

PROFESSIONALIZATION, RISK TRANSFER AND EFFECT ON GENDER GAP IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we demonstrate that Project Management (PM) in Information Technologies (IT) sector, despite the claims of autonomy and self-determination at work of creative experts, sets up fairly tight controls through management and the rhetoric of professionalism. The client's position of strength overrides the employer's direct control, transferring a major share of the risk inherent in PM to the IT experts themselves. Ensuing long hours of unplanned and unpaid overtime are the most important obstacle facing women in IT's workforce. This paper is based on a qualitative research conducted on 7 Canadian companies acting in multimedia, information technology (IT) business services and optics-photonics. We have interviewed 88 IT experts, women and men, who talk about their working conditions.

KEY WORDS

Project management, professionalism, autonomy, control, client, risk transfer, women in IT

CLASSIFICATION

Managing human resources, Gender

Professionalization, risk transfer, and the effect on gender gap in project management

1. Introduction

In North America, as in Europe, women are significantly underrepresented among Information Technologies (IT) experts in knowledge intensive business-to-business technological services (B2BTS) firms, in contrast to highly skilled professionals in general (Chasserio & Legault, 2005, 2010). Many scholars have stressed that new organizational forms and managerial practices, particularly project management (PM), have arisen in knowledge-intensive firms (Barley and Kunda, 2004, p. 304; Child and McGrath, 2001; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Robertson and Hammersley, 2000; Robertson and Swan, 2003), and some point out that they may account for gender bias in the workforce (Cartwright and Gale, 1995; Gale and Cartwright, 1995; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Perrons, 2003).

Why should this be so? From many points of view, these are good jobs. These highly skilled people earn between 50% and 100% more than people in the traditional economy with same education (Chasserio & Legault, 2010).

Their jobs also enjoy a certain prestige, not merely by virtue of being essential to the economy, but because of their inherent autonomy. Among the IT experts we have spoken to, 76% say they are very independent when making the chief decisions incumbent upon them and autonomy is actually the most important quality required of them (Chasserio & Legault, 2009).

We have been studying this sector in an attempt to explain the low proportion of women in it, which was greatly lamented at the time we launched the study, due to the coexistence of a labor shortage. In 2001, not just in Canada, but in the U.S. and the European Community alike, women

accounted for no more than 20% of the workforce in the sector (Chasserio & Legault, 2010). In the organizations we visited, the situation was similar, and the women never numbered more than a quarter of all employees.

Things did not look like improving afterwards. In 2003, only one-third of women with a computer science bachelor's degree were still employed in a science, engineering, or technical (SET) job two years after graduation (Arrache, 2007a). According to a North American study by the Center for Work-Life Policy, 74% of women in technology report "loving their work," yet these women leave their careers at a staggering rate: 56% of technical women leave at the "mid-level" point just when the loss of their talent is most costly to companies. This is more than double the quit rate for men. It is also higher than the quit rate for women in science (47%) and engineering (39%) (Ashcraft and Blithe, 2009, p. 11).

Recruiting highly skilled workers is harder in those fields than in others (Arrache, 2007a, p. 4) and women are still minority in corresponding training programs (from 20 to 25% between 2000 and 2006) while in other university programs as a whole they are now more than half of students (Arrache, 2007b, p. 42).

The study of work-life balance in this segment of the labor market sheds light on the wider canvas of human resource (HR) management practices in this part of the so-called new economy and helps explain this social phenomenon.

In this paper, we demonstrate that PM in the sector, despite the claims of creative autonomy at work for skilled workers, actually sets up fairly tight controls, not just through management, but through the rhetoric of professionalism. These means render the experts' autonomy merely operational. The client's position of strength overrides the employer's direct control of working hours, transferring a major share of the risk inherent in PM to the IT experts themselves. As a consequence of this transfer, experts are held responsible of the projects' success while having no

control on the constraints of the “iron triangle”; yet, these constraints are usually negotiated very tightly in a highly competitive context. Experts are thus subjected to high pressure to work very long hours, as this remains the only locus of flexibility. Long hours are the most important obstacle facing women in IT’s workforce and can account for their scarcity (noted both in social sciences literature and among our research sites); worst, women as an end result are seen as unable to meet the so-defined “professional” standards of PM.

2. Methods

We investigated seven Montreal companies that employ highly skilled people. The core sample consists of five small, loosely structured Business to Business technology services firms (B2BTS) in the areas of multimedia, information technology (IT) business services, and optics-photonics. Two big bureaucracies (a corporate real-estate management company and an insurance firm) in which we interviewed professionals from the IT department serve as the comparative sample. We chose them in order to compare conditions relating to the same professions in different organizational contexts.

We conducted 88 extensive individual interviews with women and men in the same positions: managers, computer analysts, programmer-analysts, project managers, systems analysts, systems architects, testing engineers, software designers, optical engineers, process engineers, operating engineers, optics-photonics researchers, and IT engineers. The data were collected between January 2001 and April 2002. To make things simple, we refer to them all as IT experts.

In each company, we interviewed the HR manager, one or two project managers, and ten to twelve IT experts, virtually equal numbers of women (45) and men (43). In our sample of 88 respondents, the average age for men and women was around 35 years old. A proportion of 60% of our respondents had a university degree and 26% had a technical college diploma.

Our respondents were chosen randomly from the lists of IT experts provided by the HR manager. The in-depth interviews lasted one and a half to two hours, and the interview guide was semi structured. Everyone was asked certain standard questions, so simple descriptive statistics can be summed up, though the study was qualitative. Content analysis used a two step process of coding interviews first to identify discourse categories and second theoretical categories, leading to unfold a grounded theory. A sample of specimen interviews were first coded by three researchers until we reached a strong internal consistency in coding categories; we then used these categories for a larger sample of interviews until we reached a thorough list of categories to account for all the nuances of respondents' discourse.

3. Project management as a blossoming form of work organization

The five small companies in our sample dealt with numerous external clients, while the two bureaucracies' IT departments served in-house clients. All seven organizations used project management, an organizational model very common in the IT sector, which can be briefly described as follows: each project is governed by a binding contract under which the supplier organization provides the client firm with a deliverable—either a product (software, for instance) and/or a service (technical support, maintenance). To produce the deliverable, a multifunctional, relatively autonomous, temporary team is constituted by design around a project manager. At the end of each project, the IT experts are freed up and drafted into other teams to work on new projects or leave for other employers.

3.1. Tension between autonomy and control of IT experts

The production of customized services or products, the handling of constantly changing orders, the satisfaction of clients with fast-changing needs, and the supervision of a highly skilled workforce require a totally different sort of management than the mass production of goods or

provision of standardized services; a bureaucratic organization lends itself poorly to creativity and innovation. There is a huge amount of uncertainty about producing these goods and services, because where innovation is concerned, the process is unpredictable. The financial risk is therefore high, because it is hard to predict the amount of time, the methods, and the resources that will be needed. Among IT experts, as elsewhere, autonomy is needed for innovation but leads to tension with control over work (Appay, 2005; Guérin et al., 1996), a control made even more necessary by the fact that the production of deliverables is often constrained by a limited budget and a tight timetable (Sydow et al., 2004, p. 1476).

The IT experts we have studied are hired by organizations that have a stake in a post-Fordist, liberalized economy and are characterized by greater competition for smaller markets, a system of capital accumulation that demands great flexibility on the part of employees, the tenuousness of the employment relationship, and thus, by the high mobility of skilled professionals. Such an economic context is conducive to rationalization on the part of management: decentralization, delayering, accountability, control, and so forth. Yet bureaucratic mechanisms effective in controlling less skilled work are too rigid for a process that does not lend itself to detailed operational planning and demands a great deal of improvisation (Packendorff, 1995). The challenge for managers in this field is to abandon direct hierarchical control in order to preserve a climate of creativity and innovation, while at the same time satisfying volatile clients in a very competitive market (O'Dell and Grayson, 1998; Sewell, 1998, p. 408).

The mode of organization best suited to creativity and innovation, where the product is developed in close interaction with the client, allows IT experts a certain leeway, while maintaining enough control to reduce uncertainty (Fournier, 1999, p. 292). A *postbureaucratic* mode of organization is called for (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Fournier, 1999; Hodgson, 2004), and PM fits the bill. It is popular well beyond the bounds of B2BTS (Ekstedt et al., 1999), and some feel we are

seeing a “projectification” of society (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Maylor et al., 2006). PM offers creative industries resources that seem all the more promising because they are developing as both practices and an academic body of knowledge (BoK) (Hodgson, 2002; 2004; Hobday, 2000, p. 871).

3.2. PM as antibureaucratic reaction

PM offers a range of means to organize and manage a discontinuous process, and flexible, fluid roles that can adapt quickly to changes in the planning without sacrificing control over the work, predictability, and experts’ discipline (Hodgson, 2004, p.86). And with such appealing promise, there has been a staggering increase in the number of members of the PM profession (Hodgson, 2004, pp. 85-6). For instance, the PMI now counts more than one million members and points out that “as the number of projects swell, the pool of credentialed talent is not keeping pace. In the Persian Gulf and China Sea regions alone [...] a shortage of 6 million skilled project professionals is expected by 2013” (PMI, 2011). So PM is very likely here to stay.

Have the advantages of PM been exaggerated? This type of organization was quickly labeled postbureaucratic, part of a trend hastily trying to find more liberal forms of governance; yet several varieties of project-based organization do not break radically with bureaucratic modes of work control (Fournier, 1999, Hodgson, 2004). Postbureaucratic organization is not so much a finished form as an as-yet-unachieved state (Hodgson, 2004, 98), because the challenge is a major one. Largely unaccounted for, there’s a huge obstacle facing any so-called postbureaucratic management of HR: the most significant cost in this sector is labor and that is what employers seeking to reduce their risks must control.

Indeed, B2BTS are labor-intensive production processes requiring highly skilled resources that account for the bulk of costs. This tension is nothing new. In the ’80s and ’90s, a large part of the

work of sociology of the professions concerned the transformations in the status of professionals occurring as a result of the increased employment of salaried professionals in bureaucratic organizations, who were starting to outnumber self-employed professionals or those in partnerships, at least in Great Britain and the United States (Ackroyd, 1995, 1996). This literature used the Weberian ideal type (self-governed by a professional licensing body, reserved title, separate body of knowledge, occupational exclusion based on knowledge-based certification, self-established standards of expertise, self-controlled mechanisms of admission, closure and control) or model of the profession (Weber, 1921) as a yardstick, and often focused on the transformation of professional autonomy. According to this literature, the most highly organized occupations use training as a means of gaining a certain amount of control over people, their behavior, and their attitudes through socialization and inculcation of an ethos along with knowledge. Then the members enact (replicate or modify) the ethos as they interact (DuGay and Salaman, 1992; Fournier, 1999).

But new frameworks are needed now that more and more professional statuses are claimed and new conditions apply to “old” professional work (Hodgson, 2007; Muzio et al., 2007). Project managers and workers are key figures in these new professional groups (Hodgson, 2002, 2007).

In the context of B2BTS, how does the postbureaucratic rhetoric of PM measure up against the sometimes paradoxical goals of control and autonomy? Do PM instruments allow their reconciliation?

To reconcile the paradoxical demands of autonomy and control, PM takes the predictable path of professionalization, by offering practitioners a form of organization: associations, a specialized body of knowledge (PMBok), academic training, programs, and individual certification. Among other things, the PMBoK defines stages in a project and then characterizes the success factors of each. This calculability and predictability is largely made possible by the delineation of a generic

model for the process of project work, which is commonly defined as the *Project Life Cycle*, or PLC. The PLC is effectively the cornerstone of Project Management, representing a standardized model of the stages of a project said to represent the ‘natural and pervasive order of thought and action.’ (Cleland and King, 1975, p. 186)

If the stages of a project are thus defined, it can be seen that at the design stage, the client defines what he or she wants, and that at the next stage—feasibility—production of the good or service is broken down into operations, which are checked with the client. In the development stage, the required means, resources, and responsibilities are determined, and this leads to a work breakdown structure (WBS), which can be used for control in a variety of ways. Coordination of the project as a whole requires frequent adjustments to planning (Hodgson, 2002, pp. 810-1).

All decision making in the stages leading up to implementation involves the client and management alone; the IT experts are consulted to varying degrees solely with respect to estimating prerequisites, needs, time, or the prices of various aspects of the order. By the end of negotiations, the price, deadline, and quality of deliverables—the key risk factors in every project—are set down in a contract. The PM form of organization does not just allow to control people, it gives the client that control, as well. It is only later that IT experts enter the picture, tasked with filling the order. That is when worker discipline and control becomes very important, because the many microdecisions to be made as work progresses are so many opportunities to deviate from the overall plan (Hodgson, 2004, p. 87).

PM thus claims to meet the challenge of managing attitudes and behaviors so that they are consistent with the goal, thus avoiding the risk that decisions made by independent people might compromise the overall result: “The emergence of a utopian organizational form ‘in which everyone takes responsibility for the success of the whole’” (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994,

p. 24). In the next section, we will see how and to what extent the use of PM in B2BTS makes it possible to reconcile autonomy and work control.

4. Project management and risk transfer in B2BTS

4.1. Relative Scope of IT experts' Autonomy

The IT experts we interviewed were assigned to the production of services, but never involved in negotiating contracts in which budgets and deadlines are set. They have to comply with these conditions as far as possible, however.

IT experts have a certain degree of autonomy, not merely by virtue of their specialized, hermetic knowledge, but by virtue of the fact that they work in a PM environment and in many ways deal with the client as if they were independent contractors. Their autonomy is first and foremost operational, that is, it is limited to deciding how to achieve a very precise short-term goal, within the stringent constraints of the contract:

[Are you fairly free to organize your weekly timetable as you wish?] In line with the priorities set by my customers and my immediate superior. We have deliverables that we have to deliver on certain dates. I think I can do what I want ... to get things done on time. (AF-14-7)¹

Like that of contractors, their autonomy is actually relative and limited much more by the client than by superiors:

How can I put it? I'm independent as far as my duties go ... No one's going to tell me how to lay out a page ... But, yeah, in terms of choosing designs and all that, it's really the designers who have the last word, or of course the customer, ... who, well, either likes it or doesn't. (DF-14-16)

¹ When no mention is made, quotes refer to IT experts that are team members and not project managers.

IT experts must often adjust the order when they encounter unanticipated problems along the way, because the order itself evolves constantly over time and with the opportunities that arise as the product takes shape:

[So you're fairly free to organize your days, your weeks ... according to your own priorities?] I'd love that! [Laughs.] But ... I'd say that ... since we have so many customer requests and all that ... it's very, very hard to plan. Because we don't just get one request a day—sometimes we get 15, 20, 30 ... And you've got to know how to prioritize ... (AH-4-2)

Budget conditions and deadlines are the key issues in risk, and along with scope of the order, are well-known as the iron triangle of PM: if they are too restrictive, they could lead to project failure. In our sample, the pressure could have been greater in the five small companies (which have external clients) than in the two bureaucracies, but that is not the case: at Insurance-I, whose clients were all in-house, pressure came from within because the department had become an independent profit centre. At Real Estate, the client requirements and the ever-present possibility that they might switch to a competitor exposed the IT experts to the same type of pressure found in other project management scenarios.

Due to the high degree of uncertainty involved, production of this type of good or service has more in common with bespoke than industrial production. It is impossible to know or plan the precise sequence of operations in the production process at the time the contract is signed. To reduce this uncertainty, IT experts are always checking and frequently fine-tuning planning and WBS targets, which serve as regular reminders that their decision-making latitude begins where that of the client and project manager ends (Hodgson, 2004, p. 87).

Team members often find themselves having to make decisions or choices for which the client must be consulted. For example, the members of a team responsible for implementing software in three months had to resolve conflicts on a daily basis and make logistical decisions that

invariably had a crucial impact on the project's success or failure and, ultimately, on risk. In one instance, they had to decide whether it was better to sacrifice a test phase in order to meet a deadline, and thus risk releasing a product with bugs, or to put quality first by taking their time and risk trying the client's patience by running late.

4.2. Client Control over Work

The client (or a representative) is always on the spot, interacting directly with one of the IT experts, who, by virtue of his or her very specialized knowledge, is often the only one to do so. The expert, without an intermediary, supervision, or guidance, must negotiate an agreement as to the direction to take given the time and budget constraints, or else change those conditions. The client has the upper hand in such negotiations, owing to the strong competition that pits IT services suppliers against others from all over the world (Alvesson, 2000; Anderson-Gough, Grey, and Robson, 2000).

IT experts talk only about the client's control over the job (Legault and Bellemare, 2008), and scarcely even mention company management:

[Don't you have to report to your manager every day or every week?] Well, yeah, [the project manager] reported to the customer every Thursday, so we had to report every day ... That's why I don't really like this [job]. (CGF-6-19)

For example, if the client refuses to extend the project and the deadline, but makes extra demands, he is actually requiring extended working hours. As projects frequently overlap, employees juggle heavy parallel demands and set priorities themselves in the case of conflicting tasks, while possibly facing reprimands for the decisions they make. Instructions such as "Do whatever it takes to meet this deadline" or "Here's the objective, make sure you meet it" are inputs into autonomous decision making. The respondents' expressions on this last point are eloquent: "a customer-centered approach," "having the creativity to stay competitive on the

market,” “always say yes, take everything on,” and “honor your commitments.” They said they were frequently required to work abroad for several months at a time, be available to offer 24-hour client support by phone one week per month, or implement new systems on the weekend in addition to their usual tasks. In fact, like European project workers, our IT experts use the language of entrepreneurs (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006, p. 859).

They were encouraged to devote the “time it takes,” rather than a fixed number of hours to their work, more like entrepreneurs than wage earners or civil servants. They were left to judge what that meant, but the project manager, the client, and their colleagues monitored and evaluated their performance.

In the face of such sizeable risks, the optimal solution is often to attempt to do it all, which results in unlimited overtime (Chasserio & Legault, 2005, 2009; Watts, 2009). To stick to the agreed-upon price, production costs, the main component of which is labor, must be lowered. Thus unlimited hours with unpaid overtime is a major asset, not just in our sample, but commonly throughout PM environments (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006, p. 858-9).

Moreover, clients do not limit their impact to occasional requests but actually establish the organization’s framework for in-house production and wield numerous decision-making powers that in other settings are normally within the purview of the HR department: hiring, discipline, vacations, holidays, schedules, even firing. B2BTS firms may have a few HR policies, but the HR department plays a very unobtrusive role, does not intervene in the relationships between project managers and employees, and gives the former a great deal of latitude in applying HR policies (Chasserio & Legault, 2005; Legault and Bellemare, 2008). When establishing working conditions such as the IT experts’ hours, schedules, application of HR flextime or telecommuting policies, the project manager’s decisions are essentially based on the client’s wishes.

Since timetables and budgets are always narrowly defined, total commitment is often required from all project participants, implying long hours and a willingness to work even weekends on short notice (as also shown by Watts, 2009). PM often means improvising in order to deliver the project as planned, and in core PM theory and practice, employees are the ones to improvise, because each project, by design, is a temporary exception, a state of emergency where normal rules do not apply. Total commitment is rationalized by the fact that it is only for a short period, but team members work on one project after another all the time. In the experience of employees, the requirement to do overtime is so clear that it helps decide who is laid off.

Project-based organization has many consequences, including: long working hours with fierce resistance to any reduction, unpaid overtime, and high management expectations of employee flexibility to meet unanticipated client demands. According to our interviews, policies regarding balancing work and private life are not a top priority; none of the organizations had such compelling policies nor intended to develop any. Furthermore, the HR departments never deal with the management of people or issue guidelines for doing so, leaving it up to project managers to take any decision they consider appropriate (Chasserio & Legault, 2009). The project team is the basic unit where all of the usual managerial functions (production, research and development, marketing, HR, finance, etc.) are coordinated, whereas the same functions are separated and specialized in a bureaucratic context. Project managers control all of these aspects, but is the logic different? In fact, they must attain and reconcile a range of objectives, one of them being to mobilize their team members. Despite the rhetoric, project managers represent corporate management and must control their people, thus reintroducing bureaucracy principles in a so-called postbureaucratic environment (Hodgson, 2004). Drawing on previous papers, we must acknowledge serious effects on women in these work environments.

4.3. Gender and PM constraints over work time

We have previously established that the long, unplanned and (often) uncompensated working hours so commonly required in the field are one of the principal reasons, if not the main reason, that women decide to leave it (Chasserio & Legault, 2005, 2009, 2010). Never in our interviews have we met gendered differences regarding passion for the job, or pleasure to succeed, or coping with stressful projects. We have however noted genderized patterns in coping with clients' demands. For instance, 40% of women and 58% of men reported working more than 40 hours a week, whereas 6.6% of women and 20% of men reported working more than 50 hours a week. Regarding overtime at home in the evening or on weekends, among our respondents, a third of women and half of men took work home with them. Our female respondents worked less overtime than their male colleagues. Half of women who worked overtime (over 40 hours a week) were childless, whereas two thirds of men who worked overtime were fathers. Looking at professionals who work 50 or more hours a week, differences between men and women who were parents are larger. In this group, there were only 2 mothers, but 5 fathers (while women and men were equally represented in the sample). Among mothers, however, the number of preschool-age children was inversely proportional to overtime (Chasserio & Legault, 2005, 2010). Our numbers are very small, and we do not claim any statistical representativity; rather, they suggest that women's under-representation in IT sector can be explained by the fact that women are still primarily responsible for childcare. In fact, we found that the explanatory power of genderized division of labor, particularly with respect to childcare, is greater than that of gender differences in preferences, leaning towards - or *gift* for - technology, and so forth. Moreover, we've established that, ironically, women have to work much overtime in order to be granted *compensation time*, that is to say free time allocated to compensate unpaid overtime, on a discretionary basis by the project manager. Corporate management entrusts project managers

with an important responsibility. They must reach high productivity objectives while at the same time managing their teams on their own. Project managers could not count on any help, so they spontaneously developed *ad hoc* practices to mobilize their employees. One such practice is the handling of employee requests for work-life balance arrangements. Due to the lack of official policies and rules, project managers had total discretionary authority and autonomy to decide who made informal arrangements and under what conditions:

It's only recently the four-day week policy has started applying to all employees ... But it's still at the manager's or supervisor's discretion. We [project managers] can refuse anytime, because we're in the midst of a project with tight schedules or close to the deadline. (ASF-3-3)

Arrangements were granted like favors and rewards in return for flexibility and self-sacrifice. They use overtime as a bargaining chip in case-by-case negotiations and finally, arrangements regarding working hours or place of work served as an HR management tool to punish or reward people for their commitment (Chasserio & Legault, 2005).

In these cases, there's no such thing as a guarantee of proportionality; the project manager is free to allow compensation time in the amount and at the time he considers appropriate, in the paramount interest of clients. Still, women are the ones asking – timidly - for days off, working at home, reduced work time or refusing transfers or promotions, while men are/do not; the social division of domestic work leads them to far less flexibility in working time and place than men have.

Flexibility towards work time and place being a taboo in the field (Legault & Chasserio, 2003; Watts, 2009), these women – and those who are seldom or never willing to work overtime - fail to score high on commitment appraisal and tend to quit in higher proportion, while men play the card of flexibility and tend to succeed (Chasserio & Legault, 2005, 2009, 2010).

4.4. IT Experts' Dependency upon Clients

In a post-Fordist context, these much-sought-after IT experts have so-called boundaryless careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). They are very mobile on the job market, which itself strongly encourages their mobility. Their mobility increases their dependency on satisfying the client, who ensures both their reputation and portfolio—major assets when job hunting. They are always thinking about the next job or assignment. Presenteeism is the first criterion of performance appraisal, a process that also helps build their reputations (Simpson, 1998) through a “politics of time surveillance with long working hours and giving up or rescheduling of holidays being seen as a heroic contribution to corporate success” (Watts, 2009:40).

In the end, the client's appraisal is crucial to employees' assessments, reputations, and employability, and thus becomes a key regulating factor, both individual and collective, because the team effectively punishes anyone who refuses to work overtime (Legault and Bellemare, 2008; Watts, 2009). In this sector, employee loyalty, long held to be a major indicator of commitment, is replaced by a willingness to agree to anything to satisfy a client when working on a project, particularly overtime (Alvesson, 2000; Anderson-Gough, Grey, and Robson, 2000; Chasserio & Legault, 2009; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2000, Watts, 2009).

So the commitment expected is intense, but not necessarily long lasting. Neither the professional nor the employer views a long employment relationship as a priority; on the contrary, both scoff at it. In fact, the cost of losing an employee in B2BTS is negligible; the turnover rate is quite high. IT experts may have many years of experience, but, given that the average project lasts six months to two years, we can infer that job switches are quite common and are of such little consequence that an employee can come and go in the same organization more than once in a working life.

Last, every new job is an opportunity to renegotiate working conditions, obtain better pay and benefits, occupy a better position on the team, and work on a more interesting project. The better the portfolio, the greater the bargaining power.

4.5. Ultimate Redistribution of Risk in B2BTS firms

Although management assumes the financial risk inherent in the failure of a project, IT experts and project managers also risk a great deal, insofar as their reputations may be tarnished and their employability reduced. In case of failure, they are often fired, or not called back after being laid off, which amounts to the same thing in the industry. In short, autonomy comes with the power to make decisions on many everyday microproblems about how to get the job done while meeting as many time and budget conditions (key risks) of the contract as possible. The autonomy given to IT experts thus constitutes a risk transfer factor, to the extent that they are motivated to fulfill the order without going over budget or exceeding deadline, to ensure the client's satisfaction. In effect, employees are rarely compensated for working overtime, whether with money or time off in lieu. And at the locations we visited, IT experts do not receive bonuses, either. Their compensation is managed *ad hoc*; if they are given time off, the arrangements are approved on a case-by-case basis at the project manager's discretion, since hours are not counted and provided project demands can be met; in other words, time off is only granted in quiet periods and only in exchange for working long hours (Chasserio & Legault, 2005). But in general, the only guaranteed reward is... staying in the trade with a good reputation!

Since IT experts are not involved in defining the terms of the contract with the client, their autonomy in a PM environment is more of an injunction than an advantage, because it makes them responsible for the consequences of high-risk decisions taken in situations where they have no control over either budget and timetable (Hodgson, 2004, p. 88).

The theoretical and practical framework of PM provides means of controlling many operational microdecisions, but the most important microdecision that mitigates uncertainty is still definitely the willingness of these experts to work unpaid overtime. PM's monitoring instruments can control decisions, but not behavior. Yet controlling behavior is essential when management requires a great deal of unpaid overtime for projects with very tight time frames and budgets. Management cannot and does not wish to make overtime mandatory for salaried employees, because it would then have to pay overtime, which they do not pay actually, and to pay it at legal rate (150%), which is of course not the case either. In order to stay into the limits of the legal frame, overtime must be willingly and freely offered by a committed employee wishing to see his/her project succeed. So how can it ensure that they do it? We observed that in our interviews, the concepts of professional and professionalism were only ever raised in discussions of unpaid overtime.

5. Professionalism

In this section, we draw upon our interviews to illustrate the appeal to professionalism as a means of discipline. Our study was originally concerned with work-life balance, not professionalism. But we were struck by the extensive and peculiar use of the vocabulary of professionalism by project managers and some employees in about a quarter of the interviews, although the questionnaire didn't even mention it. It is important to note here that we don't assert here by any mean that the IT specialists we studied are in the process of formally becoming professionals, be it collegiate, organizational or entrepreneurial professionals (Muzio et al., 2007, p. 4-5). We just wish to underline how important was the recourse to rhetoric of professionalism among them, as a powerful device to rationalize, justify and promote unpaid overtime. We would not dare to go

further on the ground of establishing whether or not they are professionals, or how far they went on the road to professionalisation, as this was not our main research objectives.

5.1. Professional or Entrepreneur?

IT experts do not have a collegiate, Weberian-type professional organization and status: they do not have an exclusive practice, their own standards of expertise, or their own mechanisms of admission, exclusion, and control. They have no organized structure to defend their professional interests. Like those studied by Fournier (1999), they are members of what is known as an entrepreneurial profession: market driven, operating in an environment of multiple networked firms, and use competitive advantage to leverage power:

Furthermore just as the 'liberal professions' – through their inscription in the art of liberal government – are governed in the name of their constituency (eg. the clients) [...] The appeal to professionalism [...] serves to efface direct control [...] Thus employees are urged to 'own customers' problems', 'see through the eyes of the customers', and 'do whatever it takes to satisfy customers' needs'. This last item is a poignant illustration of 'government at a distance'; employees are not 'told what to do' but are empowered to use their initiative in 'responsible' ways, that is, in ways that answer to the 'sovereign needs' of the customers. The customer is mobilised as a resource to legitimise the regulation of conduct, to 'responsibilise' conduct, and at the same time effaces direct managerial control. (Fournier, 1999, 298)

Our PM respondents express a professional ethos that contains only a few elements of the Weberian ideal of professionalism: core knowledge (PMBok or other), raised to the rank of discipline, presented as neutral, objective, rational; professional associations that certify individuals, growing promotion of credentialism, an implicit code of conduct, and employees' self-proclaimed autonomy, which is in fact merely operational. As we have seen, members are

not involved in negotiating contracts with the client, and neither are they involved in choosing projects or clients, setting priorities, or determining the relative importance of quality, price, and deadline in a context in which difficult decisions must be made; they have no professional resources that would allow them a say in these matters.

In 24 of 88 interviews, respondents often used the term “professional,” with these five meanings:

- 1) Project managers—Guaranteeing top-quality service to clients using marketing language: “We offer professional services.”
- 2) IT experts—Proudly expressing their independence, their willingness to put in long unpaid hours, their sense of responsibility, their belief that their autonomy is the counterpart of their responsibility to estimate the time required or compensate for any mistakes with their own time: “We are professionals.”
- 3) Project managers—Trying to persuade or motivate IT experts by emphasizing their independence: “You/We are professionals.”
- 4) Project managers—Blaming workers, reminding them that they need to know what to do; that they have been trained; that they have a panoply of tools, both knowledge and technical instruments; that they are responsible; and that if they are late, they probably deviated from the PMBoK, and that they must give their own time: “You are professionals.”
- 5) Projects managers or colleagues—Blaming or chiding IT experts: “That’s not very professional.”

Professionalism does not refer to certain groups of employees possessing specific skills and knowledge (programmers or engineers, say) but indicates a certain form of conduct or work ethic, often focused on clients and unpaid overtime. So the concept is used selectively, mainly with respect to the keys to project success. In short, the usages noted evoke an ethos whereby a supposedly independent worker is in fact accountable for following plans and must either find a

way to do so or else modify the plan without letting down the client. In a PM environment, professionalism is more of an obligation than a quality of an organized profession; it is a *managed* professionalism, inculcated top-down; more, when used by experts, it is the language of entrepreneurs rather than employees—except that the client is not their client and they derive no benefits. This professionalism is used as a dominating device; it is an alienating professionalism, adopted and appropriated by salaried employees driven to commit themselves as much as entrepreneurs do.

5.2. Professionalism as Means of Discipline

Hodgson (2002, 2004) and Fournier (1999) have clearly shown how the language of professionalism can be used to turn salaried employees into entrepreneurs, among other things:

The ‘competent person’, [...] is not the person who is merely competent at his /her job or expert in a field...] but who, for example, ‘seeks responsibility and welcomes accountability’, ‘demonstrates customer care principles’, interacts with colleagues in an appropriate way [...], ‘is self-critical’, or ‘listens’. [...] indeed the sort of person depicted in the competency framework closely resembles the model of the entrepreneur, or the enterprising self popularised by the management literature. (Fournier, 1999, 297)

In a PM setting, the concept of professionalism evokes its own unique ethos, based on an accredited body of knowledge that helps objectify it and make it seem rational, that situates it outside the interests of the actors (Fournier, 1999; Hodgson, 2002, 2007). The contemporary critical perspective of these authors adds to the rather functionalist, although Weber-inspired, concept of professionalism from the second half of the 20th century, the interactionist dimension essential to an understanding of the constant work of co-construction to which it is subject, locally and socially.

The “good” professional is an ideal that is constructed through everyday interactions and is adapted locally the same way, stabilizing some features through repetition, while introducing or

eliminating others through approval or condemnation (Becker, 1970). It is far from a fixed composite. People use it as a resource to influence behavior and they may interpret and modify it in the course of their interactions, each time referring more or less formally to the PMBoK, another objectified entity.

This perspective is inspired by Foucault (1988), who analyzed the liberal concept of the organization and its goal of reconciling freedom (of people, the market, the company) and control. From this point of view, if authority is to govern the conduct of free subjects, it must pay just as much attention to the development of the subjectivity on which IT experts' judgment of client needs are based as to control techniques and to incorporating them smoothly; in a word, "technologies of the self" (Fournier, 1999, p. 293). The institutionalization of PM as a discipline makes it possible to add to WBS-based monitoring instruments yet another method of control—socialization in a professional ethos unique to PM (Hodgson, 2002, p. 819).

The obligation to behave professionally, when it becomes a firm part of workers' identity, allows "remote control" (Fournier, 1999, p. 281-2; Miller and Rose, 1990, 1995). The rhetoric of professionalism links the client and his or her interests with the behaviors and assessment criteria of IT experts in a single, flexible, integrated system designed to guarantee successful projects (Fournier, 1999, p. 302). The self-regulating power of this rhetoric makes it an effective means of discipline and helps explain the growing number of occupations where a highly skilled workforce enjoys the leeway that it needs, that nevertheless creates uncertainty. Out of self-interest, which is dependent on client satisfaction, workers are led to exercise self-discipline and serve organizational interests without realizing that anyone else is controlling their behavior. Our respondents say that managers are just as vulnerable as employees to marketplace competition and the client's power.

PM is therefore a work organization method that resolves the tension between autonomy and control by inducing people to willingly adopt behaviors consistent with their employers' success and progress. (Miller and Rose, 1990).

6. Gender and PM notion of professionalism

We've established previously that the long, unplanned and (often) uncompensated working hours so commonly required in the field are one of the principal reasons, if not the main reason, that women decide to leave it. Here we've added another layer to this demonstration. As the many overtime hours required are long, unplanned and compensated on a highly irregular basis, if at all, what explains the fact that experts continue to work them, be them men or women? This is closely linked to the widespread practice of PM and the rhetoric of professionalism that goes along with it, that leaves nothing less than unpaid and unlimited overtime to meet the conditions of the "iron triangle". Instead of showing a dispute over unpaid overtime and overtime requests, among male and female IT engineers, those are still undisputed feature of the trade, which is very different from videogame industry, for instance, where EA spouse scandal generated a series of class actions contesting unpaid overtime (Handman, 2005). We don't yet see women setting in motion a contesting movement and re-interpreting what's designed as a rule of the trade. As a meaningful consequence, women wishing to reduce their work time are seen as failing to be part of the team, to take responsibility for delivering the order whatever the conditions and, ultimately, to be professional. Anyone who asks to work different hours, to work at home or who asks for any other measures to help balance work and family life is considered as less committed and therefore less of a candidate for promotion, but these "ones" are more often women (as shown as well in Watts, 2009). Those who stay obey the rule but wish things will change, and the other ones leave the trade.

It is very important to understand here that this project-oriented environment has not yet undertaken any work-life balance campaign, as can be seen in more stable bureaucratic work environments. Not only are people in this trade left with a “take it or leave it” alternative, but also are they kept away from considering any more refined claim such as “satisfaction balance” (the amount of satisfaction derived from work versus non-work activities); or “involvement balance” (the degree of psychological involvement in work versus non-work activities) (Bradley and al., 2010). They are still struggling with basic time issues (the amount of time devoted to work and non-work activities) as peer’s and management’s support, so often invoked in the literature as an important factor in successful uptake of work-life balance policies (Bradley and al, 2010), is not yet on the agenda (as shown in Watts, 2009 as well). Many workers resent the fact that no record of overtime is kept, as overtime is rather taken for granted; if some project managers allow for compensation time-off, it’s always perceived as an unfair deal, overtime exceeding compensation time from far (Chasserio & Legault, 2005). We have to bear in mind that we are in a highly competitive context in B2BTS, where contractors compete for contracts based on price. In the case that contracts are awarded to the lowest priced contractor, contractors may be working for a low profit margin and may have insufficient resources to perform the job adequately. In a context where the client picks the middle price, we could contemplate such work-life policies as shown in some construction projects (Turner, 2009).

In everyday life, the tension between the expectations of their project managers and their family obligations places a great deal of pressure on the professional women we interviewed. Project-based management is characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. Short notice demands to work overtime make planning family life extremely difficult. In the long term, women who were less willing than their male counterparts to put in overtime were considered by their project managers to be less reliable, less committed, and less dedicated. Accordingly, they were unlikely

to be chosen to take part in the most challenging projects or to lead major projects. They therefore would miss out on opportunities to acquire new skills and build their reputations. Yet, in the ICT sector, skills and knowledge are essential to establish a professional reputation and maintain position and ranking; employability depends on involvement in innovative, advanced projects.

What distinguishes men and women towards this demand, in our point of view, is not an ontological (or essential) difference between them, be it grounded in attitude, personality, needs, meaning of life, or else. Women's scarcity in IT sector is rather grounded in the social construction of gender, making women responsible of domestic work and child care. Professional standards of PM are so defined as including total availability to work round-the-clock, as a demonstration of commitment (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2000, Watts, 2009). While men play the card of flexibility and consent to unpaid overtime, they reinforce the professional norms of PM in the making; women unwilling to work overtime fail to score high on commitment appraisal and tend to quit in higher proportion. In this field in which portfolio makes a career, reputation is paramount. The professional norms of PM in the making in the IT sector de facto exclude women because they are assigned family responsibility. More, these norms foster and reinforce the genderized division of domestic work, as they are the ground for men to take advantage of their availability to fare better than women in terms of commitment.

7. Conclusion

We have seen how a number of factors come together to resolve the conflict between workers' autonomy and managers' control in PM. In PM indeed, a very tight framework is set in place, made of time, budget and characteristics of the object ordered (scope), quite well called the iron triangle of PM. Though management has to save a space of autonomy for creative activity, it has

to ensure deliverables to be delivered and, ultimately, it has to control. Managers first negotiate very tight conditions in contracts that set up a rigorous frame for the experts to execute “autonomously”. Then these experts have to satisfy a client in a process in which they will be judged on results, though paid a fixed wage. Such an ambiguous situation drives them into an entrepreneur-like commitment behavior, while they are not shareholders nor promised any bonus. PMBoK sets up a mixture of management of the self practices that influence experts’ autonomous decision process (for instance, provides rationalization like the uttermost importance of commitment to induce consent to unlimited and unpaid overtime) and tight control over these decisions to make sure ends will meet.

The IT experts exercise their narrow discretionary power in the interests of the client, because although they do not assume the financial risk of failure, they risk their own reputation and employability. The client (or a representative) is present at each stage of the project and the expert deals with him or her without the intermediation or protection of the HR department.

Direct control of IT experts’ microbehaviors and microdecisions is ensured through planning meetings, but they alone are not enough to mitigate the uncertainty inherent in PM. The primary risk in this environment is missing the project deadline or running over budget, which IT experts seek to avert by working as many hours as necessary with no guarantee of compensation. An inexpensive behavior-control system, based on the rhetoric of professionalism, generates self-discipline and self-censorship of the need for time off. There is no anomie in the workplace, just strict, highly efficient control and extraordinary commitment. Portfolio makes a reputation and reputation is the main asset in job hunting and negotiating wages. As mobility is inherent in B2BTS, pleasing client is more important than pleasing management. The client’s strong regulating power shifts a large share of the risk inherent in PM onto the IT experts (Chasserio & Legault, 2009).

By these means, the experts' autonomy is rendered merely operational, and a significant amount of the tension between autonomy and control is resolved, because the experts feel deeply that they themselves are the ones deciding to invest the hours required to complete the project successfully.

And so a logic that has a serious impact on women pervades these workplaces:

- Women, more than men, would like to limit their working hours, often so they can take care of their children.
- But working hours and presenteeism are indicators of job commitment.
- And commitment is an important factor in promotion.

As a result, even in times of labor shortage, women account for no more than a quarter of the workforce in the sector, including bureaucracies. PM do not challenge the sociosexual order of social relations between men and women in any way. Instead, traditional gendered patterns are reproduced in the projectified workplace, where the ideal worker still appears to be a young man fully dedicated to his job. Private life or family appears largely neglected in these workplaces.

Unlike Lindgren and Packendorff (2006), we would not conclude that PM is a *male* form of organization *per se*. Of course, according to analyses of gendered logic systems in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) and of its powerful effect in generating isomorphic forces to influence behaviors among PM professionals (Buckle and Thomas, 2003; Thomas and Buckle-Henning, 2007), we can acknowledge that what's identified as a masculine logic system and masculine behavior are conceived as valuable resources to project managers and that there's a gendered discourse operating within the profession. Interestingly, those analyses conclude that 1) an important part of the same PMBoK holds so-called "feminine skills" in high esteem 2) that both sets of skills are necessary to succeed in PM and that 3) men and women as well can display

so-called masculine or feminine skills (Buckle and Thomas, 2003, Thomas and Buckle-Henning, 2007).

Nevertheless, the theoretical framework that leads to this sort of conclusion often take for granted undefined, undiscussed male and female categories that, though reflecting “commonly observed and empirically verified managerial behaviors in work environments” (Buckle and Thomas, 2003, p. 435), can too quickly turn into nature-grounded categories. Such thinking is typical of essentialism, which sees gender differences as inherent and grounded in nature. The underlying assumption is that women, more than men, need time for themselves, for family life, and that whether naturally or socially, it is up to them to take care of the home and children.

To us, there’s a risk in making feminine nature responsible for women’s scarcity in IT sector; such an assumption takes for granted a socially constructed division of domestic work and overshadows social and health costs of such a work environment for men and their families (Burke, 2009; Burke et Fiksenbaum, 2009; Campbell, 2002a et b; Dembe, 2009; Jacobs et Gerson, 2001; Kanai, 2009).

If, as Carnoy (2002) has said, the ideal worker works without sleeping, eating or drinking, having children or seeing his or her children, or socializing, and if, incidentally, men manage to do it, it is not because the PM form of organization is “male”, but because it is based on the sexual division of labor. As women are still chiefly responsible for child care and housework, they are the ones who lament the demands of unlimited overtime and refuse to accede to them. They are thus excluded from the “projectification” of society, with its highly paid, prestigious jobs. At the same time, women who are married to IT experts enable them to work long hours by scaling back their own labor market participation, thus assuming the risk inherent in these forms of domination and exploitation.

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