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Time and Time Again: The Search for Meaning/fulness Through Popular Discourse on the Time and Timing of Work

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Abstract

Many working individuals struggle with the time and timing of work, and often turn to books, web sites, magazines, seminars, and workshops to assist in their struggle to find meaning/fulness in work. In the present article, we first adopt Hassard's (2002) pluri-paradigmatic perspective on organizational temporality to consider the limitations of popular discourse that organizational members draw on in their day-to-day interaction. We consider themes in this discourse along three tropes—*commodification*, *construction*, and *compression*—intended to help members address widely held concerns associated with the time and timing of work. Our analysis highlights problematic issues arising from the focus of one trope over the others. We conclude by considering Adam's (2004) macro-level framework of temporal control to suggest broad implications of popular discourse on the time and timing of work.

Keywords

Time, organizational temporality, popular discourse, work-life, chronemics

In the form of time is to be found the form of living. Elliot Jaques (1982)

Jaques' assertion makes plain why scholarship and civic engagement (Cheney, 2007) on the meanings and meaningfulness of work must include the study of organizational temporality, including the time and timing of work. Organizations are run through time: they are constituted in and through discourse, symbols, and messages about the time and timing of human activity. McPhee and Zaug (2002) recognize this through their identification of activity coordination (i.e., the time and timing of interdependent persons and their activities) as one of the four constitutive communication flows that give rise to formal organizations. Indeed, in contemporary parlance, the centrality of time to organizational communication processes is reflected in popular discourse that emphasizes time management (e.g., time-saving, time wasters, time-and-motion studies, etc.) and time to market (e.g., lead time, development time, speed of delivery, time-efficient transactions, etc.) giving way to discussions regarding how to manage the resultant time pressure (e.g., work-life balance, reduced hours, vacation time, flex time, time sharing, etc.).

The history of industrialized organizations illustrates the vitality and utility of such an orientation toward time. Marx (1849/1977) attributed our relationship with time to the “commoditization” of labor. In the industrial revolution, through labor, time became traded for wages. Employers sought to extract surplus value from that labor time; in essence, to receive more for their money. Taylor's (1911) principles of scientific management reflect that desire, and Mumford (1963) summarized the effect of these changes on the societal conception of time: “Time, in short, was a commodity in the sense that money had become a commodity. Time as pure duration, time dedicated to contemplation and reverie, time divorced from mechanical operations, was treated as a heinous waste” (191).

While this conception of “time as money” reflects a familiar modernist analysis of temporal *commodification*, Hassard (2002) proposes that in order to apprehend its full complexity, organizational temporality must be understood vis-à-vis three predominant tropes, that also includes the *construction* of time by quasi-autonomous work groups owed to symbolic and cultural processes, and the *compression* of time (and space) ushered in by postmodern communication technologies. While the commodification paradigm privileges structure and rationality, and the construction paradigm centers on members' agency, the compression thesis complicates both commodification and construction based on unpredictable patterns of informational development (Hassard, 2002).

Therefore, Hassard argues that exploring time through one trope over others can offer a misleading image of time in contemporary organizations.

In addition to Hassard's framework (2002) which focuses at the meso level and is centered on organizational members' specific practices, Adam (2004) offers a macro level framework that describes the five Cs of industrial time—*creation, commodification, compression, colonization* and *control*—highlighting broad societal shifts since the incursion of clock time into global culture. In the present article, we first adopt Hassard's (2002) pluri-paradigmatic perspective on organizational temporality to consider the limitations of popular discourse that organizational members' draw on in their day-to-day interaction. We consider themes in this discourse along each trope—*commodification, construction, and compression*—intended to help members address widely held concerns associated with the time and timing of work (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006; Ciulla, 2000; DeGraaf, 2003; Hochschild, 1997; Schor, 1992). Specifically, we focus on messages about what are often called “work-life” issues and illustrate how problematizing the time and timing of work within one conception—that is, commodification, construction, or compression—to the exclusion of others is a limited and limiting approach in the search for more meaning and meaningfulness at work. Based on these locally situated practices, we then end by considering the macro level issues associated with the *control* of time described by Adam (2004), providing a link between popular discourse in U.S. media and the broader global implications.

Popular “Work-Life” Discourse

Books, web sites, magazines, television programs, and newspapers not only illuminate many of the struggles people experience wrestling with the tensions between work and home, but these popular texts also influence the behaviors of those who consume them. They not only reflect organizational members' experiences, but they also shape what they do (Zorn, Page & Cheney, 2000). Many working individuals struggle with the time and timing of work and often turn to books, web sites, magazines, seminars, and workshops to assist in this struggle. An Amazon.com search for books under business life results in a list of 310 entries for “time management” books alone. Additionally, every issue of *Parenting* magazine contains a section titled “Work+Life,” while *Fast Company* has a dedicated “Work-Life” blogger on their web site (http://blog.fastcompany.com/experts/work_life/). Moreover, a number of blogging sites have emerged as spaces for people to share their experiences managing “work-life” issues. As working individuals grapple with challenges

related to how they should spend their time, they are surrounded by popular discourse aimed at helping them in their struggles.

Through the discourse of popular media, individuals construct expectations of organizational life and how they expect to spend their time—at work and home (Hall, 2005; Jamison, 2005; Munoz, 2005; Jablin, 2001; Hassard, 1991). In addition to shaping members' expectations about their professional and personal lives, these messages also function as a tool to help organizational members as they wrestle with these issues: i.e., they turn to various popular media (books, magazines, web sites, etc.) as they engage their own work-life management (Webster & Gossett, 2006; Fiske, 2005). Cunliffe, Luhman, and Boje (2004) assert that “how we conceive of time has a major influence upon our ideas of what organizational life should look like” (p. 266). Part of this influence includes beliefs regarding how we should spend our time (Guins & Cruz, 2005; Hassard, 1991). The influence of popular media and discourse is reflected in the dominant cultural patterns that Ballard and Seibold (2003) described as central to organizational constructions of time. It shapes members' perceptions about organizational life prior to entering a given organization and aids members throughout their careers. Prior to even entering the workforce, popular media influence the vocational development process as individuals mature from childhood to adulthood (Hassard, 1991). From this vantage point, popular culture helps to both shape expectations of organizational life and inform current organizational practices.

Ballard and Seibold's (2003; 2006) meso level model of organizational temporality accounts for the relationship among these issues. Particularly, it delineates the role of *dominant cultural patterns* (which shape and are shaped by artifacts from popular discourse) as key to shared temporal constructions, and additionally identifies *work-home conflicts* as moderating individual organizational members' *temporal construals and enactments*. While this model describes an array of distinctions among culture (including national, regional, local, and ethnic influences), it nonetheless fails to articulate how these influences are communicated. Elsewhere, Hassard (1991) describes the vocational socialization processes that teach prospective organizational members proper (i.e., culturally sanctioned) constructions of time, beginning with their early membership in religious organizations and primary education. Yet, neither Ballard and Seibold (2003) nor Hassard (1991) delve into the varied sources of these cultural messages. Findings from Webster and Gossett (2006) suggest that popular media are a significant, and potentially powerful, source of these messages. Thus, we seek to problematize the ways that these messages reflect and reinforce particular conceptions of time and work.

In particular, we argue that popular discourse is a critical site from which to begin exploring organizational members' temporal construals and enactments. It both shapes and is shaped by the dominant cultural patterns, yet is more nuanced, dynamic, and sensitive to momentary historical fluctuations. "From a meaning-centered approach, discourses of work and family are inherited and situated in historical contexts. These forms constrain and facilitate thought and action regarding the contextual categories of *family*, *work*, and *organization*" (Kirby et al., 2003, 2 [emphasis in original]). These "thoughts" are reflected in members' temporal construals and these "actions" represent diverse temporal enactments or performances of time (Ballard and Seibold, 2006). Thus, Ballard and Seibold's model highlights the connection between discourse, thought, and action. Moreover, examining discourse according to Hassard's three tropes—commodification, construction, and compression—illuminates the problematic, and often conflicting, notions and experiences of work time and timing. The following discussion explores each trope to further explicate this argument.

Temporal Commodification: "Balance" Discourse and the Search for More Time

Temporal commodification is reflected through the equation of time with value and reflects a linear-quantitative orientation (Hassard, 2002). As Adam (2004) observes, this valuation pervades industrial life so completely that it shapes our behavior both in and out of the workplace. For example, discussions about "spending quality time" with family members reflects temporal commodification no less than does the common phrase that "time is money."

When "work-life" discussions focus on issues of temporal commodification to the exclusion of other tropes, popular discourse typically centers on themes of "balance" to address the *amount of time* spent working (Perrons, Fagan, McDowell, Ray, and Ward, 2005; Caprioni, 2004; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, and Smeaton, 2003; Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw, 2002). Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2002) frame time as the root to achieving balance and balance as the desired outcome between the work-life relationship. They state, "To be balanced is to approach each role—work and family—with an approximately equal level of attention, time, involvement, or commitment" (p. 512). The authors assume balance emerges as individuals enact their personal and professional activities through expending equal temporal resources in both contexts. Similarly, Perrons and colleagues (2005) assert that individuals achieve balance by negotiating the degree to which they perform time within and across spaces of "work" and "life."

For organizational members, notions of balance emerge through a variety of popular discourse. For instance, in popular media, broadcasts like Oprah & Friends Radio feature shows titled “Work-Life Balance” designed to offer strategies in search of more time for “life” (Chatzsky, 2007). Additionally, troubled by the lack of time allotted to achieve balance, balance discourse inspires political movements and workplace debates about how to recover more time for family and leisure. As an example, citizens in the U.S. and Canada celebrated the first annual *Take Back Your Time Day* on October 24, 2003. As described on their web site (www.timeday.org, ¶1), “Take Back Your Time is a major U.S./Canadian initiative to challenge the epidemic of overwork, over-scheduling and time famine that now threatens our health, our families and relationships, our communities and our environment.” *Take Back Your Time* supporters view preserving and lengthening vacation time as the solution to time poverty, time stress, and achieving more balance. As such, members of the coalition educate and campaign for an amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act protecting vacation endangerment allowing people to recover a greater amount of leisure time.

Time recovery is an important—even critical—goal to humanize the workplace and provide space for meaningfulness in work (i.e., through adequate time “off” in order to find a satisfying balance between the professional and personal). Nonetheless, and importantly, this strategy overlooks findings that, for varied reasons, many organizational members do not use the vacation time or other family-friendly policies to which they have access (Hochschild, 1997; Kirby and Krone, 2002). Additionally, while vacation time allows for time *recovery*, more vacation time does not solve problems with the time and timing of work on a day-to-day basis. This problem exists, in part, because vacation time as a solution presumes the fungibility, or interchangeability, of various times (Bluedorn, 2002). In fact, time also has an epochal valuation (Bluedorn, 2002) wherein problems with the amount of time worked by organizational members on a weekly or daily basis are not fully resolved by an annual vacation.

Moreover, more time off from work perpetuates the myth that separate spheres of paid and unpaid work exist (Kirby et al., 2003). The meanings we assign to private and professional lives emerge through discursive practices. “Work and family are neither specific places nor groups of people, but social contexts” (pp. 8–9). Our experiences of life stem from the meanings we ascribe to our notions of work, home, family, friends, co-workers, organizations, institutions, and lifestyles; and these meanings exist fluidly. Thus, individuals work as organizational members as well as members outside of work (including

as family members). Therefore, only one part of the problem of the time and timing of work can be resolved through *more time*. The futility of redressing work-life problems based solely on the commodification of time is that it ignores non-rational aspects of temporal *construction* by organizational members, discussed next.

Temporal Construction: “Conflict” Discourse and the Search for Better Timing

While temporal commodification explains many of the daily practices that organizational members engage in carrying out their work as well as the strategies adopted to find greater meaningfulness, nonetheless, it fails to account for other time use patterns and approaches. The process of temporal construction, particularly by various occupational groups, helps to explain the time use patterns and approaches taken outside of a strictly linear valuation of time. In particular, despite the formal autonomy of many organizational members to construct time as they wish, cultural values and norms act to construct a variety of times unanticipated by a commodification thesis (Ballard, 2007).

In her study of top managers, Sabelis (2002) observes that “working time seems to penetrate into ‘free time.’” While these managers had the autonomy to determine the actual times they start and stop work, in practice they maintained twenty-four hour availability. In response to these norms, popular discourse centers on the conflicts concerning the *timing* of work. Reynolds (2005) describes: “Work-life conflict exists when work activities interfere with personal or family activities or vice versa” (p. 1314). Not surprisingly, then, when a theme of “conflict” predominates discourse, strategies of integration appear to be a natural remediation (Ballard and Gossett, 2007). For example, a recent Verizon wireless advertisement suggests that mothers get a “Wireless Makeover” as part of the “solutions for freedom and flexibility to work anywhere” (<http://news.vzw.com/news/2007/05/pr2007-05-10.html>). Through this makeover, a mother could conceivably conduct work at the park while watching her children play. The promised freedom comes from the ability to answer phone calls, send e-mail, search information online, and watch a two-year old child play on a slide (ostensibly) all at the same time. In addition to advertisements, *The Wall Street Journal* has developed a Work & Family series in which they report on the “working date” where couples share dinner, wine, and tap away on laptops as a form of intimacy (Shellenbarger, 2007). Nonetheless, an unanticipated

consequence of this alternative temporal construction is that rather than simply offering better timing of work, these strategies also degrade the time of leisure.

Related to the strategy of integration, non-standard work arrangements (such as telework, job sharing, and independent contracting) also take advantage of the spatio-temporal affordances of new communication technologies to address the issue of timing, or when work is accomplished. As Baldock and Hadlow (2004) contend, “work-life” conflicts can be best understood as a “scheduling problem” (p. 706). In the August/September 2007 issue of *Working Mother* magazine, two articles applaud non-traditional working hours (enabled through the use of communication technologies) as a triumph in the search for better timing. Within these articles, female lawyers discussed their law firms’ willingness to provide flexible working hours in order to allow them to remain on the partnership track (Riss, Palagano, and Ebron, 2007). The number of hours remained the same, but the timing of work activities changed. In their search for better timing, these women perform much of their work in the late hours of evening or early hours of the morning while their loved ones sleep.

Certainly, the flexible work arrangements afforded via new communication technologies that offer organizational members discretion over the timing of activities is one avenue in which we might find greater meaningfulness in our work (i.e., through being able to successfully navigate professional and personal demands in our own time and place). However, the problem with a focus on integrating these spheres of activity is that communication technologies offer remarkable possibilities for constructing both our own freedom and bondage. Technology can be viewed as not only empowering employees by increasing autonomy and flexibility, but it also can exploit and control employees (Eriksen, 2001; Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgenson, and Buzzanell, 2003; Broadfoot, 2001). This reality is unanticipated by a construction thesis, as Kirby and colleagues (2003) point out: “New technologies are the apparatus through which employers intrude across boundaries into their employees’ personal lives to extract ever increasing amounts of time and energy” (p. 8). Likewise, Broadfoot (2001) suggests that by dissolving all boundaries, the virtual workplace encourages both a “workaholic heaven and workaholic hell” where employees simultaneously feel autonomy and control (p. 113). These findings epitomize the problem with the timing solutions found in conflict discourse. That is, the idea that *timing* conflicts can be resolved by integrating work and “life” into the same time and space overlooks not only competing cultural constructions of time, but also the conception of time as a commodity and the unintended consequences of technological development, described next.

Temporal (De)Compression: “Slow” Discourse and the Search for the Right Speed

Temporal compression proceeds from the observation that “contemporary organizational practices are based on time-frames that lie beyond conscious human experience” based on the increasing speed of each successive generation of communication technologies (Hassard, 2002, 889). Compression is a measure of the combined effect of the *time* (i.e., scarcity, or lack of time) and *timing* (i.e., scheduling, or when work occurs) of work, leading to an increased pace of life.

In response to compression, which “implies pressure on and within time frames” (Sabelis, 2002, 129), popular discourse centers on slowing down, or downshifting. SlowMovement.com describes: “Downshifting is a fast growing movement of people who choose voluntary simplicity in all aspects of their life. Downshifter go beyond materialism—beyond the fast life” (www.slowdown.com, ¶1). Notably, downshifter “accept less money through fewer hours worked in order to have time for the important things in life” (www.slowmovement.com/shifting.php, ¶1). The website recommends a variety of books designed to help the aspiring downshifter, such as *Downshifting: A Guide to Happier Simpler Living* (Ghazi & Jones, 2004), and goes so far as to state that: “This book helps us to understand why downshifting is the only sensible option” (www.slowmovement.com/shifting.php, ¶1). Living Slow entails taking time to connect with the places, people, and food in one’s life. The “Slow Food Manifesto” states, “A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of Fast Life” (www.slowmovement.com/slow_food.php). Balance comes with slow enjoyment and pleasure of surroundings.

In a similar movement, Timothy Ferriss, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The 4-Hour Work Week* (2007), suggests “skip 9–5, work anywhere, and join the new rich” (<http://fourhourworkweek.com/index.htm>). Ferriss urges people to use time and mobility to create a new Lifestyle Design and “outsource your life.” Both movements offer the same solution for the overworked individual seeking balance: slow down and work less.

The strategy of downshifting as “the only sensible option” in managing compression overlooks both the economic system that led to the commodification of time and the cultural values that shape and are shaped by our constructions of time. In terms of commodification, the fact is that, for the working poor, fewer hours clocked will not lead to more meaningfulness in their work. They literally cannot afford to slow down: Food, clothing, and shelter are indeed

among the “important things in life.” The solution of downshifting privileges the concerns of wealthier segments of society. For example, the outsourcing of personal and family services is unrealistic for the working poor. Additionally, the downshifting solution is profoundly insensitive to overworked, overburdened, tired segments of the workforce for whom the option does not exist (Ehrenreich, 2001). Reflecting on the thirty-five hour work-week in France, Honoré (2004) notes: “Blue-collar workers get an especially raw deal. Restrictions on overtime have cut their income, and many have lost control over when they can take vacations. To workers who actually want to put in longer hours, the system is anathema” (198).

In terms of culturally-bound, locally-situated constructions of time, while the intent of the reduced workweek is to make work less stressful (and more productive), this objective is not always realized. Honoré (2004) notes other unintended consequences of the 35-hour French workweek:

The state enforces the thirty-five hour week with nit-picking inspectors, who count cars in company parking lots and look for lights on in offices after 6 PM. Employers are more likely to frown on coffee and toilet breaks. Some French shops now have to shut early so that staff can leave bang on the official closing time. The system is flawed, and everybody knows it ... In a landmark poll in September 2003, a slight majority of French citizens said the country should return to a thirty-nine-hour week. (Honoré 2004, 198)

Thus, the reluctance of employers to truly embrace the system has led to more stressful work lives for their employees as they struggle to complete more work in less time. As well, in an ironic twist, the state enforcement of a policy designed to reduce the pace of work has led to greater anxiety about the need to be timely. Constructions of time are always less rational and resistant to change (Schein, 1992) than either a commodification or compression thesis predicts, another important consideration in the search for more meaning/fullness in work. We conclude below by considering the macro level issues associated with the *control* of time described by Adam (2004), providing a link between popular discourse in U.S. media and broader implications.

Considering Control in the Search for Meaning/fullness

Amidst a backdrop of increased working hours, the proliferation of asynchronous technologies that extend work into all spheres of life, and a general perception that the pace of life has grown faster, organizational members are turning to popular media outlets in their efforts to remedy perceived prob-

lems in the time and timing of their work. The books, web sites, magazines, television programs, and newspapers to which they turn offer at least three predominant solutions to these challenges consistent with the major tropes in organizational discourse—temporal commodification, temporal construction, and temporal (de)compression (Hassard, 2002). Popular discourse has taken a similar tact and reflects a related range of themes. Reflecting a commodification trope, organizational members are advised to recover more time for leisure. Reflecting a construction trope, organizational members are encouraged to use autonomous work settings to engineer better timing of work. Reflecting a compression trope, organizational members are urged to slow down in all spheres of life, including fewer hours clocked at work. Each of these approaches may assist members in finding more meaning/fullness at work; nonetheless, applied in isolation, each has fundamental weaknesses. Part of the problem is that individually negotiated solutions—such as effort to find balance or to find better timing or to slow down—can prove difficult in attempting to manage complex economic, social, and cultural patterns.

While Hassard's framework (2002) focuses at the meso level and helps us to problematize the popular discourse that organizational members consult in the search for more meaning/fullness at work, Adam (2004) offers a macro level framework that helps us to consider broader cultural norms that ultimately enable and constrain organizational members' practices. Adam (2004) asserts that *control* is the larger, broad concept encompassing the five Cs of industrial time—*creation, commodification, compression, colonization, and control*. She observes:

The pursuit of temporal control confronts us with the (im)possibility of the task, tempers the industrial hubris. When so much control fails and converts intended actions into unintended consequences, there is a need to (re)consider the place and role of humans in the cosmic scheme of things, to take stock of the ways we approach finitude and the temporal limits to human being.

This observation suggests how a cultural orientation toward the control of time underlies all of the approaches (intended to lead toward greater meaning) found in popular discourse. Notably, the control of time is framed as both the problem and the solution to more meaning/fullness at work, reflecting an objectified, externalized time (Adam, 2004). Indeed, "meaning" serves as a proxy for "control" in organizational members' search for the proper time and timing of work.

Adam argues that the successes we have enjoyed, culturally and globally, in perfecting the control of time—taken to their extreme—have now led to a lack of control over time. She notes that, "for clock time to exist and thus to

be measurable and controllable there has to be duration, an interval between two points in time ... The principles of instanteity and simultaneity of action across space ... are encountered in quantum physics; they have no place in the Newtonian world ... that we as embodied beings inhabit” (p. 146). Ironically, our obsession with the time control has created a time world where control is devoid of meaning. She ends by asserting that new social relations of time will be required to create new possibilities in our search for greater meaning/fullness.

Toward creating new social relations of time, Bluedorn and Waller (2006) advocate focus on proper stewardship of the *temporal commons*, defined as “the shared conceptualization of time and the set of resultant values, beliefs, and behaviors regarding time, as created and applied by members of a culture-carrying collectivity” (p. 367). Their conceptualization invites us to consider the time and timing of work from multiple vantage points, and directs our attention toward the role of alternate discourse and collective action in addressing the problem. Currently, however, market-driven values have been applied to enclose this temporal commons. This is reflected in industrial norms that are characterized by the control of time and beliefs that time is valued based solely on its transaction potential (Adam, 2004; Bluedorn and Waller, 2006).

Taken together, Adam’s (2004) and Bluedorn and Waller’s (2006) observations suggest that controlling the time and timing of work (through more vacation, or better timing, or working less) will not necessarily offer organizational members greater meaning/fullness. Rather, efforts that contribute to a cultural shift in our time worlds (Adam, 2004) are an essential aspect in the search for meaning/fullness.

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