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Re-shaping the logics of office work

Work related subjectivity and discourse in environments implementing so-called new ways of working

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Typical elements of NWOW

From Bill Gates 'New World of Work' memo **to a buzzword for consultants**

Although NWOW practices are not really new (Van Meel, 2011), NWOW poses as an **indicator of modernity** associated with **business values** such as efficiency, autonomy, creativity, flexibility and self-management.

In **organizational & management studies** NWOW refers to (Taskin, Ajzen & Donis 2017, 68):

1. Flexible, spatial and temporal **work arrangements** such as teleworking, shared offices and co-working
2. Participatory **management strategies**
3. Self-managing teams and other **organizational reconfigurations**
4. Integration of **ICT's** in everyday practices

As a managerial philosophy, NWOW is **meant to replace** the legacy of **Fordist and Taylorist forms of organization** (Taskin, Nils and Foor 2013, 4)

A discursive approach to NWOW

In contrast to Taskin et. al. **we do not assume** there is a **'pure' NWOW approach**.

We **do not consider** NWOW in terms of a **fully coherent philosophy** necessarily grounded in democratic ideals.

Rather, **NWOW discourse** is marked by **potentially competing managerial logics** informing the way managers and employees make sense of their world
→ The **'meaning' of NWOW shifts and changes** depending on the logics at play.

We seek to identify the different **ways** in which **office workers and managers make sense of, contest** and/or **criticize** NWOW.

A critical discourse study (Fairclough 1992; Wodak 2013; Angermüller et al. 2014; Flowerdew & Richardson 2018) from **a post-structuralist perspective** (Glynos & Howarth 2007; Marttilla 2015; Zienkowski 2017):

- **discourse** includes but is **not reducible to** symbols, metaphors, arguments, narratives, texts or genres (cfr. Foucault 1969)
- **discourses are inherently social** and **partially escape reflexive awareness and control** of social actors, they are **socially constituted and constitutive**
- human beings can display **a partial awareness of the way a discourse functions** - which is a key condition for critique.
- discourse is inherently **linked to matters of power, ideology and hegemony** (functions of discourse)
- discourse **can be studied at multiple levels of abstraction** (words, sentences, interactions, narratives, logics)

Discursive Logics

Social practices are **structured through discourses** that **operate through** certain **logics**. Social actors may or **may not be aware** that they re-articulate them.

We **all rely on interpretive logics** in order to establish a **sense of self and society** with some degree of **coherence**.

An **interpretive logic** allows us to articulate a variety of signifiers with each other in a way that **fixes** their **meanings** temporarily.

Logics are **named and described by the discourse analyst** but their operation **needs to be observable** in the data under investigation.

Discourse is **never** dominated by **one single logic**. The question is how different logics relate to each other.

Research Question

What logics do office workers rely on in order to make sense of the transition to 'new ways of working' in public and private organizations?

Data Collection & Organization

Interviews with 29 respondents with **different functions** (NWOW managers, Team Leaders, IT personnel, employees, union members, ...) active in **public and private organizations** shifting to NWOW

Qualitative coding of values (e.g. autonomy, respect, participation) and interview topics via NVIVO for Mac

29 analytic memo's containing preliminary observations and discourse analyses of individual interviews.

What are managerial logics?

The **meaning of the label NWOW** and **NWOW-related practices** gets fixed **through a discourse** structured by **managerial logics**.

- Managerial logics are **not only** to be found in 'the **discourse produced by managers**'.
- Managerial logics **aim to bring** the identities, values and practices of the **members of an organization in line with** the interests, goals and/or missions of the **organization itself**.
- The associated process of **adaptation can occur in two directions**. **Most of the time** adaptations are made **in function of the organization** rather than the other way around.

So far we have identified: (1) a **neoliberal**; (2) a **(pseudo-)participatory**; (3) a **humane**; and (4) a **public service managerial logic**. This list may not be exhaustive.

1. A (dominant) neoliberal managerial logic

This logic **sets the tone** for discussions on company culture, the ideal office environment, office worker and ways of working. It is **recognized as being the 'core' of NWOW discourse** - no matter if one agrees with its goals and underlying logic or not.

This logic articulates values such as **autonomy, trust, flexibility, collaboration and responsibility**, while **subordinating these values to efficiency and/or productivity**

It is a matter of trust and values. The fact that we are into NWOW does not mean we are at Club Med now. (external consultant to insurance firm)

This logic **holds office workers responsible** for the development of their careers, competences, productivity and subjectivity in general.

Managers should 'trust and let go' and deploy a **result-oriented management style**, allowing for teleworking and other NWOW practices.

1. A (dominant) neoliberal managerial logic

NWOW is seen to be **a matter of culture where individuals are incited to responsibilize themselves**. The **new NWOW culture is supposed to be superior** to an 'old' administrative culture based on hierarchical control.

In the past employees supposedly found themselves in 'a hierarchical mode' that created a specific attitude:

I don't do anything my manager does not tell me to do. (external consultant to insurance firm)

So they don't take on responsibility, even if you have a manager who is very transparent, who lets go, who delegates, there will still be people who say 'no, no, no, no, I don't take on, it's not up to me to do this.' (external consultant to insurance firm)

The **neoliberal managerial logic does not automatically wipe out the 'old' culture**. Many interviewees emphasize that practices of 'bureaucratic dinosaurs' co-exist with NWOW.

2. Participatory and pseudo-participatory logics

The participatory logic **promotes an egalitarian and democratic organization of decision-making** processes.

The participatory logic is also **articulated in a more minimalist way** as the need **to express** feelings, emotions, ideas and critiques **to stimulate a sense of connection** with the organization - irrespective of the actual impact on decision making.

The participatory logic **can work in sync with the neoliberal managerial logic:**

There is kind of the same philosophy behind it, in the sense that teleworking implies a loss of control on the part of the hierarchy and an increase in trust. (Team Leader about NWOW and participatory management)

I think that one should be more involved in the worries of work and should make these a bit your own worries. (Team Leader)

2. Participatory and pseudo-participatory logics

Several interviewees identify a pseudo-participatory logic deployed by managers who merely claim to listen but push through their vision on NWOW:

He moves a bit like a bulldozer. I mean, he gives the impression of consulting with us but he does not really consult. He asks questions and provides us with information but he has his goal and knows where he's headed. (Union member and Team Leader about an NWOW manager).

3. A more 'humane' managerial logic?

Discourse marked by this logic **emphasizes physical, psychological and social values**. Human **well-being** is placed **at the top of the value hierarchy**.

The 'humane' managerial logic **pleads for an adaptation of the organization to human needs** instead of the other way around.

This logic provides **a basis for addressing the risks** of the NWOW techno-managerial apparatus.

It also **potentially undermines** aspects of the **neoliberal managerial logic**:

- it legitimizes guarding the boundary between work and private life;
- it is often linked to critiques on perverse effects of NWOW on well-being (burn-out, noise in open office environments, ...).

But elements typically associated with a humane logic can also be integrated in the neoliberal managerial logic (e.g. talk about 'a human approach to flexibility').

4. A managerial logic of public service

This logic is **not necessarily connected to NWOW** but **offers a basis for critique on** aspects of the **neoliberal managerial logic** that often informs NWOW discourse.

This logic **stresses the importance of delivering quality service to citizens.**

As qualitative public service is emphasized, **objective oriented management** and **quantitative tools for measuring productivity** get criticized.

NWOW culture and technology are treated as mere **tools** or **obstacles** for giving the citizen the service (s)he has a right to. NWOW are not valued for their own sake:

It is not the way of working that has to change. It is the mentality. Does one give the citizen the time he deserves or not? → This public servant is not opposed to the technological dimension of NWOW but disagrees with its productivity orientation management style.

NWOW discourse marked by a dominant neoliberal managerial logic usually includes elements from potentially competing logics.

By integrating elements (signifiers) from alternative logics, the neoliberal logic is softened (e.g. 'a humane approach to flexibility').

Most critique on NWOW discourse is **limited to:**

- aspects of communication about the transition to NWOW
- insufficient or inefficient implementation of the NWOW techno-managerial apparatus
- avoidable perverse effects on well-being (stress, burn-out, relational issues)
- insufficient participation of office workers in the implementation process

The neoliberal logic structuring NWOW discourse is usually left intact.

In a **next phase** we will examine further to what extent **critiques are (not) embedded** in specific managerial **logics**.

We will **also** question **if and how these logics (re-)shape the sense of self of office workers** and the **power relations** in their organizations.