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The modern worker: a framework for individual choice

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The modern worker: a framework for individual choice

Summary

The new world of work is upon us and with it brings a period of constant change and new workplace challenges (Bauman, 2000 and Canzler, Kaufmann and Kesselring, 2008). Mirroring societal changes of a focus on the individual, movement from deferred to instant gratification and a desire for flexibility; the modern workforce is changing. Previous research has taken a top down approach, focusing on a governmental and organisational perspective on the future of work (See Hyman and Summers, 2007 and Lewis et al. 2008). This paper takes a bottom up approach, exploring what the modern worker looks like and questions what is shaping individual work choices. The paper draws on findings from a wider piece of ethnographic research which included interviews with lifestyle orientated workers. Findings reflect current work relations tensions with a movement away from governmental and organisational control towards individuals regulating and controlling workplace policies.

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Introduction

This paper draws upon multiple theoretical areas of mobilities, identity and human resource management to build a picture of the modern day worker. This developmental paper will attempt to outline the key theoretical arguments and begin to explore the shift towards individual control over work.

The paper begins by setting the context of the research within the modern world, as if we are to understand the modern worker we must first understand the world in which they are operating in. It goes on to explore how this translates into the new world of work with a focus on increased demand for flexibility, work-life balance and instant gratification. The methodology is then discussed before initial findings and discussion are outlined and the development of the paper considered.

Modern world

The modern world is viewed by many as one of flows and multiple mobilities, transforming what Bauman (2000) terms a heavy and solid industrial modernity into a light and 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000 and Canzler, Kaufmann and Kesselring, 2008). The metaphors of fluidity, liquidity, flux and flows are seen to be fitting for the nature of the state of flux in modernity (Baumann, 2000; Molz and Gibson, 2007; Thomsen, Nielsen and Gudmundsson, 2005). Ideas of liquid modernity posed by Bauman (2000) continue to reflect traditional post modernistic thoughts of bureaucracy, hierarchy and tradition but are seen to have taken on a liquid form, creating fluidity in lives:

> Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects – but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change. (Bauman, 2012, p2)

No longer do we have a societal compass to follow, gradually preparing us for what society expects, we are now a society of consumerism of want and want it now (Weltan, 2015). A continual need be in a state of readiness to react to the moving world has intensified structural uncertainty, creating a continual refreshing of data and a desire to grasp on to the structural and make the world solid again (Bauman, 2000). Bauman (2012, p2) explores this further:

> To 'be modern' means to modernize – compulsively, obsessively; not so much just 'to be', let alone to keep its identity intact, but forever 'becoming', avoiding completion, staying underdefined...What was some time ago dubbed (erroneously) 'post-modernity' and what I've chosen to call, more to the point, 'liquid modernity', is the growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty. A hundred years ago 'to be modern' meant to chase 'the final state of perfection' -- now it means an infinity of improvement, with no 'final state' in sight and none desired.

For Bauman (2000), the consequences of a liquid modernity are most clearly seen in individualistic approaches to self-identity. The concept of identity has long been contested but is commonly referred to as that which makes, or is believed to make, something what it is and can be both singular and plural (Ferguson, 2009). Breathnach (2006) on the other hand holds that identities are neither wholly individual nor collective. Yet for Castells (1997), identity is a source of meaning and experience and should be viewed in terms of self-interpretation. In this sense, identity is determined by what people find valuable and their commitments guiding them as to what to do and what roles to assume in work and society

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(Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Brinkman, 2008; Gordon and Walsh, 2008). As such identity and a sense of self have become increasingly valued in work where we have moved from understanding ourselves as pilgrims in search of a deeper meaning to 'tourists' in search of multiple, instant and short lived experiences (Urry, 2007).

Fluidity in thoughts and structures, explored here through the search for identity and individual control, as opposed to solidity is central to allowing change and progress over time. Yet we also see that structures, in this case organisations, also provide the foundations within which individuals can operate (Benson and Osbaldiston, 2016; Korpela, 2014). The question here is how are these societal movements of mobility and identity searching impacting upon the world of work?

New world of work

The 1960's saw attitudes towards work change from dutiful and society led to the new 'Holy Grail' of the self and individual achievements with work as a practical and instrumental necessity (d'Epinay, 1992; Gratton, 2010). Such views have in the main continued into society today with an attitude towards work of 'what do I want to do' rather than 'what should I do'. Such individualistic attitudes to work are prevalent in modern day society, led by increasing fluidity in which the power of the individual is of paramount importance to attempting to regain / hold on to elements of control. A key factor in this is the rise in the demand for instant gratification including instantaneous wealth, education and a greater work-life balance.

In essence the current new world of work is a continuation of a power struggle between organisations and workers in which a power balance or imbalance is evident. Where once there was a desire for ownership over labour and work within an organisation, indications now are of a shift whereby ownership is now labour through choice. Historically the aim of control over work within an organisation was for stability and elements of control as a collective, but with the power now appearing to sit more with the individual; self-identity, flexibility and individualism reign.

What is certain is that the ways of working are changing. Despite the universal nature of work 'how, why, where and when we work has never been so open to interpretation' (Gratton, 2010, p16). The ways of working that we have witnessed, and in some cases taken for granted, are disappearing. Relationships with work are becoming more complex as individuals and organisations attempt to manage changing demands (Bauman, 2000). Individuals are no longer committed to lifelong careers with one company; instead there is a movement towards people using work to achieve a better life (Reed, 1997) and there is a greater demand for individual satisfaction, flexible work and a work-life balance (Donkin, 2010; Holland, 2016; Stone and Stubbs, 2007; Walmsley, 2003). In this context it is becoming ever more important, and difficult, to attract and retain talent and so there is a need to understand the modern worker.

Method

With a desire to understand 'how' and 'why' people use work in relation to individual and socially constructed identity, an ethnographic approach was undertaken in an attempt to understand social reality through both an individual and cultural experience of that reality (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2004). In line with this a qualitative approach was assumed to explore the 'people' element of a society at a singular point in time. The data explored in this paper forms part of a wider study into the relationship between individuals, lifestyle, migration and

work which was undertaken as a resort case study of Chamonix in order to form a connective analysis of the situation (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The primary data collection methods were semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Interviews were used in order to gain a depth of knowledge on the individual's subjective experiences. Such experiences often require a stimulus and/or action to prompt reflection with behaviours deep rooted in social norms and individual values (Giddens, 1984; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). With a desire to understand relations between work and life over time, a questionnaire would not have reached the level of depth desired.

Interviews took place over a three month period in the resort and were conducted with 33 lifestyle migrants and consisted of 16 males and 18 females, two in their 20's, 20 in their 30's, eight in their 40's and three in their 50's. The group could be classed as a typical in that although the majority of participants are from a white British, middle class background, they have chosen to follow a non-traditional work trajectory. The average time post migration, classified as full time and permanent migration, from the UK was just over 10 years per respondent. Respondents worked full time post migration across a range of tourism and hospitality businesses from chalet management, bar and restaurant work to mountain guiding, ski hire, ski guiding, mountain bike guiding. Each participant had remained in the same work position for this duration but may have reframed their work role on numerous occasions to fit their life stage.

The stories heard allowed for life histories to be built and were subsequently transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis used to assist interpretation (Lacey and Luff, 2001). With such large amounts of data and a desire to uncover depth and meanings, a manual 'pile building' approach as suggested by Harvey and Macdonald (1993) was adopted. From data analysis, key themes were identified and the following section will present the initial findings and discussion in relation to the modern worker to whom individual choices are paramount in creating satisfaction in work.

It is important to note that this group of lifestyle migrants are more than just an 'atypical' group of people who have sought a better quality of life. These lifestyle migrants are representative of the changing nature of society and work (Eikhof, Warhurst and Haunschild, 2007; Gratton, 2010 and Donkin, 2010) and they are exemplars of Giddens' (1991) under explored modern social life in which individuals are managing and negotiating lifestyle choices and working lives. Their stories indicate greater levels of mobility in work than has previously been explored and can be an indication of current and future work relations with lifestyle migrant behaviours mirroring wider societal changes.

Findings and initial discussion

Researching this group of atypical workers has allowed for a series of life histories to be explored, which build a wider picture of mobilities in work and lifestyle relations over time. By reviewing the participant work histories and current literature, two key worker-workplace relations can be identified that are reflective of the fluid and mobile world in which we live and where individuals are exercising control over work and life choices. Dependent upon a range of influencing factors and the degree to which people are searching for individualism and work-life balance; individuals are identified to be either Mastering or Managing their work and life relations.

Mastering work relations

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This group of individuals are those with the greatest level of individual control over work and life choices. Choices tend to focus on lifestyle over work and the ability to be highly mobile, facilitated often by affluence and a good education. These individuals are representative of the millenials to whom a desire for instant gratification and job-hopping is commonplace and of paramount importance in achieving a leisure lifestyle (see Hall, 2011; Smith, 1987 and Davidson, McPhail and Barry, 2011). This group of workers are characterised by transnational lifestyles with the aim of maximising immediate satisfaction with a focus on recreation and a sense of identity founded in their leisure rather than work (see Adler and Adler's (2004) Seeker Migrants and Scott's (2006) Bohemian migrants). Eileen's comments reflect this, *'Chamonix has pretty much got the most well-educated, qualified blue-collar workers ((laughs)) in the whole world I think. I've had two pot-washers who have had PhDs'* (Eileen interview). Here well-educated migrants are choosing work to fit with their desired lifestyles reflecting the modern worker who is focused on their own aspirations rather than those of the organisation.

Participants also show a tendency to job hop with *'a lot of moving about, working here and there'* but also the strategic building of skills repertoires to aid future mobility *'the hospitality experience was the most important'* (Ivan and Gabrielle interview). This therefore is a highly transient group with a lifestyle of physical mobility, transient careers, transient families, and transient friendships. Building upon the current literature, this work suggests that these workers are highly mobile in seeking out lifestyle first opportunities but that such a level of individual control will continue to be limited to the privileged that can socially and economically afford such a lifestyle.

Managing work relations

This category is represented heavily by the participants in this study. These individuals, having either attempted to maintain, manipulate or master their work relations at previous points in their life stage are now managing their work relations through control and ownership having not achieved the level of 'stillness' in life they aspired to or achievement of aspirational 'fantasies'. Here high levels of control over work and life choices are exercised through management of movement within current work roles. Having focused on lifestyle for a number of years, Sara now shows a high work centrality with a desire to fulfil her entrepreneurial aspirations through *'developing other aspects of the business'*. Similarly, Linda recalls going from *'forgetting where she was sometimes when she was working'* when the business first started to accepting *'work is work'* as the reality of owning a business falls short of the initial aspirational lifestyle. Instead Linda can be seen managing her work choices with the direction of the business altered to re-fit her lifestyle aspirations. Keith was also initially motivated to combine his passion with his work with *'a feel good day can be a work day'*. Yet he reflects on the reality meaning that *'increasingly I try differentiate so what I do in my own time is definitely not what I would be doing on my daily work'*. In this sense, these individuals originated as aspirational vocational orientation workers but as time and life progressed, individuals are seen to be negotiating and renegotiating work choices in an attempt to manage the fluidity in life.

From these, suggestions as to future relationships with work can be identified in which individual regulation of work choices is a more prominent feature than that of the traditional governmental or organisation management of the labour market. Traditional arguments within the literature have focused on governmental and organisational ownership over work, but initial analysis of the data shows that the individual has increased ownership over work, making different life choices over time, influenced by life and career stage, family and the

drive for identity. The outcomes of this research indicate that the power increasingly resides with the individual to a greater or lesser extent dependent upon a number of factors including socio-cultural background, education and life stage. Individuals now appear to have greater human agency and freedom to make choices and take control of their identity, work and life choices. Rather than changing jobs or careers to achieve satisfaction, as is becoming the norm for the millennial generation (see Weinburg, 2014; Davidson, McPhail and Barry, 2011 and Sujansky and Ferri-Reed, 2009), there is evidence of individual control over lifestyles. The participants of this study are managing their relationships with work in a strategic manner dependent upon their needs at that time. With this in mind, the modern worker needs to be viewed not from the perspective of the organisation and their needs but through the eyes of the individual. In this sense the modern individual relationships with work are indicated to be more self-regulated and individually controlled than managed through governmental and organisational structures.

This paper has begun to explore the complex narratives associated with the modern worker and the implications this may have upon organisations. The parameters of this research paper have not allowed for full presentation of findings, only some initial discussions on the implications. To develop this paper further, research findings would be presented in detail and translated into a useable framework for understanding the various 'types' of modern worker and their relationship with work. The caveat to this is that the participants of this study were predominantly white British, middle class workers and therefore to develop such a framework it must be set within research into the relationship between individuals and work in a wider context. Such a framework can be utilised by organisations to better understand the shift in some areas towards individual control over policy and choice and the implications this has for the organisational workplace; giving a better understanding of both the top down and bottom up approach to work.

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