THE CHANGING NATURE OF MANAGERIAL WORK: THE EFFECTS OF CORPORATE RESTRUCTURING ON MANAGEMENT JOBS AND CAREERS

William M Foster, University of Alberta, Canada

John S Hassard, Manchester University, UK

Jonathan Morris, Cardiff University, UK

Julie Wolfram Cox, Monash University, Australia

Abstract

This article analyses contemporary issues relevant to understanding the changing nature of management and managerial work. The argument is developed in four parts: First, to provide context, we offer an overview of the literature on the organization and control of managerial work, tracing contributions mainly from the early 1950s onwards. Second we discuss the first of two related concerns relevant to understanding the contemporary nature of managerial work – strategies of organizational restructuring: an analysis highlighting the effects of downsizing and delayering on managers amidst corporate campaigns promoting 'post-bureaucratic' systems. Third, we extend this discussion by addressing how corporate restructuring affects managers in their everyday work – notably in relation to the perceptions and realities of growing job insecurity and career uncertainty: an analysis which draws regularly upon data we, as researchers in the field, have collected in a series of investigations since the turn of the century. The paper concludes by summarising the content of four research articles whose arguments relate to issues discussed in this analysis of managerial work.

Keywords: corporate restructuring; delayering; downsizing; job insecurity; managerial careers; managerial work; organizational forms.

Introduction

It is nearly 20 years since Barley and Kunda (2001) made their well-known clarion call for work to be brought 'back in' to studies of organization. In our view this remains particularly apposite for studies of the changing nature of managerial work. Despite a growing body of empirical work in which managers tend to be a key focus (see Hassard et al., 2009; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016; Tengblad, 2012), grounded research investigations on what managers actually *do* in their everyday work remain limited. Moreover despite Barley and Kunda's plea for 'relevance' in work-related studies, research in this area can often appear abstract (see Korica et al, 2017) and/or overly driven by the search for theoretical novelty (see Suddaby et al, 2011). This is despite the centrality of managerial work – and of managerial discourse generally – to organizing and notably to processes of organizational change and development (Cunliffe, 2009; Philips and Lawrence, 2012).

In this article therefore we wish to argue a case for research that reflects a more grounded understanding of the changing nature of management. Starting with an overview of theory and research since the 1950s, the analysis proceeds to examine two issues central to our understanding of the nature of modern managerial work. The first is the character of recent forms of corporate restructuring, with this being analysed primarily in relation to the effects of recurrent rounds of downsizing and delayering on managerial work amid business strategies promoting so-called 'post-bureaucratic' systems and structures. The second is resolution of a series of analytical problems at the heart of research into managerial work – these relating focally to issues managers have faced concerning perceptions of increased job insecurity and career uncertainty; matters that appear progressively to define their work. In seeking to make sense of these issues, our discussions frequently draw upon evidence from empirical investigations we, as researchers in this field, have undertaken since the turn of the century. The article then concludes by reviewing the four dedicated contributions to this special issue – contributions that comprise its substantive research content.

Theorizing the organization and control of managerial work

In providing a sense of context, not only for this article but for the special issue as a whole, our starting point is to return to major studies contributing to our understanding of the nature of managerial work. This is done for two main reasons: (i) to illustrate how early scholars anticipated many of the themes of importance to contemporary researchers in this field (and thus the work of the former deserves re-visiting) and (ii) to draw out many of the methodological virtues and values underpinning qualitative research based on the direct observation of managers, their work and employment.

A natural starting point here is Sune Carlson's study of what Swedish senior managers (essentially chief executives/managing directors) do at work – *Executive Behaviour* (1951) – which is one of the earliest empirical studies in business administration. The main conclusion of *Executive Behaviour* was that managerial work needed to be examined and understood in its social context and with a focus on the intentions, goals and attitudes of the manager. To investigate successfully, Carlson suggested, researchers needed both to enter the 'black box' of the manager's mind and relate managerial behaviour to the wider social and physical environment. Primarily researching 'work loads' and 'working methods', his study found senior managers were extremely pressurised in their everyday actions: individuals who rarely had enough time to strategize successfully on behalf of their organizations. Ultimately however Carlson was disappointed by failing to develop clear operational concepts for researching managerial behaviour and felt his work lacked a genuine theoretical system to make sense of his empirical observations. Nevertheless Carlson's work would largely set the agenda for research into managerial work in the decades to come.

Around the same time, C. Wright Mills' eminent account of 'the American middle classes' – *White Collar* (1953) – was set within the broader socio-economic context of the period and assessed its impact upon the working lives of among other groups managers. In Mills' analysis of the 'managerial demiurge' he argued that while managers were now very much at the centre of the 'new bureaucracies' of corporate and industrial life, their work remained highly polemical – in a study that is essentially a caricature of managers' actions and activities. Managers in Mills' analysis were thus cast in a somewhat negative light and portrayed as rather pitiful and unromantic characters, with the nature of their work being depicted as contradictory and paradoxical. Indeed managers in this analysis were portrayed as essentially trapped within burgeoning and unyielding corporate structures, and mostly in ambiguous and circumscribed ways.

Elsewhere another high profile account relating to managerial work and published around the same time – William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) – appeared even more unsympathetic to managers, characterising them as acting in largely undemocratic ways under a powerful, all-embracing, corporate gaze; one that seemingly acted contra to the socio-economic spirit the US was built on, namely entrepreneurial individualism. Other contemporaneous accounts extended these forms of sociological analysis, but often in the context of the ever-growing power of large firms in the post-war period (Galbraith, 1967), with the main cause of growth in such studies being depicted, metaphorically, as an 'invisible hand' driving western market-based economies (see Chandler, 1977).

Additionally around this time two innovative methods were gaining credence for the collection and analysis of data on managers and their work – diary accounts (Burns, 1954) and direct observation (Dalton, 1959). While Burns' (1957) diary-based work noted managers often dealt with and were largely consumed by activities related indirectly to production, Dalton's (1959) observational work noted similarly that managers spent a considerable amount of their time engaged in informal actions, including seemingly irrational, often self-protecting, undertakings linked to hidden agendas and incentives.

This 1960s saw qualitative approaches often joined by quantitative research techniques in the study and analysis of managerial work (see Hales, 1986, on this point), in what became a general widening of the research focus. Research accounted not only for interactions between different levels of managerial work (Stewart, 1967) but also for management-related commerce between the organization and its environment (Burns and Stalker, 1961). The central message of what were frequently contingency-related arguments was that the range of (formal and informal) tasks the manager dealt with – or which potentially or actually impacted upon the work the manager did – was far greater than traditionally appreciated in 'classical' prescriptions of the tasks, roles and functions carried out by managers and administrators (see Barnard 1938; Fayol; 1930; Parker Follett, 1942). Particularly influential during this period was Rosemary Stewart's (1963; also 1972, 1982) work on the day-to-day challenges 'real managers' face in the 'real world', in which she suggested management effectiveness arose from dealing well with a wide variety of demands and constraints, and as a result hopefully making 'good choices'. Stewart's various books on the 'reality' of management became popular in that they were neither heavy-weight academic tomes, nor lightweight populist handbooks, but directed at the interested or 'thinking' manager, who wanted ideas and concepts to help them be more effective in the workplace.

The 1970s saw the emergence of new lenses and perspectives on research into management and managerial work. Notable here was Henry Mintzberg's (1973) structured observation approach, and also the more politically-driven accounts associated with the industrial sociology of Harry Braverman (1974). Mintzberg's observational approach – developed primarily in his book *The Nature of Managerial Work* (1973) – sought to connect, in a very direct way, management theory with managerial practice. His research on the work of CEOs, for example, although seen as innovative methodologically, largely confirmed the findings of earlier qualitative and ethnographic studies. The image was again of a huge volume of fragmented work being accomplished by executives/senior managers at relentless pace – work that was highly interactive, often conducted in meetings, and largely completed by verbal means. By contrast, Braverman's 'labour process' approach – developed in his book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) – inspired research linking the actions of various hierarchical levels of the organization to the (sub-structural/super-structural) context of socio-economic power and conflict (Nichols and Beynon, 1977; Littler, 1982). Extending Marx's writings on the impact of capitalist industrial growth in the 19th century into studies of labour in the 20th, Braverman developed the argument that 'control' of work, on behalf of capital, was the raison d'être of management. Indeed for Braverman this is the only reason management functions as a separate hierarchical category of authority – it represents the 'global function' of capital, otherwise it would just be another category of labour to be hired or fired (Armstrong, 1989). This period also saw Kanter's (1977) thoughtful account of the experiences of managers at *Indisco* – in *Men and Women of the Corporation* – with this work arguing for a less exclusionary approach to managing and the need to devolve power, in what was a generally sympathetic account of managers' work. This however is perhaps a perspective rather lost in many of her later but higher-profile and arguably more 'managerialist' (Parker, 2002) contributions to corporate analysis (see Kanter, 1983, 1989).

The 1980s and 1990s were often characterised by focus on a more technocratic view of management, with research on managerial work frequently drawing on quantitative methods. This period often saw emphasis placed on the role of strategic planning by decision-making elites and 'top management teams' (Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Hambrick, 1994; Hambrick and Mason,1984), and on management being evaluated in the context of achieving ever-greater corporate 'performance' (Kanter, 1983; Kotter, 1982; Pettigrew, 1992). Other research analysed managerial work beyond Anglo-American domains, and as historically distinct in analyses adopting an increasingly comparative and cultural perspective (Hofstede, 1980;

Kanter, 1989; Ouchi, 1981; Pascale and Athos, 1981). Meanwhile enquires developed in the labour process tradition (Willmott, 1984), and also those emerging within an incipient 'critical management' perspective (Willmott, 1987; see also Adler et al, 2008) – often marrying forms of 'critical theory' and 'post-structural' analysis (Willmott and Alvesson, 1992) – continued to emphasise conflictual relations between labour and capital.

Other critically-oriented contributions published during these decades, however, reflected the re-emergence of research in the ethnographic tradition. Among them three works stood out as making significant and high-profile contributions to the field: Robert Jackall's (1988) *Moral Mazes*, Tony Watson's (1994) *In Search of Management* and Charles Heckscher's (1996) *White Collar Blues*. In the research for *Moral Mazes,* Jackall interviewed and observed managers from various organizational levels, over a number of years, in a range of large and medium sized companies. Adopting a social constructionist perspective, his analysis conveyed extremely negative images of the lives and work of managers employed by US companies. Jackall argued that by engaging managers in regular, rational and socially approved actions, in the context of close and enduring subordination to authority, modern firms serve to routinize not only individuals' experiences at work but also their life experiences in general. In so doing corporations shape moral consciousness, with the hierarchic authority structure of organizations being the 'lynchpin' of bureaucratic dominance. In the process managers progressively adopt 'upward-looking' stances that have decisive social and psychological consequences. This is most notable in terms of managers own pragmatism and rationality, with the ways in which they interpret personal relationships largely reflecting their position in the organization. Over time, Jackall suggests the successful manager is one who becomes a dexterous symbolic manipulator – someone able to sublimate their own emotional and psychological needs to the demands of others. Within the social structure of bureaucracy this sees moral questions are translated into "alliances, fealty relationships, networks, coteries, or cliques, as circles of affiliations" (Jackall, 1988, p.39). Ultimately the ambiguity of managerial work and its assessment leads managers to conclude cynically that instead of "ability, talent, and dedicated service to an organization, politics, adroit talk, luck, connections, and self-promotion are the real sorters of people into sheep and goats" (Jackall, 1988, p.3).

In the UK, research by Tony Watson for his book *In Search of Management* (1994) reflected a more dedicated ethnographic approach, with the author (a former human resources manager) being seconded for a year from his academic post to work full-time in management development for a large telecommunications company. Interviewing 60 managers during the period of his participant observation fieldwork, Watson asked questions such as: 'What does it mean to you to be a manager?' and 'What do you see as the essential difference between managerial and non-managerial work?' The subtitle of a book that is basically a discursive diary – *Culture, Chaos and Control in Managerial Work* – somewhat mirrors the findings. Here 'culture' reflects the concern at the time for understanding the importance of symbolic factors in management and organization; which had been a key concern of Peters and Watermans' (1982) best-seller, *In Search of Excellence*, the title of which Watson's book purposefully echoes. Subsequently 'chaos' represents a view of the corporate world as disordered, muddled and confused and where managers can never be absolutely sure of the outcomes of their actions, which adds to the difficulties pervading managerial work. And 'control' refers not only to managers' desire to be in control of their professional actions, but also the influence of corporate control on what managers can realistically achieve in the context of bureaucratic complex functioning. Overall, Watson reveals the pains and rewards managers experience as they cope with both traditional business pressures and changing organizational cultures. The image of managerial work is that while it appears simple in principle it is difficult in practice, because managers constantly have to 'feel their way' in carrying out tasks and roles. This reflects processes of iterative strategic action and exchange within cultures largely shaped by the demands of securing corporate survival amid intense sectoral competition. Watson thus sees managerial work as an inherently 'emergent' phenomenon and presents us with a group of people who – located between large-scale organizational change and what happens practically on the ground – find themselves constantly in the process of making sense of their own biographies, of their importance in the business world, and what they are personally achieving as professionals.

In *White-collar Blues* (1996) Charles Heckscher explored the nature of managerial work in context of the on-set of large-scale corporate restructuring in the US during the late 20th century**.** Interviewing over 250 middle managers from corporations including AT&T, Dow Chemical, Du Pont, General Motors, and Honeywell, Heckscher surprisingly found that managers often remained loyal to their firms even in the wake of extensive downsizing and rationalization. Nevertheless he argued that loyalty frequently aided neither managers, who often felt disconcerted by organizational reforms they perceived as making little sense, nor corporations, which in attempting to retain employee fidelity often found they were trying to protect their personnel from what were even tougher realities. Heckscher argues that during much of the 20th century large firms engaged in an implicit contract with managers, one that saw the provision of long-term employment security in return for employee subordination to the corporate will – an essentially paternalistic convention that delivered employment assurance to managers and operational stability to organizations. However, with the on-set of widespread corporate restructuring in the late 20th century, Heckscher suggests that for the first time managers became treated as a 'variable cost' rather than as part of the 'fixed base', a change accompanied by plunging levels of management morale. In this context, Heckscher explains how some of the more effective firms in his sample attempted to remedy this by moving beyond the traditional transaction ethic of paternalism. He describes, for example, the policies of four corporations that successfully converted the erstwhile loyalty ethic into one of a “professional ethic”, signalling a different type of ‘community of purpose’ constructed around new forms of corporate mission and resolve. In the process Heckscher rejects conventional rationales for restructuring – such as the pressures associated with global competition – and argues instead that America's corporate rebirth will be triggered by the emergence of ‘professional’ managers who ply their trade amidst a decline in bureaucratic procedures and the rise of entrepreneurial cultures, a climate in which he suggests corporate loyalty in the US can continue to flourish.

To return to an earlier work discussed, Mills (1953) had also described classical, bureaucratic, white collar work as reflecting organizational rigidity and narrowness of scope, albeit with a degree of career certainty and job security for the manager. This position essentially presaged another major theoretical and practical reaction in the 1980s and 1990s, notably in the form of the considerable interest shown in Japanese-style management and managerial work (Morris et al., 1993; Pascale and Athos, 1981). Although ‘Japanization’ (Oliver and Wilkinson, 1991) purportedly increased empowerment and the devolvement of decision-making activities, critical accounts reported expansion of tasks, roles and responsibilities in its wake, and thus – when allied with headcount reduction – the onset of significant work intensification for managers. Moreover whereas modern organizational restructuring has seen a shift from the types of collective endeavour associated with classical bureaucracy to new forms of corporate ‘individualisation’ (Dawson, 2012) – reflecting for example personal productivity targets, performance-related pay and individual bonuses – researchers have since argued that rather than such phenomena reflecting managers operating under ‘post-bureaucracy’, large organisations inevitably need bureaucracy in one form or another to coordinate activities (du Gay 2000; Hales, 2002; Jaques, 1990). Thus what has emerged in recent corporate practice is the condition that Hales (2002: 51) calls ‘bureaucracy-lite’ – where corporations adopt stratified structures, but underpinned by an ideology which sees managers increasingly accept wider spans of control, increased levels of responsibility and consequentially much enlarged workloads.

This is not therefore use of the concept of decentralisation in the traditionally understood sense of Alfred Chandler writing about the history of strategy and structure at General Motors or DuPont (see Chandler, 1977; McGraw and Tallow, 1997). Instead the types of decentralisation evident include devolvement of authority partly, or largely, as a consequence of cuts in employment – which have tended to see more, not less, centralisation of authority, and as a consequence the reassertion of senior management prerogative (Iida and Morris, 2008; McCann et al., 2008, 2010). In this regard, the way in which the core corporate message is communicated is somewhat reminiscent of Mills' (1953) description. Indeed, the devolvement of authority in this way largely involves expanding work for managers, in a situation where there is a constant search to increase managerial productivity via cost-cutting and retrenchment (Hassard and Morris, 2017) – with persistent cuts in expenditure over recent decades resulting in a similar scenario for public sector organizations (Farrell and Morris, 2003; 2007). However, whilst managerial work under modern corporate restructuring has possibly become more varied, it had also arguably become more intensive and demanding (see later).

In the post-2000 period therefore much research in this area has concentrated on whether the nature of managerial work has qualitatively changed, given purported shifts in corporate governance and organizational forms (Child and Rodrigues, 2003), with analysis often focussing on the changing identity of the manager, and especially the middle manager (Hales, 2005; Tengblad, 2006). During this period research has often adopted a broader perspective for assessing the nature of managerial work, as in research that continues to describe internationally comparative trends (see Hassard et al, 2009). In such comparative studies, researchers have often offered a more sympathetic view when describing managerial work in corporations of 'coordinated-market' (Hall and Soskice, 2001) economies, such as

Germany, Japan and Sweden. Authors commentating on business strategy and management style outside of the Anglo-American tradition have often pointed to 'alternative' ways of directing corporate affairs and economic matters more generally. In particular they have highlighted alternatives to the enduring dependence on capital markets, for example in the form of 'patient' capital in economies such as Japan and Germany (Amable, 2003; Dore, 2000).

In contrast, the tone of accounts of corporate behaviour and managerial experience in 'liberal-market' economies, especially the USA and UK, has often been rather negative, notably when linked to the effects of large-scale organizational change on human resources, especially middle managers. Exceptions to this are accounts claiming managers have some leverage over the 'strategy process' (Balogun, 2003), or research arguing a case for retaining traditional managerial roles within modern organizational forms. Work on the latter has included the against-the-grain thesis of du Gay (2000, 2005) on the advantages of modern bureaucracy, and Huy's (2001) plea in the *Harvard Business Review* for commentators to argue 'in praise of middle managers' in media reports, rather than denigrate their activities, which had become somewhat normative during the 1980s and 90s, and notably so in wake of Hammer and Champy (1993). Presaging such arguments, Pfeffer (1998) was highly critical of corporate America's natural reaction to economic downturn being seemingly a knee-jerk one of 'restructuring' – variously cutting costs, posts and entitlements, with such measures directed at middle management in particular.

Indeed, by the 2000s the issue of corporate restructuring dominated many accounts of the nature of management and managerial work. In accounting for the everyday reality of corporate life, influential research took resource again to ethnographic methods – such as in Barley and Kunda's (2004) high-profile work on IT specialists in California and Graham's (2003) in-depth study of insurance staff in Japan. Many writers offered a picture of large corporations recurrently launching major structural change programmes in the face of intensified global competition. This offered a marked contrast with for example Mills' (1953) analysis of half a century earlier – which, although far from offering an uplifting portrayal of managerial work, suggested extant philosophies of paternalism working to maintain a sense of job security for managers not readily evident in accounts from 2000 onwards. In fact, as we discuss shortly, accounts of corporate behaviour in advanced economies have pointed to a much harsher business environment globally in recent decades, and noted in particular the rise of progressively individualised and targets-based cultures characterised by incentivised pay systems for managers.

Finally, reflecting broadly on the research literature, we argue for a return to grounding accounts of managerial work in theories of social structure and political economy. This is advanced not only to tease out subjective and intersubjective interpretations of changing corporate environments, but also to understand better the economic, political and strategic drivers behind such changes. In other words, how the changing structures of contemporary capitalism impact upon managerial work, as relayed potentially in accounts possessing a 'touch of realism' (Beynon et al, 2002) or those assisted by 'retroductive' analysis (Reed, 2005). The internationalisation of capital has accelerated and been transformed since the 1970s, including significant developments in the role and influence of multinationals, greater international merger and acquisition activity, and capital and labour being drawn from across the world into global commodity chains (ILO, 2015; OECD, 2017; UNCTAD, 2013). In this context managerial labour has been subject to the vagaries of an ever-more competitive business environment, one accompanied by considerable deregulation of product markets and associated with a predominantly neo-liberal economic agenda (Levin, 2016). International corporate expansion was a notable feature of late 20th century economic development (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 2002), as similarly was the growth of financial markets, which governments have often struggled to control (Glyn, 2006). These changes have reflected an era in which for example shareholder value logic, the leveraged buy-out, and (the 2008 financial crisis notwithstanding) global investment banking have come to dominate the economic stage, all in the spirit of advancing neo-liberal market-based operations (Davis, 2016). These are some of the reasons why we feel future accounts of managerial work should show greater sensitivity to questions of political economy in particular.

Corporate restructuring and managerial work

As we have argued, issues related to recurrent rounds of corporate restructuring have increasingly influenced the nature of managerial work. Recent decades have seen large publicly-listed corporations depicted as recurrently in the midst of major strategic and/or structural crises of one form or another. Often portrayed by business analysts or change consultants as problematic and sluggish 'leviathans', 'dinosaurs' or 'giants' (see Chandler and Malzlish, 2005; Crow, 2010; Kanter, 1989 respectively), such corporations are commonly characterised as weighed-down dysfunctionally by excessive levels of bureaucracy, and possessing systems no longer appropriate for an environment of hyper-competition in liberalised global markets (Hammar and Champy, 1993; Peters, 2012).

In turn, the hegemony of shareholder value logic (Lazonick and O'Sullivan, 2000; Mizruchi and Kirneldorf, 2005) is held to have pushed firms to become 'post-bureaucratic'. This has involved changes based on out-sourcing, delayering and downsizing in order for corporations to become leaner, flatter and more responsive (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994), with waves of restructuring, often involving large-scale job losses, being reported in the media. The consequences for managers arising from such developments are multifaceted, but rarely portrayed in a positive light (Alvesson and Thompson, 2006; Hopfl, 2006; Johnson et al., 2009).

While corporate restructuring is not a novel phenomenon, increasingly media and research reports have discussed the effects on managerial jobs and notably growing problems of managerial job insecurity. It has even been argued that an environment of uncertainly for managers can be promoted purposefully by corporations as a means of securing increases in managerial productivity (Hassard and Morris, 2017). In the UK in 2018, there have been widespread announcements of job cuts among major corporations, partly reflecting industry-specific structural adjustments, but also wider corporate pressures – with significant announcements, for example, at British Telecom, Barclays Bank and Marks and Spencer. Indeed on the day this article was completed, 23 November 2018, Vauxhall Motors, UK, announced significant job losses at its Ellesmere Port plant as part of a 'restructuring' exercise to make the plant more 'competitive' (The Independent, online, 2018), while on the same day parent company General Motors announced they were closing plants in Canada and the US as a way to save $6 billion (Daily Mail, The, online, 2018). However large-scale job losses have not been confined to 'liberal-market' economies, such as the US and the UK, but have also been felt across stakeholder-orientated 'coordinated-market' economies, such as Japan and Germany

Moreover this sustained squeeze on managerial jobs is not confined to manufacturing, as often highlighted in the media, but is now spread across a range of sectors, such as telecoms, retailing and financial services. As Hassard and Morris (2018) noted, recent research in the London offices of a multinational consultancy revealed a key performance indicator for managers to be how much project work they could outsource to contracted consultants in India, given significantly lower compensation rates. While similarly Bowkett and Morris (2018) noted the transfer of managerial aspects of high technology value chains from the UK to the Indian sub-continent for similar reasons. In these instances western managers could almost be seen as being the knowing architects of their own demise. In contrast, one group to emerge as relative ‘winners’ in this process has been elite senior managers benefitting from escalating salaries, bonuses and pensions, often received at the same time their corporations were experiencing major job losses (see Erturk et al, 2004; OECD, 2018).

Despite regular reports of structural change in large corporations such organizational transformation is not always radical. Indeed writers on business and management have often pointed to significant national differences in the extent to which corporate change is experienced as ‘sweeping’ or ‘drastic’, with firms in coordinated-market economies often perceived as more ‘stable’ employers in this regard (Mantale, 2003). Additionally, the organizational outcomes of corporate restructuring are not always so ‘post-bureaucratic’ as the more popular literature on strategic change would have us believe, certainly not in the literal sense of the term (Farrell and Morris, 2006; Hassard et al, 2009; Hassard and Morris, 2018). In some senses there is a great deal of continuity in the nature of managerial work, even amid large-scale transformations. Despite ample rhetoric about the demise of managers (and middle managers in particular) under downsizing, delayering and other forms of ‘reengineering’ (Hammar and Champy, 1993), what remains in the middle layers of corporations are employees continuing to play pivotal roles in administrative operations. Furthermore, despite much corporate grandiloquence about the strategic and structural benefits of delayering, devolvement, outsourcing and network forms, plain top-down control remains the favoured means of organizing in most corporations.

This is not to deny, however, that there have been significant changes to (and greater pressures exerted on) managerial work in large corporations, irrespective of the national context in which such work is exercised (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 2010). To make a historical point, the classic work of Berle and Means (1932) on the nature of corporations suggested the more the modern corporation grew the more powerful and anti-democratic it became. This is a prescient argument in the 21st century, given the concentration of power in large multinationals and their role, for example, in the 2008 global financial crisis. Indeed in the midst of a seemingly habitual tendency in management studies to search for the 'new' (e.g. Suddaby et al., 2011), we would argue historical analyses of managerial work are useful in demonstrating both continuity *and* change in large corporations (see Drucker, 1947; 1964; Mills, 1953; Whyte, 1960). For this special issue such analyses are particularly expedient as benchmarks against which to judge for example how issues of collegiality, loyalty and mutual gain may have been eroded. There is much contemporary empirical evidence for instance of disruption to traditional career paths as a consequence of delayering and attempts to reduce labour costs. Such studies have demonstrated how these trends can have significant and ostensibly negative consequences for managerial motivation, which senior managers are often struggling to address despite vaunted measures to increase employee 'involvement' and 'empowerment' (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Randolph, 1995) and irrespective of whether the corporation in question is German, Japanese, UK or US owned (Morris et al., 2008). Furthermore, it has been argued such disruption is often accompanied by greater performance pressures, increased levels of work stress, yet reduced levels of job and career security (Hassard et al., 2009; Hassard and Morris, 2018a). Although arguably less severe in coordinated-market economies, nevertheless, managers in such economies have also witnessed the flattening of hierarchies, attenuation of loyalty to employing organizations, and work intensification as a consequence of recent corporate restructuring (Jackson, 2009; Jacoby, 2005; Morris et al, 2018b).

Thus corporations have frequently made cuts to their managerial workforces as a consequence of large-scale restructuring, but particularly since the 1990s (Burke and Nelson, 1997; Worrall et al, 2016). What is perhaps counterintuitive however is that management headcount figures for big firms have also grown, for example, through merger and acquisition activity, businesses moving into new markets or (as often evidenced in Japanese and US corporations) employees simply being relabelled as ‘managers’, sometimes in lieu of a pay raise (a process analogous to ‘title creep’, which for many decades was exemplified by middle managers in US banks being relabelled ‘Vice Presidents’: see Sackett, 2012). This all forms part of what Littler and Innes (2004) notably termed the ‘paradox of managerial downsizing’.

Elsewhere, despite almost calamitous accounts of managers being stressed by increasing job insecurity (Burgard et al, 2009; Ferrie et al, 2002), quantitative reports have suggested numbers of jobs in large firms, notably in the US and UK, have remained relatively stable over recent decades (Froud et al., 2006), as have long-term tenure rates (Doogan, 2009), with this situation being mirrored in reports on Japan (Kambayashi and Kato, 2017). This of course points to a degree of stability and security in managerial employment (Fevre, 2007); one which runs counter to the arguments of high-profile commentators such as Giddens (2000) and Sennett (1998), who reported sometimes alarmingly on the adverse impacts of ‘flexibility’ in employment systems. Indeed White et al. (2004) provide what is seemingly a positive view on the issue; although they do express concerns about the effects of managers ‘overworking’.

Researchers from a ‘critical’ perspective however are often highly pessimistic about levels of managerial security and well-being in modern corporations, pointing regularly to examples of job loss, anxiety and heavy workloads (see Beynon et al., 2002; Green, 2006; Hodson, 2001). Thus given the seemingly paradoxical nature of much of the literature, arguably analysts of organizational change and its managerial consequences should address what exactly the levels of change being proposed are, and what the impacts on managers are likely to be, before resorting to what can appear rather under-researched and polemical accounts of trends in corporate management. Arguably Sennett’s (1998) work on the *Corrosion of Character* can be cited in this regard, in that it extrapolates grandly from what is arguably a rather slight empirical base.

Perhaps reflecting a degree of evidential uncertainty in the field, the international study of restructuring and its implications for managerial work by Hassard et al. (2009) came both to optimistic and pessimistic conclusions. While managers welcomed more open and less authoritarian management styles, they were often, understandably, negative about features such as work intensification and the progressive dismantling of the work-home boundary. The latter was seen largely as a consequence of the amount of 'stretch' in contemporary management work, with this brought about largely by developments in information and communications technology; notably the BlackBerry from 1999, which brought with it the facility for managers to be contacted about work 'anytime, anywhere'. This was a major feature highlighted in further research by the same team in the mid to late 2010s, which explored 'work addiction' amidst the 'the new organizational ideology' (see Hassard and Morris, 2018b; also McCann et al., 2008), here noting how new digital systems, such as the messaging platform WhatsApp, offered even greater potential for facilitating corporate surveillance over managers' activities. Taken together however these studies offered little evidence of 'post-bureaucracy' in modern corporations, but rather a tendency for hybrid organizational forms to emerge, structures which may be better characterised as 'neo-bureaucratic'.

In such studies the reported pace of managerial work remained characteristically fraught, with managers typically undertaking long working days and dealing with a myriad of tasks. While for younger managers such phenomena were often just part and parcel of the 'new' organizational ideology – with relatively long days, intensive work and insecure employment accepted as 'the way things are' – conversely, for experienced managers, this could signal reduced loyalty to the company; brought on by lowered expectations of durable employment and linked to more circumscribed prospects for promotion. This was noted in the three countries studied by Hassard et al. (2009) – the US, UK and Japan – but noticeably so in Japan, where purported ‘lifetime’ employment and habitual loyalty to the corporation seemed increasingly moot phenomena (see also Morris et al., 2018).

Given the often negative consequences linked to corporate restructuring and the fact that a large percentage of restructuring exercises fail (see Griffith, 2001), the question remains of why corporations so readily and recurrently undertake them. Cascio’s (1993, 1998) work in the US indicated downsizing is risky and often counterproductive, potentially leading to diminished morale and lower productivity. Furthermore, while Garrow and Stirling (2007) and Gifford et al. (2007) pointed to increases in unpaid working hours and stress among managers, Green (2006) notes that while wages and levels of affluence across OECD economies have increased, the quality of jobs has declined, in part because of increased managerial control and work intensification. So, again, the question arises as to why firms engage in such restructuring, notably given the often seemingly negative outcomes for managerial workforces?

In part the answer lies in the increasing dependence of large corporations on financial markets, and particularly institutional investors cognisance of benefits from corporate cost cutting (Golding, 2003), with managers and employees often being squeezed as a result (Froud et al., 2006). However, we should beware of becoming too obsessed with shareholder value arguments when considering corporate behaviour (Lazonick and O’Sullivan, 2000) and thus underestimating the importance of structural or historical factors, such as path dependency (Bebchuk and Roe, 1999; Schmidt and Pindler, 2003). Indeed restructuring has been practiced in economies (such as Japan and Germany) that are far less reliant on capital markets than liberal-market ones, suggesting other institutional factors are at play (see Ahmadjian and Robbins, 2005; Doellgast, 2013). Furthermore, firms have frequently engaged in ‘false signalling’ and overestimated the extent of restructuring, particularly on headcount announcements (Baumol et al., 2003; Froud et al, 2006; Littler, 2006). Equally however equity financing and the role of institutional investors have increasingly influenced corporate strategy and thus firm management, for despite often disappointing results associated with restructuring, such exercises have significantly reduced labour and management costs (Cascio 2002; Osterman et al., 2001). Thus while various studies point to the deleterious impact of restructuring exercises on managers, notably below senior executive levels (Hales, 1986; 1999; 2002), recent studies point to restructuring continuing to be practiced, albeit arguably in a more incremental fashion (Hassard and Morris, 2018a,b). The work of managers in future investigations therefore needs to be located in wider debates referencing the logic of shareholder value (Froud et al., 2006), the productivity and capacity of corporations and nations (Porter et al., 2005) and even firms' human resource and other stakeholder capabilities (Hillman and Keim, 2001). Certainly when researching corporate change in coordinated-market economies, such as Germany and Japan, there is a need to go beyond traditional research loci, and notably studies of manufacturing, which have tended to dominate empirical investigations (Doellgast, 2013; Morris et al., 2018).

Problems, dilemmas and conundrums: Towards a research agenda

From the above analysis, a number of problems, dilemmas and even conundrums associated with the nature of contemporary managerial work become apparent. These variously reflect trends in the literature suggesting for example: rising managerial job insecurity (amid perceptions of an increasingly competitive global environment for corporations); stalled managerial careers (in a context of widespread corporate delayering and downsizing); inexorable curbs on management labour costs (involving related issues of managerial motivation and corporate loyalty); unresolved questions of managerial work identity (such as why and when managers are working in intensified regimes do they still appear attached to their jobs?); and finally various connections between working time, work intensification and work-life balance (including the impact of new and increasingly mobile information and communications technologies on managerial work patterns). We would argue that these and possibly many other issues comprise a suitable agenda for further research into managerial work, an agenda which we now unpack.

Managerial job insecurity

We have already alluded to the first issue: why do managers, in a variety of studies (quantitative and qualitative) and from a number of national settings, perceive their jobs to be more insecure than they once were, especially when the macro data on job tenure points to only modest change over a relatively long period? Social theorists, qualitative researchers and survey-based analysts have argued that managerial job insecurity is pervasive in mature capitalist economies due to the heightened competition brought about *inter alia* by globalisation, liberalisation and entrance into international markets by economies such as China and India in goods and services (Bachmann et al., 2015; Burchell, 2011; Gallie et al., 2017; Maertz et al., 2010; Standing, 2011; Worrall et al. 2016). Beck (2000), for example, argues this is part of a wider societal shift – from work-based to consumerist ideology – in the move to a 'risk society', while Giddens (2000) welcomes kindred changes suggestive of employees becoming liberated from the 'dead hand' of a job for life (cf. Bloodworth, 2018; Brinkley, 2013). By contrast Sennett (1998) argued such social transformation is 'corrosive', and that the employment effects of contemporary organizational change are fundamental to instilling a growing sense of insecurity in everyday affairs (Mythen, 2005; Uchitelle, 2006). Similarly Cappelli (1999) argues such insecurity reflects a 'dark side' of corporate efforts to increase organizational 'flexibility', with this forming part of a reversion to work patterns essentially pre-dating the 'long wave' of marginal and insecure work for managers (see Jacoby, 1985).

Similarly more empirically-based studies of managerial work also point to increased job insecurity, such as Burchell et al.'s (1999) study in the UK, which suggested apprehension in this regard had spread from blue collar to white collar employees (see also Brinkley, 2013; Fleming, 2017). Other studies suggested job insecurity had progressively become of major concern to white collar employees, including managers, who had moved from being the most, to the least, secure occupational grouping (Felstead et al., 2007; Van Wanrooy et al., 2013). Meanwhile studies by Beynon et al. (2002) and Worrall et al. (2000) suggested this trend was reflected in a decline in open or long-term contracts for white collar work. In North America both Burke and Nelson (1997) and Heckscher (1996) described firms not only weakening job security guarantees, but also levels of employee morale in such firms had decreased as a result, while Maertz et al. (2010) noted anxiety over job insecurity was most acutely felt by those who were 'survivors' of previous downsizing exercises.

In arguing that concerns over job tenure stability reflect a conundrum, we note however that Fevre (2007) is somewhat dismissive of claims for widespread employment insecurity, arguing this is a 'myth' popularized by high-profile social theorists such as Beck (2000), Giddens (2000) and Sennett (1998) (cf. Conley, 2008). Drawing on large-scale data sets, he argues while the rise of part-time work has been cited as evidence of an increase in insecure work, this largely reflects greater female participation in the labour force; with their jobs not necessarily being as 'insecure' as sometimes documented. Elsewhere Doogan (2005, 2009) uses data for the UK, western Europe and the US to suggest long-term tenure rates, including those for managers, actually increased on average in the 1990s (see also Rodrigues and Guest, 2010), which is confirmed by a series of studies across developed market economies (Auer, 2005: Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2016; Gallie et al, 2017; Kambayashi and Kato, 2011; Kersley et al., 2006; White et al, 2004). Littler and Innes (2004) also addressed this issue, arguing that in addition to corporations overstating the level of downsizing in announcements, the aggregate number of managers in many OECD economies appeared to have increased. This was due, they suggest, to a number of factors, including managers made redundant by large firms being later hired by small and medium size enterprises and the increasing practice of 'title creep', discussed earlier.

Thus, the paradox – of managerial tenure rates appearing stable while managerial insecurity levels increase – appears unresolved. Like others, in analysing large-scale data sets Green (2006) argues while job security is at the 'heart' of managers' employment concerns this conflicts with the evidence on tenure, a situation he describes as 'baleful' for understanding in the field. Meanwhile Fevre (2005) argues the 'myth' of job insecurity is one largely perpetuated by the media, and especially the press, while Green (2006) also questions media interest in this issue, which he argues serves massively to overstate the problem. However, Green adds that this 'problem' is also generated by the commercialization of the public sector, the widespread decline in trade union influence, the retrenchment of employment protection regulations, and repeated fiscal squeezes (despite his treatise being published before the 2008 global financial crisis) (see also Turnbull and Wass, 1999). Like others, Green argues that sensitivity to job insecurity has been engendered by perceptions of this phenomenon spreading from its traditional heartland in blue collar work to white collar domains, which has led to a growing sense of precariousness in managerial work (Hassard and Morris, 2018). Notably affected here are managers in foreign-owned organizations, who are seen as particularly susceptible to fears of job insecurity (see later), with intra-corporate competition and the fear of takeover by overseas concerns serving to heighten such concerns (Hassard and Morris, 2017; 2018a).

Kalleberg (2011) also explores these themes, arguing that job stability has become an issue of particular importance for certain demographic groups, notably previously privileged groups such as white collar workers and (white) males of prime working age, who may earlier have seen their employment protected by internal labour markets (see Farber, 2008; 2009; Fligstein and Shin, 2004; Fullerton and Wallace, 2005; Kalleberg and Marsden, 2011; Mishel et al, 2009; Osterman, 2009). A similar pattern exists in coordinated-market economies, such as Japan, where despite scant evidence of decline in long-term tenure rates and a strong degree of institutional resistance (see Jackson, 2009; Inagami and Whittaker, 2005; Morris et al, 2018), factors such as a rise in the number of non-regular workers (Imai, 2011), the disproportionate impact of job insecurity on white collar and public sector workers (Chuma, 2002), the deregulation of the Japanese labour market (Chatani, 2008; Genda, 2005; Inagami, 2004; Keizer, 2008; Mouer and Kawanishi, 2005; Sako, 2006; Witt, 2006), the emergence of restructuring, downsizing and delayering (Ahmadjian and Robinson, 2005; Morris et al, 2006) and the growing influence of foreign ownership over domestic firms, had led to major changes in managerial attitudes towards the nature of jobs, careers and working life (Ahmadjian, 2016; Ahmadjian and Yoshikawa, 2013; Dore, 2009).

These and other issues were explored in the qualitative study of managerial work in the US, UK and Japan by Hassard et al. (2009), a study they replicated in the late 2010s but adding evidence from corporations in Brazil and China (see Hassard and Morris, 2018b). Both investigations found widespread perceptions of job insecurity, despite the fact that many respondents were corporate 'lifers'. Broadly these authors argued the connections between job tenure and perceptions of job security should no longer be assumed, a point also made by Gallie et al. (2017) in discussing the 'hidden face' of job insecurity. Such evidence suggests perceptions of insecurity often result from corporate managers experiencing recurrent rounds of restructuring during their careers (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Maertz et al., 2010). Indeed the majority of corporations in Hassard et al.'s (2009) sample had indeed undertaken significant downsizing and delayering. What is more, many of the corporations studied were either explicitly or implicitly 'playing-off' different parts of the corporation (divisionally or nationally) to gain concessions and thereby ramp-up various forms of productivity, including managerial (Hassard et al., 2009; Hassard and Morris, 2017; 2018a; see also Svenningson and Alvesson, 2016).

Managerial careers

A second area where we feel more research is required is the changing nature of managerial careers, and in particular the impact on managers' levels of motivation and company attachment. Strongly linked to research on new organizational forms, a literature emerged in the 1990s proclaiming the emergence of so-called 'boundaryless' careers (see Inkson, 2008, for a review). Here instead of individuals forging long-term careers within relatively few employing organizations, the predication was for managers in future to move relatively freely from job opportunity to job opportunity, thereby gaining a 'portfolio' of personal skills and experience in the process (Templar and Cawsey, 1999; see also Greenspan, 2017). This scenario however seemed to contradict the image emerging from much of the literature mentioned above, notably of managers' desire for long-term job tenure, particularly in Japan, but also in western European countries, and even somewhat in the US.

Rodrigues and Guest (2010) were among the few commentators to attempt to tie these two literatures, organizational forms and managerial careers, meaningfully. In so doing they essentially caution against some of the more extreme claims of the 'new careers' literature. Pointing to data on long-term tenure, they argue the main claims of these literatures are broadly incompatible, arguing boundaryless or portfolio careers are not as widespread as some proponents claim; notably given many managers play-out their professional lives within just a few organizations. Put another way, there is a need to understand changes to managerial careers in contexts not reflecting the characteristics of so-called post-bureaucratic organization.

Indeed, even if we accept the veracity of increasingly flexible careers, this does not necessarily represent a 'win-win' situation for employer and employee, for instead this may signal an essential transfer of risk from corporations to the people who add value to them. Studies of industries involved in the extensive outsourcing of activities to freelance employees for example have reported interesting but again inconsistent findings on such issues. Barley and Kunda (2004) researched freelance specialists in the Californian information technology industry and found, contrary to their *a priori* expectations, these self-employed professionals generally welcomed the freedom to develop their careers essentially as they wished. However, they also found heightened levels of career anxiety and considerable concerns for future employment among these freelancers. Another set of studies researched the UK television industry, where there has been a substantial amount of sectoral fragmentation in recent times, and consequentially a rise in freelancing activity (Morris et al, 2016, Tempest et al. 2004). Again research pointed to certain positive aspects of freelancing, notably in terms of increased levels of personal autonomy, but also considerable ‘dark side’ (Baruch and Vardy, 2016) forces at work too – especially work intensification, unpaid work, perceived job insecurity and often problematic access to the social capital associated with securing such work (see Storey et al, 2005; Tempest et al., 2004). Furthermore, empirical research has questioned the basis of many claims for ‘boundarylessness’ in white collar and managerial career development. Inkson et al. (2012), for example, argue there has been an overemphasis on personal agency, noting few employees are truly ‘boundaryless’ as their actions are always circumscribed by a range of economic and social factors, such as class, attitudes and gender, which may serve variously to enable, constrain or punctuate managerial careers (see also Mayrhofer et al., 2007).

To return to our main argument, we would contend the idea of a ‘new’ careers model for managers, based largely on portfolio and boundarylessness notions, is simply not borne out by the evidence, other than for selective industries and occupations, or under specific strategic circumstances. Research points more readily to changes in managerial and other professional careers stemming from corporations reorganizing their parameters – for example through outsourcing, offshoring, downsizing or delayering – or else refocussing their business practices in line with meeting ‘core’ objectives (Pieterse, 2012). In large corporations these measures have often combined to limit markedly opportunities for managerial career development – for in the wake of restructuring or reengineering exercises there are often fewer positions to attain or levels to achieve (Hassard et al, 2012). Nowhere is this truer than in Japan which, at least for large corporations, has traditionally favoured relatively tall corporate hierarchies in an employment system where career advancement historically reflects an implicit pact where managers pledge commitment and time to their 'lifelong' employer in return for job security and career advancement opportunities. Nevertheless, recent research in Japan suggests a weakening of this pact, with fewer managerial promotions available and corporations responding to career development needs by 'rotating' managers (nationally and internationally) around divisions, functions and plants – a response which some managers see as largely inadequate (Hassard et al. 2012; Morris et al, 2017).

Motivation, loyalty and identity

Certainly trends and developments such as those noted above have led researchers increasingly to consider issues of motivation, loyalty and identity in managerial work. For the US, in recent decades several empirical investigations have reported motivational problems arising from diminishing identity with and loyalty to often historically paternalistic and iconic corporations (see Cappelli, 2012; Watzman, 2017). By the mid-2010s this had arguably spread to Japan, with younger managers routinely expressing the possibility of changing employers, irrespective of how satisfied they were with their jobs (Morris et al., 2018). This marked a radical departure from attitudes to corporate loyalty in that country 20 or 30 years before. Indeed when consulted over matters of loyalty to an employer, research has shown older managers to be somewhat bewildered and confused by perceptions of reduced job security in the major Japanese corporations, notably the keiretsu, as well as in Japanese society as a whole (Hassard and Morris, 2017).

Turning to what might be termed the managerial identity ‘conundrum’, managers interviewed in Hassard et al.’s (2009) international study reported a litany of complaints about contemporary work and employment, many of which have been rehearsed here –intensification of work, longer working days, restricted career prospects and deteriorating work-life balance. Yet toward the end of many of the (251) interviews conducted for this study, when managers were asked about their *own* jobs, rather than employment issues in general, they often changed the tone of response to a far more positive one, suggesting (somewhat to the interviewers’ surprise) they largely enjoyed their work. This, then, is possibly another area requiring further research and for two main reasons: First there is a need to offer greater empirical input to the much vaunted theoretical debate that consumerism has overtaken employment as the major focus for ‘identity work’ (Baumann, 1998; Beck, 2002) – here we would argue that grounded qualitative and ethnographic investigations represent the preferred ways elicit such information. And second, the recent theoretical focus for research on identity has overwhelmingly been post-structural, in studies which explore essentially individualistic interpretations (see Alvesson et al., 2008; O’Mahoney and Marks, 2014; Watson, 2009) – here we would suggest while such contributions offer innovative perspectives on identity, we feel they somewhat ignore the economic context explored above, which is vital for making sense of the contemporary character of managerial work. Indeed there is evidence supporting a continued attachment to work as a source of identity (Sturgess, 2013), which we would argue is unsurprising given the amount of time and effort managers spend on work-related tasks and activities. Given that this view runs somewhat counter to the findings of a number of studies on loyalty reported in the literature (see Doherty, 2009), a tentative conclusion might be that managers identify more strongly with their work than with their employer, which arguably is another largely under-researched area for management studies.

Working time, work intensification and work-life balance

The final issue we identify in managerial work research relates to connections between working time, work intensification and work-life balance. When assessing the quality of contemporary managerial jobs, various authors have noted the increasing pressures that demands of management work can place on domestic arrangements (Kalleberg, 2011; Standing, 2011). However, although a recurrent theme, there is seemingly disconnection between managers' perceptions of their working time, as reported in various sociological investigations, and much of the macro-level data.

Burchell et al. (1999) for example discuss employees progressively working longer hours and the deleterious effects on work-life balance, particularly in liberal-market economies (see Boisard et al, 2003, for a review). Similarly, Green's (2006) detailed analysis across OECD economies suggested job quality was largely declining because of increased levels of managerial control and work intensification. Meanwhile, case-based research by Marchington et al. (1999) on inter-organizational forms described similarly how a range of new organizational strategies were facilitating the 'fragmentation of work', notably through 'blurring boundaries' and 'disordering hierarchies'. Yet Warhurst et al. (2009) suggested working hours in OECD economies were at an all-time low and thus questioned the veracity of studies pointing to increasing problems and tensions in this regard. We would argue however there is a need to treat the OECD data quoted by Warhurst et al. with caution. First, such data only point to the number of hours worked and not what is actually *done* in those hours – indeed the particularly intense nature of modern managerial work was noted by Hassard et al. (2009) in their study of corporations in the US, UK, and Japan, with this also evident in their later investigations (Hassard and Morris, 2018a, c; Morris et al., 2017). And second, this data only reflects *reported* working hours, when for managers in particular unpaid overtime is now commonplace (Hodson, 2001; McGovern et al, 2008). Imai (2011), for example, notes the extensive use of unpaid overtime in Japan (see also Graham, 2005; Mehri, 2005).

The issue of 'over-working' has recently become one of much media and policy concern in Japan, with the spotlight placed on the employment policies and practices of so-called 'black companies', who have been 'named and shamed' in national press awards (e.g. the annual *'Black Corporations Award'* from 2012). Originating in the information technology industry, the term is now applied to companies in various Japanese sectors. While details vary from firm to firm, the dominant image of the 'black corporation' is of hiring a large number of young employees into white collar positions and forcing them to work large amounts of unpaid overtime in an essentially dictatorial atmosphere (Hassard and Morris, 2018b; Morris et al, 2017). Given the sensitivity in Japan over the length of the 'real' working day, Hassard et al (2009) reported how in research interviews Japanese managers could be very reluctant to state the hours they essentially work. Typically in such situations an interviewee would initially cite the 'official' hours managers were supposed to work in the company, and only later – when pressed repeatedly – report those actually worked. Similarly Kersley et al (2006) draw on UK data to suggest managers are now regularly working a 48 hour week, with this causing particular problems for women managers (see also Hochschild, 1997; White et al, 2004). Other researchers have pointed to falling levels of task discretion in managerial work (Gallie et al, 2004) and that managerial employees have borne much of the real cost of corporate restructuring (such as downsizing and delayering) with 'survivors' now having to work far harder (Baumol et al, 2003; Bolchover, 2005; Kalleberg, 2011; Standing 2009).

Issues of deteriorating work-life balance are further exacerbated by the 'normalisation' of ostensibly anti-social working (McCann, et al. 2008) and the progressive blurring of the work/non-work divide though greater use of information technologies as discussed above (Clarkberg and Merolo, 2003; Kalleberg 2011; Mishel et al, 2003; Scherer and Steiber, 2007).

The work/non-work divide is now often perceived as tenuous for managers (Morris et al, 2017), with the use of digital internet-linked mobile devices placing considerable and increasing pressures on work practices (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Wajcman and Rose, 2011). What is more, the trajectory of such change can reflect subtle consequences for managers in terms of organizational control, as the boundaries between work and home becoming increasingly distorted. Managers often report the 'necessity' of continuous on-line access to work-related emails – via laptops, tablets and particularly smartphones – and a 'need' to be working with the aid of digital devices, whether in the workplace or so-called 'third places', such as cafes, parks or trains (Ashford et al, 2007; Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Spreitzer, et al., 2017). Often extending beyond official working hours and into evening, managerial work can also encroach on the weekend, and thus even further into the traditional spatial and temporal domains of social and family life. Some managers even admit to completing work via digital devices while on annual vacation. Thus, understanding the connections between working hours, work-life balance and the impact of new digital technologies appears to represent an area of increasing concern for research into the contemporary nature of managerial work.

Papers comprising this special issue

Having analysed historical and contemporary issues relevant to understanding the nature of managerial work we now turn to the papers that comprise the substantive research content of this special issue. These papers report on investigations into a number of the analytical themes addressed and empirical gaps identified in this introduction. The four papers can be summarised in this respect as follows:

Carola Wolf's paper on managerial identity discusses whether managers can keep control of their careers based on private ideals and aspirations, or whether these have to be yielded in face of the vagaries of modern day corporate life? Wolf's paper resonates with many of the themes discussed above in suggesting this question often represents a central concern for managers whose careers have been considerably affected by shifting business environments, the design of new organizational forms and related changes to work organization and human resource management. In developing this analysis Wolf argues that managers can no longer put their faith conclusively in historically normative ‘linear’ models of the managerial career, for the modern corporate environment stresses the need for managers to be more elastic, and essentially to become adept at managing their own careers, a situation she feels is well-expressed in recent notions like the ‘protean’ career. As the argument develops, Wolf takes recourse to narrative identity theory to examine how managers can build a protean identity, and in particular discusses how narrative practices can serve to bolster the shaping, realising and protecting of this identity. Ultimately, from a life histories analysis of managers experiencing substantial career fluctuations, Wolf identifies a set of narrative ‘building blocks’ at the core of protean identity building, with these including ‘discovery of conflicting expectations’, ‘exploration of one’s own values and capabilities’, ‘commitment to one’s own path’, and ‘defending that path’. Importantly, this approach links changes in the macro-economic environment to how managers perceive these changes in terms of career implications. Ultimately the paper calls for a more holistic perspective on managerial careers, one that considers the influence of the social context of work, thus pushing the debate beyond the narrow boundary confines of the workplace.

Ricardo Azambuja and Gazi Islam’s (2019) paper discusses kindred experiential issues, albeit through a different analytical lens and using a different research methodology. The paper examines the experience of middle management employment through the concept of ‘boundary work’, characterized as that of negotiation between the multiple roles managers play in the ‘gaps’ between organizational groups. An ethnography of a Brazilian accounting firm, the study highlights the ambivalence of middle managerial work, with on the one hand managers having awareness of their roles as ‘proactive and reflexive agents’, but on the other as ‘lacking autonomy and hence a sense of belonging’. This tension expresses itself as a contrast between the forces of emancipation and alienation, which is reflective of the tensions that reverberate through the lives of middle managers. Azambuja and Islam highlight that these tensions are particularly acute for middle managers, and that their roles vacillate between emancipation (as expressed through a sense of ‘mastery, empowerment and reflexivity’) and alienation (expressed by ‘fatigue, lack of self-determination and detachment from their profession and co-workers’). Ultimately Azambuja and Islam debate these factors and their consequences for the nature of managerial work in the light of results suggesting managers habitually swing between being ‘boundary subjects’ (‘agential and reflexive mediators’) and ‘boundary objects’ (‘interfacing and coordination devices’), with this analysis highlighting how middle management work is often negotiated between the strategic and operational levels of the organization.

A similar tension is also noted by Isabelle Bouty and Carole Drucker-Godard’s paper, which focuses upon the work of managers as ‘coordinators’. While acknowledging that coordination has long been accepted as a key managerial function, they argue the literature on how managers coordinate is under-theorised and lacking in grounded empirical depth, especially regarding temporal aspects of the manager’s role. Using a practice-based theoretical approach, they contrast this with previous work on the nature of managerial work which, they argue, has been dominated by formal and normative approaches to capturing its essence. While acknowledging how many influential studies (notably by Henry Mintzberg) have highlighted the messy and complex nature of day-to day management activities, Bouty and Drucker-Godard suggest a need to theoretically and methodologically integrate elements of ‘action and structure’ through better understanding of the minutiae of the manager’s purposeful behaviours and actions in relation to broader socio-organizational concerns (see Kornica et al., 2017;

Tengbad, 2012) – in other words through seeking to 'praxeologize' coordinating phenomena. Empirically the study examines the case of the skipper and crew of a racing sailboat to illustrate how managerial work is pivotal, in situ, to acts of coordination as they occur. This is explained principally notably through analysing how processes of 'circulation' are maintained in terms of managing various combinations of coordination mechanisms. In this respect, the study contributes innovatively to the literature on managerial work and notably by placing rhythmicity and the temporal engagement of the manager at the heart of our understanding of the enduring flow of managerial activities.

Lastly Amanda Peticca-Harris's paper represents a case study of emotions in managerial work. Contributing to the recent literature on 'compassionate organization', the paper concerns focally the sudden death of a restaurant employee and the need to cope with grief while at the same time managing emotional labour to maintain the organization's commercial operations. The paper basically asks two questions: 'how do you manage a team following the death of an employee' and 'can managerial responses to suffering … be compassionate within a decentralized structure?' In what is basically analysis of the failure of managerial work, narrative-based findings describe material conditions which can 'impede, disavow and inhibit' the compassion process, with this explained from the viewpoint of managers and their essentially ineffective attempts to assuage the anguish of the grieving team. Through this detailed case analysis Peticca-Harris goes against the grain of much research in the field by illuminating the dynamics of managerial failure rather than success. In the process she extends significantly our understanding of the management and mismanagement of grief at work.

Conclusions

In this article therefore we have analysed a range of issues relevant to understanding the changing nature of managerial work. Having provided context for this investigation through a modern historical review of the literature on managerial work, we discussed the effects of organizational restructuring on management arising from corporate campaigns promoting 'post-bureaucratic' systems. Extending this discussion to how restructuring affects managers in their everyday work, we focused subsequently on the perceptions and realities of mounting job insecurity and career uncertainty, an analysis which drew frequently upon our own empirical investigations in this field. The paper concluded by outlining the main arguments and contributions of four articles on managerial work related variously to our discussions of workplace perceptions and organizational change.

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