

Work, Too much Work and Not Enough Work: Implications for Workers and the Workplace.

Gillian Vogl-presentation notes

Essentially, my research on the workplace has focused on the impact of neo-liberal changes, specifically constant restructures, individualised industrial relations and human resource policies combined with moves towards more collective forms of work organisation (i.e. work teams) and how the changes have played out empirically within specific workplaces. That is, how micro workplace practices and the nature of individual's work shape and refine the impact of these changes with regard to how individuals relate to one another. So for me it has been a teasing out of the relationship between individualism and solidarity.

Today, I want to focus specifically on two aspects of my research that I have become particularly interested in and more focused on in the latest workplace interviews that I am presently carrying out.

Firstly, I am interested in the benefits that employees have gained - or at least perceive that they have gained - from changes to the cultures in which they now work. While 'ideal type' work models are never placed fully on workplaces, so for example: public sector workplace might retain some of their 'traditional practices' while mixing these with aspects of more corporate types of models (usually the worst aspects), I am interested in what advantages employees might perceive to gain from these changes. As Thompson (1990) suggests, the need for capital to continually transform labour cannot depend totally on control and coercion. To an extent capital needs to encourage workers' co-operation, creativity and commitment. I am interested in the conception of the workers as a self-actualising agent and how individuals perceive the expression of their creativity and ownership of their work within this conception. This aspect will become clearer once I discuss my empirical work.

Secondly, while neo-liberal changes have been implemented into workplaces to create more flexible and efficient/productive workplaces, through findings from my empirical work, I want to demonstrate that not only are many of these changes bad for workers but they are not always very good for workplaces. They frequently lead, in fact, to less efficient and productive workplaces. I am particularly interested in the aspects of change management where people's roles/skill sets are changed to meet the 'productivity' and flexibility needs of corporations. These changes have become more prominent in relation to other types of organisational change during the global financial crisis.

I don't want to use this forum to present all my data; instead I would like to focus on a few of my more recent interviews to illuminate the above two aspects. I thought that this would be a good forum to get some feed back on some of these ideas.

In addition to going into different types of workplaces and talking to employees about their experiences of work, I have also been interviewing change management consultants to gain insights about the kinds of changes that they implement into different types of workplaces. I have interviews lined up with more change management consultants and also with a business lawyer who has been running a large law firm for the last 12 years as I am interested in impact of changes to industrial relations laws on specific workplaces cultures.

I would like first to present a case study from an interview that I did with a participant a few months ago to illustrate the first aspect of my research. I have chosen this interview as this participant has worked within two extremely different types of workplace cultures.

David comes from a marketing background and has managed to become very successful in two insurance places, one a very “dynamic cutting edge workplace” that I will call XTAM and the one in which he now works which is a not for profit organisation which I have called CareCliff.

David talks about coming from XTAM which for David was always a six day a week job, sometimes 7 days. He never got home from work before 8.30 at night. He was also expected to travel a lot. He said XTAM talked about work/life balance but there was none. At his new job, he has work/life balance but it is never discussed because it actually exists.

David flourished at XTAM, he was promoted twice in three years and his salary almost doubled. He got “drawn into the whole thing” really enjoying the culture but also felt exhausted and burnt out a lot of the time. He claimed also that marketing sector was very ageist in places, such as XTAM and he felt that he was nearly at the end of his use by date. David was in about his mid to late forties.

He stated:

You get the young ones; you let them sort themselves out into those that can do it and those that can't, those that can't find themselves out, for those that can they rise to the top.

David said that he wished he had worked at XTAM 10 or 15 years earlier as it attracted smart, good looking people. There was great humour and excitement. There were huge rewards for doing well, first class cruises and airfares to Europe. If you did well you could get a first class cruise to New Mexico and the CEO would be on that cruise. David was head of insurance and he really got to own his work and make his own decisions. He felt very stimulated and had a lot of autonomy over the decisions that he made.

About three years ago, David was managed out of XTAM. He had some family troubles. He and his partner decided to have a child and his partner suffered from terrible antenatal and postnatal depression to the point that she tried to commit suicide a couple of times. David took some days off to spend with her in the hospital because she was refusing to feed their child. While he was in hospital with his partner, his boss rang and said, “Look David if you can't cope, I will have to put someone in the role that can do it”. David said it was a really “traumatic time”. On the way to a business trip when David was on the aeroplane with his boss, he said to David, “Look David, unofficially, it would just be a whole lot better if you found another job. “This is how it is going to play out, you are going to get crap reviews, you are not going to get a bonus, life is going to be difficult or you can leave”.

And so David was managed out. I am interested in this whole ‘managed out’ scenario as we tend to think of precarious work as only applying to those who partake in casual work or are on contract work-yet I believe that all workers feel more fragile about the tenure of their employment today, even those with so called secure jobs.

David got another job. He describes his new workplace as “a little bit out of the seventies”. David says he was so surprised when got there because this workplace was so “public service” in nature and yet it was such a successful organisation.

One of the things that David has found interesting is “the correlation between the amount of work that you do, the staff and the success of the organisation”. CareCliff is very successful, it is one of the fastest growing of the major funds and has been doing very well for the past ten years. It is very well managed and has a very low staff turnover. There are six hundred employees and over 100 have been there for over 25 years. David said “I must say, when I first arrived here I was a little surprised at how successful it has been given its very relaxed culture and you know, it is not particularly aggressive but I think it has a lot to do with continuity of management which means that it hasn’t tried to reinvent itself every ten minutes”. David has decided to work his days out at CareCliff but there are aspects of his job that he finds very frustrating.

He has to be at this desk each day and is not allowed to work from home, at XTAM he could work from wherever he wanted; in fact they encouraged it to ensure that you were working 24/7. At CareCliff, as long as you turn up to work, they don’t mind if you don’t do anything, in fact in some ways, he implies they prefer you don’t. He feels like there is so much he could do at Carecliff that he is not able to do. He was able to launch their first new product in ten years and that was like “pulling teeth, the attitude is, we like the products we have got and so why would we want to change them”. David feels that they are losing big segment of the market. He says there is an attitude at CareCliff, “If its not broke, don’t try and fix it.”

Thus, in lots of ways David is frustrated and his creativity to an extent is being stifled. He doesn’t have totally ownership over his work. He says:

Here I have this really clear vision, of what needs to be done and I am thinking that all I need to do is have the rational underpinnings for this strategy and it will get accepted and the answer was ‘well we don’t do that here because we might offend somebody’. For me, David says, I can put up with a bit of personal friction if it is directed towards a sensible logical way forward for the business.

David is also frustrated by one of his team members who is not performing and he says that this is not situational; she doesn’t perform on a regular basis. He has asked his boss, if she could be managed out, the boss said, “No, we don’t do that here, we employed her and so we just have to accommodate her within the team”.

I have used this to illustrate some of the findings that are emerging from my research to suggest that people really need to work in ways where they feel stimulated and where they can own their work and use their creativity but also in caring organisations where they have some stability.

While management is not a homogenous group there has been a general trend towards two compatible, yet conflicting management ideologies that have shaped post war conceptions of the worker. These ideologies, particularly the latter, are to a large extent congruent with neo-liberal workplace structural changes but are couched in the individualising language of psychology. The first being the focus on the humanisation of work where quality of working life has become an issue and the latter on the idea of the employee as a self-actualising ego. I am particularly interested in the construction of the worker as a ‘self actualising ego’. The modern construction of the happy and

motivated worker as a 'self-actualising agent' synchronizes well with the language of neo-liberalism. The worker is no longer conceptualised as a social person looking for solidarity and security but rather as an agent controlling his/her own destiny and success. I argue that this has worked to an extent because to a degree many workers are motivated by this way of working (Rose, 1990; Miller and Rose, 1990).

Individuals carry out any creative work under the conception of the 'self actualising ego' in a state of constant change. They continually have to keep up with changes to the organisation of their work in order to fill up their workplace's efficiency and productivity requirements. What I refer to as the "Adapt or Die Scenario". For many, also, work involves constant anxiety about losing one's job. Continual organisational restructures often lead to people being required to change their skill sets and frequently the real skills that workers' possess are devalued or not used at all. Changes to people roles are implemented in the name of efficiency and productivity. However, it is not particularly efficient or productive not to use people's 'real' skills and thus I argue that these changes do not always create more efficient workplaces. And so with that I want to turn to some more of my empirical research to discuss the second aspect of my research that I am interested in exploring.

Colin works for a management consultancy and has implemented change management in numerous different types of workplace, both public and private sector workplaces. He is very cynical about the adoption of corporate workplace models onto public sectors institutions, such as universities and health sector workplaces-he says it doesn't really work.

He gives the example of the health sector.

Like the health sector involves the delivery of patient care and so even at an executive level when you are not the nurse on the ground but you are the funding provider and you are the one that makes the decisions, you know if you look at the health service, there main reason for existence is to provide patient care and to provide good patient safety, so how do you even for a senior executive who is office bound put a KPI on that, say yes you have delivered this amount of patient care.

In a corporate environment, you can give executives and managers key performance indicators and it's around sales and profits and gross margin. You can't do this with public sector organisations because your output is different and your reason for existence is totally different.

So why do they put corporate types of key performance indicators on to public sector institutions, I ask?

Colin says:

Because corporations do it and so it's all prepped into governments and so the government does the same thing now. A lot of management theories that apply to corporations they try to apply to government and it just doesn't work but you can't necessarily convince them not to have them.

I move on to ask Colin about the types of changes he is involved in implementing.

He says it can be anything from people being made redundant to peoples work roles changing. There job changing to a new job. You get rid of people that don't have the skills sets that are now needed or get people to change their skill sets. It can also be about implementing new types of technology.

I ask him about the impact of the GFC and he states that:

The GFC had meant that more companies are risk averse, I think that they are a bit more careful about how they spend and so the implication of that from a change perspective is that you are trying to invent change, so from a risk perspective you are trying to change people more rather than necessarily investing in the cost of change processes. You make changes that don't involve a lot of expenditure and rather you change the roles that people do.

Colin does post implementation surveys that involve some space for open ended answers. So what are people fears about some of these changes I ask?

Colin answers:

They come back to you with I don't understand this, you haven't explained it properly, you have thrown me into this new role.

Colin's comments remind me of an interview that I carried out a week before.

I tell him that I was talking the other day, to someone where he was employed for one job and now he is doing two, one that he feels totally unqualified for.

Colin says:

Yeah that often happens, people get thrown into jobs they don't know how to do, or don't have the skills for.

And so I ask: "How does that make the workplace more efficient, if people are doing jobs that they are not really trained to do?"

Colin thinks for a while and says:

Yeah, well, it might imply that the change process that you took was a mistake. Or you didn't analyse their skill sets or perhaps they were not telling the truth.

And then he adds,

Or it might just be that you think they have the capability when you redesign the organisation and they are just not stepping up. That's what I like about my job, I get thrown into things that I am not necessarily accustomed to doing and its a chance for me to step up.

So what are the impacts of constant people changes on employees and their workplaces?

Tom works in local government and he has been in his job for nearly four years and is on a five year contract. He was employed to do one job and is now doing two, one that he doesn't have the skill

sets for. This has been the greatest difficulty that he has had in the last few years. Also, his workplace has gone through a massive restructure and he describes it as:

If I was asked to describe the workplace that I am in, I would say that it is totally overloaded, highly stressed, dysfunctional, poorly led and that is having a significant emotional, physical and professional impact on virtually everybody on the floor.

He talks about the external and internal pressures. The general manager is at the beck and call 24/7 of a whole bunch of “highly uncaring and manipulative politicians”. They then have a new internal management structure which was poorly conceived and appointments were made to team leaders and they were hopeless appointments. The new manager has never worked in a management role previously and many of the team leaders do not have the expertise to lead their teams.

He says it is a very punitive structure as nobody is prepared to accept the limit of what an individual can do. Tom says:

You just have to do it and if you can't it is because you are inefficient, not well organised or just plain stupid. There is always extra being asked, when your performance is measured you often get the thumbs down and that happened to me last week. I got a letter last week saying “needs to improve”. Totally different from the letters that I have previously had which were well done for achieving X Y Z. My contract is up for renewal next year and I don't want to go. I am still excited by the one job. But the reporting structure is untenable and it's having impacts on my home life, it having impacts on my health, it having impacts on my confidence, if I didn't have my home identity in the way that I do, I would be completely destroyed by now. I am a 51 year old with three children, and it is an extraordinarily childish situation to be in.

And I could go on but just want to talk very briefly about a couple of other people that I have interviewed.

Clem was made redundant from his job at the end of 2009. He worked as an IT consultant in financial systems. It took Clem eight months to find a new role and he became severely depressed during that time. He finally got a three month role working in an Insurance company. The company are impressed by his work and want to keep him on. However, he will probably have to leave at the end of January, as although there are a whole lot more projects-these projects haven't been signed off on yet. Thus he has started looking for a new job. He doesn't want to find out at the end of January that he is unemployed. Thus, there is the possibility that the company that he is now employed at will not be able to keep the same well performing employees. The company risks losing these employees and having to rehire all over again.

Mike an ambulance driver talks about the “dog eat dog” environment that has been created in his workplace that has been created by heightened surveillance at the ambulance service. He states that

Heightened surveillance at the ambulance service appears to improve quality of care in the short term as people are scared of losing their jobs and so display the correct behaviours. However in reality the increased accountability leads to worse care as people are constantly on edge.

Rashad works as part of an IT team in a supporting role to a faculty at a university. This team in the past has been a well performing team. The notion that this was a very well performing team comes from those who have depended on the services of his team. Rashad says that everyone at work in his team is on contract which makes them all feel very insecure. The one guy who has been on a contract for three years has just found out that his contract will not be renewed. Previously they had a supervisor who was very much part of their team and it was a very trusting and positive environment. They have recently had a restructure and a new management system with a manager who is very autocratic and there have been many more complaints across the university about their performance.

As I said the interviews are ongoing and today I just wanted to provide you with some of the findings from a few of my interviews to illuminate the aspects of my workplace research that are of particular interest to me today.

In my passionate mission to create better workplaces, I think there is a need to show how changes which are terribly negative for workers, frequently also have negative outcomes for workplaces. However, it is important to consider aspects to changes in the ways in people work that may also have benefited people in terms of their job satisfaction. These changes just need to be situated in workplaces that don't constantly undermine the dignity and mental health of workers so they can focus on being creative, owning their work and using the skills they actually have rather than focusing on what is going to happen when their contract is up or if they don't 'step up'.