself like this. I’d rather go to COMPANY! I’d also earn good money, maybe not as good, but I’d also have a regular working time or at least I’d know that I can go home in the evening at 6 or 7 and have time to live.’ There are many people like this. And they all belong to this young generation.” (Project manager)

A similar trend was observed in people leaving the firm. Consult conducts exhaustive exit interviews to identify the relative importance of different ‘clusters’ of motives people have for quitting. An HR representative commented:

“[...] it becomes increasingly obvious because the prevalence of health issues has increased as a result of this continuous pressure. And because the average age has increased. We have more people who are married, who have kids, who say ‘We no longer want to be part of this circus.’ In the exit interviews I have a cluster, it is called ‘Personal Reasons.’ For one thing, it includes health issues, and for another, the disconnect from cultural and social leisure activities. And this topic, ‘Personal Reasons’, grows [...] every year it grows more.”

While the overall turnover rate remained relatively steady at circa 20 per cent, the strategic importance of *retaining* talent has dramatically increased. The commodification of consulting services and fiercer competition on the market make it difficult to ‘sell’ consulting teams consisting primarily of junior consultants who have just joined from university. Clients now ask for consultants with extensive industry-specific or functional expertise. In other words, it has become increasingly important to keep people within the firm after the traditional retention time of three to four years.

However, most interviewees expressed strong doubts that such initiatives will achieve sustainable change in the established working time regime. In an informal conversation, a senior consultant called the ‘Work and Family Certificate’ a “joke that is always used for recruiting but which hasn’t really changed anything.” The ‘Office Friday’ and similar flexibility schemes officially framed as a ‘right’ of every consultant, are often ignored or declined with the excuse that “the client expects us to be always on site.” Most consultants contended that such initiatives are laudable but almost impossible to reconcile with the *nature* of consultancy work which one partner compared to “high-performance sports” and many others described as “being on war.”

### **Smart balance Rules**

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On a standard project, the daily working time must not exceed twelve hours. This is achieved by good planning and structuring of projects and maximum efficiency of the project management.

No internal meetings or telcos after 10 PM

As a principle, no one must work after midnight on external tasks (MbO and acquisitions)

No email correspondence on weekends or public holidays (except in exceptional emergencies)

Tasks from an external project may be directly allocated to mentees when they are on site only after consultation of the project manager

Before the beginning of a project, the project managers and partners/principals must specify the resources needed for the delivery of the project. Deviations of the sizes sold must be coordinated with the partner/principal.

#### **Figure 2: Smart Balance Rules (excerpt)**

More recently, several divisions have launched initiatives such as the ‘Smart Balance Rules’ which explicitly target the temporal organization of work and the prevailing work practices and routines of consultants (see Figure 2). The motivation for launching ‘Smart Balance’ was to “address persisting problems and challenges [...] surrounding the topic workload” (principal). At the time the initiative was launched, the respective division was experiencing very low levels of work satisfaction and a very high turnover rate: half of the employees decided to quit within less than a year. The rules were developed internally by a group of consultants and then launched officially as an initiative supported by the top-management. However, 18 months later, most members feel disenchanted. Junior consultants complain that the rules are often ignored by partners and project managers. The partners, in their turn, express strong support for the initiative but are quick to add that it is the responsibility of project managers and consultants to assure compliance with the rules. Project managers, again, often experience the rules as additional pressure and declare that the nature of the project, or overly demanding clients, make compliance nigh impossible. After initial but short-lived excitement, people “reverted to their old routines” very quickly, as one partner put it.

A similar initiative, launched in another division, was based on six points regarding the “work culture” of consultants. After one year of alarmingly high sick-leave and turnover rates, the division’s management started a conversation in the beginning of 2013 about how ‘work-life balance’ could become a more integral part of a “modern concept of consultancy.” As a result, they implemented a new division-wide “barometer” based on the six points listed in Figure 3. In this scheme, the consultants have the opportunity to

evaluate each point in an anonymous survey which is distributed by email every four weeks. The results of the first months of this scheme were discussed at the division's business meeting before the Christmas party. After a presentation of key projects, the division heads introduced the topic and emphasised its importance. "Our people are our most important resource", they said, "our commitment to this tool [the division barometer, B.B.] is unequivocal." Then they handed over to one consultant who had been involved in the initiative from the start and who presented the results of the survey. Very quickly, it became clear that the success of the initiative has been mediocre.

#### **Division barometer**

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At least one evening a week available for non-work activities

No calls/meeting before 8 am and after 9:30 pm

On days with travels, consultants should not have to wake up before 6 am and arrive home after 10 pm

Consultants should have the opportunity to work at least one day a week at the office in their home town

Consultants should receive an extensive briefing in the beginning of new projects and/or acquisitions

Consultants' workload should be kept at acceptable levels

#### **Figure 3: Division barometer**

Three of the six points – one free evening per week, travel times, and workload – scored badly. Over 50 per cent of the respondents described their workload as unacceptable and did not receive proper briefings before the start of a new project and/or acquisition. Only two points, the 'Office Friday' and the rule concerning times of telephone calls/meetings had slightly more positive results. Several anonymous comments referred to frequent work at night or on weekends; one described a situation in which the weekend could only be used for catching up on sleep. Commenting on the results, one of the division heads said that there were "several positive surprises, but [that] some of it is simply frightening." Most of the ca. 50 consultants in the room seemed uncomfortable to discuss the topic openly in front of their superiors. When the question was asked for who the situation had worsened since the launch of the initiative, only one person raised his hand; two reported an improvement. But the majority did not respond. While this anecdote can certainly be interpreted in many ways, it is evident that the success of the division "barometer" has been limited so far.



One of the most surprising findings so far is that these initiatives did not fail because consultants suffer from a chronic lack of time, i.e. because there is too much to do in too little time. As one senior consultant put it, “it is not necessarily the amount of work that determines this behaviour [i.e. working long hours, B.B.], but rather the fact that it is such a strong element of our culture. You simply sit long hours.” Observational data confirmed that only in rare instances, the everyday work-life of consultants can be described as ‘fast-paced’. Instead, it is often marked by repeated patterns of ‘waiting’ and ‘delaying.’ Consultants often need to wait for someone to give them input in order to go on with their tasks or wait to give input themselves. Their work-life is punctuated by periods of up to several hours in which the majority of the team waits for a project manager to finish his or her phone call in order to hold a team meeting, for instance. Similarly, meetings are put off because something ‘more urgent’ needs to be done. The working time regime is so deeply embedded in the organization and coordination of work that many people ‘stretch’ their work tasks because they know that they will not be able to leave until late into the night. One former consultant describes:

“I think it is just more relaxed ... the hours that I work... when I approach everything a bit more relaxed, maybe read the news online every now and then, instead of working at full tilt the whole time. For me this is more relaxed. I stretch, so to speak, the number of hours instead of working with a high concentration for a shorter period of time.”

In other words, it is the distinct ways in which work and time are organized at Consult that are key to explaining the lack of success of flexibility initiatives. But how has Consult ended up exhibiting these temporal patterns? And, more importantly, why is it so difficult to change them? The following two sections provide some preliminary answers to these questions.

### *The historical evolution of Consult’s working time regime*

Consultants have always been associated with a professional work ethos of hard work and high effort (McKenna, 2006). In the 1980s and early 1990s, however, hard work meant something different than what we observe today. The most pronounced difference was that it was unusual for consultants to work at the client’s site from Monday to Friday. Instead, they worked at the office and only travelled to clients for one or two days a week. This had several implications for the working time regime of consultants.

First, although working hours were also seen as long by those who worked in this period, they were shorter than today. As one current partner who started working for Consult in 1991 described,

“[...] it was not so stressful, it was not so demanding [...] as I joined the firm, on projects I would stay from 9 in the morning till ... it depends where you were. When I was at the client site, until 9 pm or sometimes 10. When I was in the office, till 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening. This was normal.”

Compare this to today, when leaving the client site at 10 pm is widely considered early or an “ideal scenario.” The reason to still work longer than in other industries at that time was the sheer volume of work coupled with the lack of sophisticated technology. As a former consultant explains:

Consultant: “[...] we used to do everything on our own – from research to the design of the presentations. [...] you had to work longer in order to achieve something. [...] today, this is no longer necessary.

Interviewer: “What did long mean back then?”

Consultant: “9... maybe 10 PM.”

Second, constant connectivity to work was not yet problematic, and certainly not expected. Protected, as it were, by the lack of modern communication technology, consultants were not available to their clients and superiors 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Moreover, they had to deal with periods of reduced communication as the socially accepted response time was longer. When at the client’s site, consultants were virtually disconnected from the flow of communication. One current partner describes:

“The rhythm was much more comfortable. There was no email that had to be answered immediately. When I was on a project, I didn’t receive any memos. I was disconnected from the communication. I received one fax a day with the five memos that had arrived and that was it. Of course, you had more time for the client. And you could go to the restaurant in the evening.”

Third, boundaries between work and non-work were more clearly defined in time and space. Unlike present-day project managers and partners phoning up their team at 1 AM to distribute to-dos to be finished by the next morning, leaving the (client’s) office meant disconnecting from work:

“Back then, when I left the office, I was done [with work, B.B.]. It was not the case that someone would call me at home... it was just over.”

The idea that consultants should be constantly available and spend as much time as possible on the client’s site appeared in the early 90s. More precisely, it was deliberately introduced and employed as a marketing strategy by Consult:

“I have to add that we used to spend less time at the client’s site compared to now. Today it is completely normal to do a project and spend 100 per-cent of your time at the client’s office. [...] Back then it was common to spend two days with the client and the other three in your own office. [...] the client did not have a problem with this. This constant presence at the client’s site, it came later. Initially it was used as a sales argument, then it became increasingly popular... it was a bit of a herd instinct, a trend in consultancy marketing strategy to say, ‘we are there for you entirely and 100 per-cent on site.’”

In the terminology of path dependence theory, this would pose a *critical juncture*, or the end of the pre-formation and the beginning of the path formation phase. At this point, working time became more than simply a mechanism for coordinating activity; long hours spent at the client’s office became a key ingredient in Consult’s marketing strategy. Just after the introduction of ‘total availability’ in the 1990s, the firm experienced a period of remarkable growth. Until 2001, Consult saw double-digit yearly growth rates and tremendous international expansion. ‘Total availability’ seemed to pay off and may have convinced Consult to continue on this path: The positive feedback from the environment in the sense of *increasing returns* may therefore account for an increasing commitment to chosen marketing strategy. These years of an “elitist hype”, as one partner referred to them, were disturbed only after the dot.com bubble collapsed in 2000-2001, when the whole industry went into a price competition mode and there was a general lack of innovation.

In the meanwhile, however, clients had learned and developed very specific expectations about how consultants work, what they do, and how to negotiate projects:

“[...] clients got used to consultants. Consultancy was something new back then [in the 80s, B.B.] and consultants could get away with more things [...] the client has become smarter. He realized how to deal with consultants and our competitors’ contribution should not be neglected. They employed this argument – we are always on site – much stronger than we have. This was a development from the mid-80s till the early 90s.” (ex-consultant)

This might have initiated a process of *adaptive expectations* both on the side of clients and of consultants, especially partners who have the closest interactions with client representatives. This process has been driven not only through repeated interaction between clients and different consulting firms. Another important driver was the sheer diffusion of ex-consultants, so called ‘alumni,’ across various industries. The alumni often arrive at key positions in big corporations and turn from providers of consulting services to purchasers:

“We have educated our clients. In consultancy it is like this: if you don’t want to make a career in a consulting firm, you typically end up in a staff unit of some big corporation and then sooner or later you end up in a top management position. And if you have been a

consultant yourself, then you know quite well what you have to do in order to extract the most from them [the consultants, B.B.].” (partner)

The effect of this development is twofold. On the one hand, it had a positive effect of enhancing collaboration between consultants and clients. Especially in the early years when “no one knew what consultancy is” (former consultant), developing and stabilizing expectations about what constitutes a consulting project and how consultants work, could have been a key driver for the steep growth of Consult. Not only made it selling projects easier, it also made project delivery smoother as clients had “more realistic expectations about what we as consultants can deliver”, as a partner who had joined Consult in 1992 explained. On the other hand, the long-term negative effects of the “professionalization of clients” (consultants?) began to surface markedly in the aftermath of the 2000/2001 crisis. Clients began to have their own internal consultancy units. The specific knowledge consultants had been selling to their clients became commoditized. “Basically, there has been no real innovation in the consultancy industry since the early 2000s,” one partner explained. The developments, which had facilitated growth in the past, had begun to put the established business model under pressure:

“the client’s expectations, his demands have been continuously on the rise. And there you have a number of factors. The business model that you typically have in consultancy – in very short time we can solve problems that you can’t solve on your own – is under ongoing pressure. The problems get bigger, the time gets shorter.” (partner)

As clients’ and consultants’ expectations gradually adapted to each other, a certain idea of what constitutes consultancy work became fortified. It was rooted in a set of assumptions about where and when consultants should carry out their work: on the client’s site and in by showing constant availability for the client’s needs any day, any time. By the end of 1990s, this working time regime was already firmly entrenched at Consult. First signs that the time regime might have already been locked-in appeared in the early 2000, when a first attempt to re-introduce an ‘office day’ was made. As one current partner explained, the initiative was met with great resistance by partners:

P: “At some point in the last 10 years [...] we re-introduced the Office Friday against a lot of internal opposition. It was not a popular measure at all. Among consultants of course it was, but not among partners.”

B: “Why not?”

P: “Because they had to explain to their clients ‘we won’t be here on Fridays.’ Then there was a danger that the client would say, ‘What are you doing on Friday? I am paying you for Fridays as well. Why are you not here?’ So it is also a culture of dealing with the client. [...] The partners think ‘Why should I do this? What do they want to do at the office, anyway?’

They should sit with the client!’ Partners have an interest to cut a good figure in front of the client. They do not want to get entangled in discussions about what their people are actually doing.”

As described above, while this internal opposition might have given place to a more general acceptance of the various initiatives over the last couple of years, the working time regime remains largely unchanged and exhibits a high level of persistence. The following section presents some thoughts on the hidden dynamics behind this persistence.

### *The mechanisms of persistence*

The working time regime at Consult serves as coordination mechanism which enables consulting teams to react fast to unexpected events (i.e. phone calls, ‘overflowing’ meetings, additional tasks requested by the client) at the cost of personal working time flexibility. As such, it was once a solution for a specific marketing strategy problem. It has then taken a life of its own and become increasingly persistent as the result of self-reinforcing processes driven by increasing returns and adaptive expectations. The original marketing strategy was based on the idea that consultants should be constantly available for their clients and spend their entire working time at the client’s office. By doing so, it implicitly defined ‘ideal’ or ‘expected’ durations of consultants’ working days. Because Consult appeared to be successful with this particular marketing strategy, the ‘ideal working hours’ of a consultant became deeply embedded in the organization; in its formal appraisal and incentive systems but also in its informal culture. Consider the following two examples:

- Consultancy projects are billed by days and not by hours. When *selling projects*, partners need to gauge the length of the working days of their consultants. They base their decision on the historically grown assumption that, when on a project, consultants are 100% available to their client, i.e. work for the client sixteen hours a day. This implies that there are incentives to ‘undersell’ projects, which results in a “structural tendency to work overload” (one consultant). As a consequence, consultants have to compensate the unrealistic promises made to the client with additional work. This, in turn, reinforces the assumption that consultants’ working days are, and therefore should be, long.
- Following the pattern of a self-fulfilling prophecy, project managers and consultants approach the *delivery of projects* with the same assumption about and engage in

work practices which make it turn into reality. Consultants, well aware that they cannot simply go home when they have finished with their work, have an incentive to engage in *work stretching* and approach everything “more relaxed.” Project managers and partners also tend to employ a specific *ad-hoc management style* which is rooted in the assumption that consultants are constantly available and supported by the very strong hierarchies that define everyday interactions. Meetings and telephone calls, for instance, are put into the calendars of team members automatically on evenings or late hours as consultants are unlikely to be busy with client meetings or workshops and are thus supposed to be available at that time of the day. This very hierarchical way in which tasks are allocated and appointments and deadlines dealt with does not take into consideration the current workload of consultants. As the general rule goes, “whatever your superior allocates to you has highest priority, no matter if it is project-related or not,” consultants are given another incentive to stretch their time. In the event, such work practices that result in extended working hours reinforce the assumptions made about the temporal organization of consultancy work.

Against this background the various WFIs launched by Consult will find it difficult to change the persistent working time regime unless the hidden dynamics of the system reproducing it are changed, too. What is more, they engender a number of contradictory messages which might, in turn, paradoxically end up reinforcing the working time regime they seek to change. In daily work-life, the official message communicated by the top-management-supported initiatives is in conflict with the variety of informal and informal signals to which consultants are exposed. Consult employees are often described as hard working, highly motivated, effectively self-managing individuals with a natural predisposition to work much. The rather explicit message of WFIs, however, requires consultants to actively say ‘No’ and demand working less in order to retain their ability to be a hard working, highly effective individual. The uncertainty about what behaviours are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in such a situation is resolved by choosing to comply with informal signals such as emails sent out on Friday night by partners which read “I am finding it strange disconcerting that you cannot be reached on your phone.” Instead of challenging the established working-time regime, these initiatives seem to

paradoxically reinforce the dynamics behind it, reify the belief that it cannot be altered, and restrict the scope of solutions being solved.

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper presented the first findings of an empirical study that set out to explain the puzzling persistence of a working time regime. While still being a “work-in-progress”, the analysis shows that the currently observed temporal patterns exhibit a high level of persistence and seem to be “immune” to change. This working time regime of constant availability was originally employed as a marketing strategy by Consult with big success. I also drew attention to several mechanisms that have driven the path-dependent development of working time regime. The various WFIs launches by Consult fail to alter the system logic which is driven by these mechanisms. Instead these initiatives seem to paradoxically reinforce the persistent time regime. This finding, when developed further, might substantially advance our understanding of organizational lock-ins and the often times paradoxical effects of top-down change initiatives.

In the next steps, the analysis needs to be deepened and extended by employing additional data sources such as archival material and additional oral history interviewing. This will enable me to provide a more nuanced account on the gradual perpetuation and stabilization of Consult’s working time regime.

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