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The case of adopting the Pomodoro time-management tool in a four-day workweek company

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# **Time management between the personalisation and collectivisation of productivity: The case of adopting the Pomodoro time management tool in a four-day workweek company.**

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## **Abstract**

Time management technologies and their adoption into daily working life have been discussed as solutions for managing individual productivity and as problems that intensify individualised productivity, enhance the norms of busyness and disconnect colleagues from one another. However, drawing on the case study of a company that implemented a four-day workweek, this paper argues that this is not always so. In our case company, a digital marketing agency, the Pomodoro time management tool led to the personalisation of productivity and instances of collective working towards better work-life balance. We end the paper by suggesting that this fruitful adoption of time management habits can be understood through John Dewey's notion of habit. Deweyan habit allows us to know how time management habits are plastic and open to change while always being part of a material and social assemblage. We argue that these two features explain why time management tools might lead to personalising productivity and enhanced neoliberal self-discipline. At the same time, these features point to how time management habits under the right circumstances can be part of cooperation and better work-life balance.

## **Keywords**

Habit, John Dewey, Time Management Technologies, Work Reduction, Four-Day Workweek

## Introduction

Time management technologies have been discussed not only as tools for managing individual productivity (Classesens et al., 2007; Strzelecka, 2022a; Wajcman, 2014) but also as problems that individualise questions of productivity and enhance the norms of busyness (Gregg, 2018; Holdsworth, 2021). Time management tools and techniques were initially propagated in self-help texts in the 1990s (Strzelecka, 2022a, 2022b) and are most often used today by white-collar workers to increase productivity and manage their busy lives (Gregg, 2018). However, critical voices have also questioned the central premise of time management tools as mere instruments that help individuals effectively coordinate and control the time flow of their white-collar work-life. For instance, critical voices have pointed out that the adoption of time management tools in daily life tends to personalise productivity (Gregg, 2018), leading to a disconnection from colleagues, accelerating busyness (Holdsworth, 2020, 2021) and having adverse effects on mental health (Strzelecka, 2022a). Nonetheless, the degree to which time management tools will always lead to such impacts has also been raised (Guthro, 2019; O’Grady, 2019). In this paper, we add to this emerging discussion by suggesting how the collective adoption of time management at one organisation has not only personalised productivity but also led to collective transformation to improve work-life balance.

We do this by providing a case study of how the gradual implementation of a specific time management technology—the Pomodoro technique—has helped Blue, a small digital marketing organisation, achieve five days of work in four days. In February 2017, the organisation made Fridays free from work, even though employees were still paid for the whole week. From that point onwards, employees were paid for 37 hours but only needed to work 30 hours. Although its employees worked fewer hours, Blue’s work redesign experiment allowed them to find different ways of working smarter. In particular, they reported that their customised use of the Pomodoro time management tool influenced the process. At Blue, Pomodoro took the form of a digital interface that would keep track of individual sessions, use lamps to signal to others so as not to interrupt, and use various other artefacts. As we will see, these different technological props are needed to enable modes of self-adoption to achieve both enhanced personal productivity and a collective transformation towards better work-life balance.

To highlight this, we discuss Holdsworth’s (2020) conception of time management habits as ‘paradoxical habits’. By citing 20th-century philosopher John Dewey, Holdsworth (2020) suggested

that habits are embodied dispositions to act that are embedded in material and social contexts. However, such habits are paradoxical as they, on the one hand, come to penetrate and produce stability in individuals and groups but, on the other, are malleable and open to change. Like Holdsworth (2020), we will draw on John Dewey's (1922) conceptualisation of habit as an acquired but flexible disposition to act following specific material and social contexts to understand time management. We conclude that this Deweyian understanding of habit allows us to conceptualise why time management does not necessarily lead to a personalised version of productivity but also to potentially new forms of socialites focused on work-life balance. This is something that, in our view, is illustrated by the case of Blue.

To reach this conclusion, we begin the paper by considering how time management has been discussed primarily as a form of personal productivity that neglects more collective aspects of contemporary white-collar work. Next, we discuss the case study and the methodology behind our data collection, fieldwork and analysis. The analysis section emphasises how Blue's employees acquainted themselves with the Pomodoro technique *both* as a means to enhance personal productivity *and* as a collective form of transformation towards better work-life balance. We conclude by discussing the relevance of our findings to time management studies. Through Dewey's conception of habit, we highlight how adopting time management is both an embodied and socially embedded practice that can lead to personalising productivity and a collective transformation focused on gaining more time to have a work-life balance.

## **Time management technologies and the personalisation of productivity**

Excessive working hours reduce white-collar workers' leisure time, increase privacy concerns (Bourne and Forman, 2014; Caruso, 2006) and contribute to adverse health outcomes such as stress, burnout, cardiovascular diseases and obesity (Bannai and Tamakoshi, 2014; Caruso, 2006; Ervasti et al., 2021; Raediker et al., 2006; Otterbach et al, 2021). However, despite these dangers, working weeks of more than 40 hours and the expectation for workers to be available outside regular working hours persist (Blagoev et al., 2018; Samuel and Kanji, 2019; Snyder, 2019; Wajcman, 2014). As Wajcman (2014: 74) pointed out, one way to understand the contemporary problem of overwork is through the notion of 'timing'. Timing demonstrates that contemporary white-collar workers'

experience of time pressure has multiple interrelated sources. Among these are an increase in the volume of work, the intensification of the temporal disorganisation of the worker and the workplace and the growing temporal density whereby multitasking becomes ingrained in everyday work (Wajcman 2014: 74–75). As part of the solution to these problems of overwork and busyness, popular best sellers have advocated that the way forward is efficient time management habits, especially among white-collar workers (Gregg, 2018; Holdsworth, 2021). Time management is, in other words, the promise of being given the ability to control aspects of timing in a kind of personalised ‘temporal sovereignty’ (Wajcman, 2014: 164).

Since McCay (1959) developed a time-management technique as a solution for busy executives, many of the critical elements of achieving this temporal sovereignty have been the same: to give insight into time activities and expenditure and to increase workday productivity by prioritising tasks. Many books and articles have since conveyed similar techniques for greater effectiveness while expending less time. Consider the Pomodoro technique, which plays a central role in the company Blue. Initially developed in the 1980s by the management consultant Cirillo (2018), the Pomodoro technique aims to increase workflow by minimising interruptions. Central to the method is breaking down work tasks into a series of discrete components, each taking approximately 25 minutes to complete. A short 5-minute break follows each period of concentrated effort. The 25-minute periods help keep one fresh by boosting productivity in small chunks and optimising cognitive focus, while the 5-minute breaks are there to prevent cognitive depletion and burnout. A tomato-shaped kitchen timer (the Pomodoro) performs a regulatory and transitory function and symbolises and normalises the ritual. Cirilio’s design principles have since dominated various websites, apps and instruction manuals on time management (Gregg, 2018; Strzelecka, 2022a). The Pomodoro seems to offer particularly appealing promises to contemporary white-collar workers in light of interruptions—from app pings, web boards, emails, phone calls and desk visits—that regularly take attention away from whatever task might be at hand. In short, the Pomodoro technique presents itself as a time management tool that can enable the practice of taking control of one’s time and productivity (Strzelecka, 2022b) to the degree that being in control of one’s time seems to have become symptomatic of being in control of oneself. Moreover, to be in control of oneself also seems, to a great extent, to be a matter of being in control of one’s time and productivity (Gregg, 2018).

Nevertheless, as critical voices have pointed out, being empowered by time management technologies is also to have one’s subjectivity produced; it is to experience oneself not apart from relations of

power but as one of their most tangible effects (Gregg, 2018; Holdsworth, 2020, 2021; Strzelecka, 2022a). Time management practices change ‘individual’s ways of thinking and acting’ (Strzelecka, 2022b: 331). Rather than empowering workers, time management technologies, within this critical tradition, promote the idea of the worker as a subject who wants to make his or herself more efficient at the expense of others. As Holdsworth (2021) pointed out, the proliferation of popular texts on time management, such as the ones on the Pomodoro technique, not only seem to testify to the experience that individuals must overcome the increased busyness of contemporary life, they also make the individual the primary site for overcoming this busyness. A common feature of reading texts on time management is, as Holdsworth (2021) proposed that the problem of compressed time is solved by isolating individuals and their tasks from those of others. Time management becomes a question of changing habits that optimise time for oneself and one’s productivity at the expense of the collective (Holdsworth, 2021)

As Gregg (2018) put it, there seems to be a clear ‘personalisation of productivity’ in time management techniques whereby productivity questions are not considered a structural or organisational concern but are experienced as an everyday personal concern. Based on this analysis, to be a subject seeking to make oneself more efficient is not to be free but, instead, to have chosen to be governed following a series of discernible parameters. Time management tools thus depoliticise an organisation by making time pressure the worker’s fault instead of pointing to structural causes such as ‘the logistical nightmare of achieving synchronicity’ (Gregg, 2018: 6) with work tasks and colleagues. According to Gregg (2018), this personalisation of productivity in time management tools is best understood through the German Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s idea of athleticism. For Gregg, the language of athletics provides a language for celebrating the competitiveness seen in time management tools, emphasising focus, self-discipline and adequate training to achieve desirable results.

Gregg used this idea of athleticism, in particular, to argue that the self-improvement strategies embedded in time management tools focus on the individual’s measure of career progression and separate them from their working collective. In the words of Gregg (2018: 15), time management is a form of training through which ‘workers render all colleagues competitors’. For Gregg, as for Holdsworth, time management’s personalised productivity propels a relentless individualised busyness without a purpose other than being successful on the career market. Strzelecka (2022a: 286) suggested that this also means that tools such as the Pomodoro technique (which she mentioned

directly) can lead to negative consequences such as a ‘sense of continual exhaustion, stress, and sometimes also depression’.

However, as Guthro (2019) pointed out, it is questionable whether time management necessarily leads to solitude and separation from the needs of others. Could not athleticism be a group or shared activity, as Guthro wondered? Moreover, O’Grady (2019) inquired if the purpose of using time management tools has a say. For instance, can time management heighten productivity to gain a better work-life balance and not just be an instrument for pursuing a competitive edge on the career market? Recently, Mullens and Glorieux (2023), in their case study of a company moving to a reduced workweek, combined a new time structure with more goal-oriented practices, creating a new kind of time consciousness among employees of not only optimizing their personal time but also not wasting others time. These findings indicate that adopting a time management tool is not destined to personalise productivity at the expense of the collective or can perhaps support a collective transformation towards better work-life balance.

In fact, Holdsworth (2020: 497), while drawing on John Dewey’s work on habit, suggested that the form of athleticism that time management consists of is enacted through habits that are paradoxical in the sense that they both ‘hold the body in place’ and are ‘also open to change’. If time management habits are paradoxical in this way, in Holdsworth’s (2020: 498) words, working on these habits ‘can open ways of doing and negotiating to reform the incessant arrest of being busy’. If so, time management habits do not necessarily lead to the busyness of personalised productivity but can also be open to more collective habits of work-life balance. As we will see in the case of Blue and its journey towards a four-day working week, the Pomodoro time management technique enabled two processes: on the one hand, a form of self-habituation that seemed to enhance personalised productivity, and on the other hand, there were also instances where this habituation pointed towards a collective transformation and improvement in work-life balance. Before we get into this, we first outline what Blue is and how we collected data about it.

## **Time management in a four-day workweek: The case of Blue**

Blue is a digital marketing company with 37 employees as of May 2022. The company is an award-winning digital agency that provides services in web analytics, search engine optimization and digital

strategy. The average age of Blue's employees is 33, and roughly 55 per cent are male. In February 2017, the organisation made Fridays a day free from work, even though employees would still be paid for the entire week. A consequentially significant, if perhaps predictable, improvement in employee satisfaction levels was ensured. Counter-intuitively, however, this objective of four days' work for five days' pay was achieved without significant detriment to most organisational performance levels. Although they work less, Blue's employees appear to have found ways of working smarter.

According to our respondents—executives and workers alike—implementing time-saving technologies should primarily be credited for these achievements. Work process reports and performance measures, for example, became AI-generated. Internal communication systems were overhauled to minimise time-wasting. Meetings were not allowed in the morning but only in the afternoon, and when they did occur, they were capped at 42 minutes. Clocks were installed visibly in meeting rooms to keep participants focused on tasks and outcomes. The contribution of these specific tactics notwithstanding, the technique that most animated accounts of why a four-day workweek was achieved without detriment at Blue was the widespread use of the Pomodoro time management tool. Initially proposed by one of Blue's employees as one of several time-saving technologies, Pomodoro quickly became a foundational principle for the organisation's entire strategic overhaul. Our fieldwork analysed the emphasis Pomodoro places upon the efficiency imperative as well as how individuals incorporated this into their working habits.

## **Data collection and coding**

Our fieldwork combined formal interviews, onsite observations and informal discussions. Most of the data were collected between February-March 2019, February 2020 and May 2020. The lead author and his research assistants were provided with a desk in the open office space next to the CEO that was used throughout the data collection period. Observations were logged into a journal, with particular attention paid to how Pomodoro sessions materialised. Observations and informal talks were done for a little over 40 hours. The research assistants, in particular, also noted what employees and managers talked about during coffee and lunch breaks, as well as of discussions that took place during weekly staff meetings. Coding the notes, we did not observe any particular deviations between



what managers and employees said in the formal interviews and during observations and informal talks. We can, of course, never fully know this, but it was our – as well as the research assistants’ – impression that employees and managers alike were very comfortable with our presence and did not seem disturbed by it nor as if they behaved in scripted ways.

More formally, the lead author and his research assistants interviewed six managers and 21 employees (15 males and 12 females). Six of these were systematically chosen as the CEO, and all five department managers were interviewed. All employees were asked to volunteer for an interview. Due to holidays, illness, parental leave, and other absences during the interview period, five or six employees from each department were interviewed. Overall, 27 out of 37 employees were interviewed, which is more than 70 per cent of the total number of employees. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and was recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted sequentially with particular emphasis on using the Pomodoro time management tool. In this way, all interviews started with two open-ended questions: 1) what has your career path looked like so far and how did you end up working for Blue, and 2) what is your perception of the four-day workweek and how has it changed how you work? Based on these two overall questions, the rest of each interview unfolded based on probing questions asking the respondents to elaborate on their perception of Pomodoro as a time-management tool and give examples of how it has influenced their work. This semi-structured protocol enabled us to observe similarities and differences between individuals regarding how they would modulate their work in response to the axioms of Pomodoro time management. All interviewees were anonymised, and the names used in this paper are pseudonyms. We coded the empirical data inductively and manually read through all transcripts and field notes to generate codes (Braun and Clark, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In the coding process, we emphasised how individuals incorporated the Pomodoro sessions into their daily working habits and the degree to which they evaluated the value of such new habits. In particular, we assessed what they found challenging and rewarding when using Pomodoro. After this inductive coding, we identified 2 themes, which we followed to structure the analysis. These were: 1) Personalised productivity, 2) improved work-life balance. Below in the findings section, we first provide a more descriptive analysis of how the Pomodoro time management was introduced – and then used – in Blue, followed by an analysis of the two thematic findings.

## Findings

### *The introduction of the Pomodoro time management tool at Blue*

When the decision to move to a four-day workweek was enforced, the Pomodoro technique gradually became institutionalised at Blue. The use of the time management tool began as an employee initiative and not a management directive. In the journey to a four-day workweek, employees were asked to offer ideas for how work could flow better and more efficiently. One day, the employee Mary suggested experimenting with Pomodoro as a collective. Management liked the idea and asked the employees for their opinions; as most employees supported the idea, the experiment began. Each employee was obliged to complete 12 Pomodoro sessions—that is to say, an average of 12 discrete instances of 25 minutes of uninterrupted work periods devoted to a specific task followed by 5 minutes of respite—per week. In the initial institutionalisation of the Pomodoro technique, each employee was obliged to manually activate a red light indicating to their colleagues that they were engaged in a Pomodoro session. They were also advised to put on headphones, both to facilitate concentration and as a signal for others not to interrupt. A large whiteboard was also placed in the open office space to encourage employees to become accustomed to the Pomodoro technique, both as a personal requirement and a collective ritual. The Pomodoro technique was used for a variety of work tasks, but the most reoccurring was finishing reports, answering emails, or programming.

This initial situation was not without its problems. The interviews revealed that employees often forgot to remove their headphones or extinguish their red lights at the end of the discrete working sessions. Most employees also had problems detecting whether their colleagues had their lights on or off, thus resulting in many unintended interruptions. Moreover, many forgot to register their sessions on the whiteboard, creating confusion and inefficiency. All in all, rather than signalling when people were in a discrete Pomodoro session, this first set of new work habits did not enable employees to know whether they could approach their colleagues, leading to many unintended and undesired interruptions.

Such teething problems were significantly reduced when Blue introduced a digital dashboard that could be accessed on each computer in the office. This display enabled each employee to see who was engaged in a session and what task they had assigned to that particular session. The display also provided real-time information about how far an individual was into their flow sessions. This made

it straightforward for colleagues to know how far along in the Pomodoro each employee was if they needed to interrupt them. To further enhance the Pomodoro time management habit, an IT-system was designed that automatically activated a red lamp to communicate any given Pomodoro session initiation. As Hannibal pointed out in an interview:

I put on the headphones and I usually have it displayed. I use two screens, and on the bottom left of one of the screens, I have the timer, so if someone comes and looks over my shoulder, they can always see how much time I have left on my Pomodoro.  
(Hannibal)

Further, although each individual is expected to complete at least 12 Pomodoro sessions per week, management rarely treated the number of individual Pomodoro sessions achieved by employees relative to one another as a key performance indicator. As Caroline explained:

Several colleagues do not reach 12 Pomodoros a week, and it's not like someone will tell them off. It is more a question that if you repeatedly do not achieve the goal, someone might come and say, 'Hey, can we help you somehow? Is it difficult for you to plan? Can we do something to help you become more concentrated at work?'  
(Caroline)

Thus, rather than existing as a means of actual control or potential recrimination, the 12 Pomodoros per week target was instead deployed by management to indicate what might be done in the future. The 12 Pomodoro sessions per week, in this sense, were treated more in the way of a positive aspiration than in the form of a harmful failure. The imperative for employees was thus to take more responsibility for their actions by being encouraged to see Pomodoro sessions less in the way of external imposition and more as a self-enabling resource.

Finally, employees were asked to complete their Pomodoro sessions before lunch to schedule customer and in-house meetings for the afternoon. In general, as we will see, the use of Pomodoro seems to have materialised as an instance of personalised productivity that would sometimes isolate people from one another but also as a collective transformation aimed at a better work-life balance.

### *Pomodoro as personalised productivity*

A common feature in many of the interviews was that the introduction of the Pomodoro time management technique became a means by which individuals could address their old tasks—and not least the tedious ones—in new ways:

One thing is that Pomodoro makes us work in a concentrated form, but another is that it helps us get going with complex tasks... For example, it can be the more tedious tasks ... for instance, something I have postponed for some time. Then I can tell myself, 'OK, now I will put aside 25 minutes and get it done.' (Carl)

It [Pomodoro] helps me get started, especially with reports I don't feel like writing because 25 minutes is always doable. (Maja)

The Pomodoro habit intertwines and starts to respond to this unease by determining the situation as a question of something that can be approached either through a Pomodoro session or through the adjustment of a Pomodoro session. In many individual cases, Pomodoro sessions seem to have become the principal mode of response to work and the primary means through which work is both experienced and addressed. Our interviews made it clear that Pomodoro sessions were not merely behavioural; they also seemed to have become the very means through which individuals experienced, evaluated and enacted their work. Such a deployment of Pomodoros for specific situations, rather than for all tasks, was especially appropriate regarding the management of task avoidance and procrastination. As Lisa put it, Pomodoros could also be a valuable means of keeping a project moving without committing too much effort to it:

If I have a task that is not finished, I might go, 'Now I am doing a bloody Pomodoro', and when the 25 are up, the job is finished. (Lisa)

These experiences at Blue resembled Strezelecka's (2022a: 283) finding in her study of how professional white-collar workers would use the Pomodoro technique to motivate themselves to engage in work tasks by 'dividing them into smaller tasks'.

In general, the efficiency imperative normalised by the habits following the Pomodoro technique seemed to have had an existential effect on some of Blue's employees. As Hannibal noted:

I tend to get distracted when I write a blog post or prepare slides, but with the Pomodoro, I force myself not to do that. When I have the urge to do something else, and I can see on the timer that I still have 10 minutes left, I won't do it. So, it helps me focus on those tasks that usually lead me to procrastinate. I can force myself; I can't go for coffee, I can't go to the toilet, I'm just like, 'I need to finish this.' ... And it works for me; it works as a self-control technique. (Hannibal)

Jacob, another employee, even suggested in jest that if he had known about Pomodoro and its self-disciplining effects as a student, he might have had an even better career—or at least better grades. Jacob's and Hannibal's experience suggests elements of the athleticism Gregg (2018) mentioned as being internal to time management tools. Through the employees' adoption of the Pomodoro, there are changes in their subjectivity that largely lead them to perceive their work-life as a question of gaining more discipline and focus in general. Indeed, following Gregg (2018) and Holdsworth (2021), some interviews reinforced the idea that time management is a personalisation of productivity whereby employees would use the Pomodoro to focus on enhancing their productivity in their work tasks at the expense of their time for colleagues. For instance, Robert and Mark talked about how it could sometimes be frustrating when crucial employees, especially managers, were locked in Pomodoro sessions when their input was needed to get on with their tasks.

Others, such as Louise, used Pomodoro to reflect upon and inquire into the nature of their work habits in general and to consider the role that these play in the ongoing work of behavioural self-negotiation:

We have a distinct focus on efficiency, which also means that I quickly feel that I am wasting my time if I concentrate and go in-depth with an assignment. I think, 'Why have I spent three hours on this? Could it have been done in one Pomodoro?' So there is a sense of guilt connected to concentration and contemplation because where is the line between engagement and just sitting there 'ending' and not getting anywhere? (Louise)

Louise experienced not being able to disappear into one work assignment but also to evaluate if this use of time was inefficient; she wondered if it could have been done quicker and in fewer Pomodoro sessions. This was an experience also indicated in interviews with Isabella and Jonas. Louise, Isabella and Jonas's experience resembled Strzelecka's (2022a: 283) findings from some of the respondents she interviewed, who said that using Pomodoro triggered overburdening and was felt to be imposed

by a culture obsessed with managing time. However, the Pomodoro time management techniques did not solely work to adopt personalised productivity at Blue.

### *Pomodoro as a means of cooperation towards better work-life balance*

After the modification and automatisisation of the Pomodoro dashboard system, employees generally described the system as one that had created a new norm of social interaction around work coordination. While strictly speaking, Pomodoro sessions did not prevent interruptions, they provided a context within which individuals developed new habits of not interrupting each other. This unique and formalised new approach changed how work was managed. Before the routinisation of the Pomodoro session, a request for interruption by a colleague ('got a second?') would have caused a flow disruption. In practice, that meant that the interrupted employee was responsible for letting the interrupter know if they were available. Sometimes they were, and sometimes they were not; either way, the interruption had already occurred. After implementing the Pomodoro dashboard, if an employee wanted information from a colleague in a Pomodoro session, it was now the responsibility of the interrupter to evaluate if their interruption was so crucial that the colleague's Pomodoro session should be stopped. The potential interrupter should, in other words, look at how much remained of the colleague's Pomodoro and evaluate whether or not an interruption was warranted. As some employees told us during informal talks over coffee, as a rule of thumb, interrupting a Pomodoro session should be compared with interrupting a meeting. Suppose the information one needs is important enough to go into a meeting and interrupt it, in such a case, one should of course interrupt a colleague's Pomodoro session.

As explained by Lisa, Pomodoro time thus requires everyone to take responsibility for indicating when they can and cannot be interrupted:

When people are not in a Pomodoro, you can interrupt them with good conscience. On the other hand, I know that if they are in a Pomodoro, I shouldn't interrupt. Pomodoro has formalised a culture about when to approach colleagues and when to leave them alone. And I think that this is important, especially for the colleagues I have who get interrupted a lot. (Lisa)

The new formal and symbolic implementation of the Pomodoro technology has thus enabled Blue's employees to develop new ways of interacting with one another. In this sense, the Pomodoro time management technology seems to have evolved from an explicit set of self-habituating practices that individuals must adapt to an implicit set of self-habituating rules; they helped organise interruptions and work coordination. Like in Mullens and Glorieux (2023) study of a four-day workweek company the changes in work practices and the shorting of the week seem to create a new time structure that made employees aware of how they used their own and others' time.

As Paul also indicated, the personal productivity aspect of the Pomodoro time management tool would generally lead to a level of precision in interactions with colleagues:

By using Pomodoro, you almost by definition become more structured because it provides a structure, although not concerning how we communicate and talk together and stuff like that. It is more like we have become a little more precise, in the sense that there is not so much beating around the bush. (Paul)

However, this structure also comes with a sense of collective buzz, as Nina put it:

We were doing most of the Pomodoro sessions collectively before lunch, which created a sense of achieving something together before moving into new parts of the day, when we often have meetings in our teams or with our customers. (Nina)

Doing the Pomodoro together seems to have created a sense of belonging. As Mark put it when asked about the role of the Pomodoros and the four-day workweek project at Blue:

Yes, I think that Pomodoro sessions and the focus on doing them have cleared a path for the four-day workweek. As I see it, Pomodoro has cleared the way to give people more space to concentrate on work tasks and clarify how and when to interrupt. So in that light, it is essential to focus on doing Pomodoro sessions and saying 12 a week is a way of reminding everyone about that. But as I see it in the end, it is about the culture of doing Pomodoro sessions that matters, not having 14, 12 or 9 under the belt this week. It is about creating a designated space for concentration and focus in our office. (Mark)

Mark's experience was one we encountered among many of the employees when we asked why they talked so much about Pomodoros in their daily interactions. As Eric pointed out:

Well, we do talk a lot about Pomodoro. I think it is a way of talking about how we can be interrupted less by ourselves and others. So it is about that. We don't focus on how we interrupt one another and coordinate with one another. And frankly, it is also central because it is in the Pomodoros that we manifest and remind ourselves that we are working for a four-day workweek company. (Eric)

At Blue, there were instances of the Pomodoro leading to the habituation of personal productivity, but we also saw how this led to a collective transformation in the shape of a collective way of managing interruptions in the company, creating a buzz about focusing on work before lunch and, perhaps most importantly, the Pomodoro time management habit becoming a reminder that Blue is working towards better work-life balance in the shape of a four-day workweek and not just enhanced personal productivity. So even employees like Jane and Anna took an additional step coordinating their Pomodoro time so that they could take breaks together. In this way, the formal time of the Pomodoro came to be a way of structuring how informal breaks and coffee time were coordinated.

## **Understanding time management at Blue through John Dewey's notion of habit**

How can we best understand these findings concerning time management at Blue, namely that Pomodoro leads both to personalised productivity and cooperation for better work-life balance? In her discussion on time management habits and the acceleration of busyness, Holdsworth (2020: 496) suggested a promising path when she pointed to the value of understanding time management habits through 'John Dewey's neo-pragmatist theory of actions' in which 'habits constitute a large part of everyday conduct'. In this Deweyan conception of habit, she continued that habits are 'acquired and influenced by prior activity but are simultaneously projective and dynamic' (Holdsworth, 2020: 496). This dynamic quality means that habits 'may fix action, while simultaneously, as time-management pundits champion, be a way of moving the body forward' (Holdsworth, 2020: 496). 'This paradoxical quality of habit' (Holdsworth, 2020: 496) also implies that habits such as time management habits can be open to change; this 'change yet is not simply down to the force of sovereign will' (Holdsworth 2020: 497). Instead, change of habit, following Dewey, depends on the 're-negotiation of



relationships that constitute these practices’ (Holdsworth, 2020: 497). Indeed, as she concluded, the ‘value of endorsing the paradoxical habits of busyness is that this approach can open ways of doing and negotiation to reform the incessant arrest of being busy’ (Holdsworth, 2020: 497). What is interesting about Holdsworth’s (2020) Deweyian reflection on time management is that it suggests that time management habits do not necessarily lead ‘to the incessant arrest of being busy’, as Holdsworth (2021) would later point to, nor the athleticism of personalised productivity, as Gregg (2018) suggested. This Deweyan understanding of habit can thus help us understand how time management using the Pomodoro technique at Blue has led to personalised productivity and become a part of a collective process of moving to a four-day workweek. In the words of Holdsworth’s Deweyan reflection, even time management habits can be reformed and renegotiated.

Critical scholarship, such as Greggs (2018), upon the efficiency imperative of time management and its capacity to bring subtle modes of self-governance into clearly bearing upon the level of adoption we observed at Blue and discussed with its employees. Nevertheless, through this Dewey framework of habit, we are also encouraged to consider whether the demonstrable production of habituation of time management is something we must oppose. As Holdsworth (2020) pointed out, according to Dewey, we only change ourselves by employing our habits. Therefore, the practical choice we always have to make insofar as our habits are concerned is ‘to revise, adapt, expand and alter them’ (Dewey, 1922: 240). This continuous readaptation is what happened and undoubtedly continues at Blue through its pursuit and achievement of a four-day workweek. Understanding the habituation of time management in the Deweyan sense means understanding two features of habit in particular. First, habits can propel transformation; according to Dewey, they can be flexible and sensitive and enact actions that are open to change. Secondly, habit patterns, even the most intimate ones, following Dewey, are always embodied and embedded into the material environment and social practices. They are always already collective. Let us look at each of these features and how these can help us with the effects of the habituation of time management, be it towards a collective transformation to better work-life balance or the personalised productivity and busyness of gaining an edge on the career markets, as Holdsworth (2021) and Gregg (2018) argued.

### **Time management habits as open to change**

According to Gregg (2018), time management habits have a Sloterdijkian athleticism to them. Time management promises self-enhancement in an endless career progression through adequate discipline and repetitive training, where self-actualisation equals self-exploitation. This athleticism, she suggested, implies that ‘time management training has the effect, if not the function, of obliterating recognition of collegial interdependence in contemporary workplaces’ (Gregg, 2018: 55). However, Dewey’s conceptualisation of the phenomenon of habit allows us to treat time management as something less fixated. For Dewey, habits are malleable and an ongoing product of the enduring interplay between the subject and its social and material environment. It does not necessarily lead to the entanglement of career ambitions with a sense of self-worth that Gregg (2018) suggested. The imperative to self-rationalise through the Pomodoro tool did not determine the course of action at Blue. The habit of Pomodoro sessions was renegotiated in various ways that cannot be reduced to the athleticism of personal productivity. Blue’s staff would use intense Pomodoro sessions to perform the tasks that they believed to be the most conducive. Everybody at Blue also formed a disposition towards their workload, mediated by the affordances of the Pomodoro technique. This disposition was itself subject to change.

Individual sessions, for instance, were always subject to contingency (interruptions are always possible) and customisation (the duration of the Pomodoro time slot might be extended or contracted). Pomodoros provided individuals with concrete occasions for reorganising their habits and intelligently adapting Pomodoro’s technological affordances to how they believe themselves to function best. Following Dewey (1922: 71), we might differentiate between routines and intelligent habits here. According to Dewey, the ‘essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response, not to particular acts . . . habit means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of special acts’ (Dewey 1922:32), while Dewey acknowledged that all habits involve an element of mechanical recurrence of unique acts such ‘mechanisation is not of necessity all there is to habit’ (Dewey, 1922: 70). Indeed, Dewey suggested habits to be a predisposition to modes of responses that, through ‘practice and use’ can become ‘varied, more adaptable’ (Dewey, 1922: 72). Such *intelligent* habits are not a mere recurrence of a behavioural *routine* (such as always automatically using the Pomodoro for 25 minutes) but involve a sensibility for the situation. Again and again, we heard of the abstract imperatives of Pomodoro sessions, on the one hand, and the specific demands made by concrete situations, on the other. The self-habituating employees at Blue seemed to recognise that behavioural routines could never entirely cover all the cases they were meant to manage. Rather than further

formalising the managing routines of Pomodoro sessions through the means of observations made from more and more cases, Blue's employees instead managed their practice of Pomodoro techniques in intelligent ways.

What happened at Blue through the use of the Pomodoro practice and the shortening of the workweek seem to echo Mullens and Glorieux's (2023) finding in a Belgian company that also moved to a reduced workweek. Their study highlights how the new time structure of a four-day workweek translated into more time-consciousness among employees: how and when did they use their work time. In Blue, the same seems to happen. In Deweyan terms, the habit of doing Pomodoros became intelligent as it created a consciousness towards how one's own and other time was used. As one employee put it: 'Pomodoro is not about protecting your time. It is about protecting other people's time, so we do not waste one another's time'. A Deweyan emphasis upon habit thus draws our attention to how individuals incorporate time management tools that are anything but automatic, such as the Pomodoro, within their behaviours. While habits may adapt to the time management tool, such habits also reconfigure the tool.

This habituation process can of course, lead to increased busyness and personalised productivity, as Holdsworth (2021) and Gregg (2018) would have it, even to the 'sense of permanent lack of time, continual exhaustion, stress, and sometimes also depression' that Strzelecka (2022a, 286) saw in her research of the usage of the Pomodoro technology. In combination with a reduced workweek, it can also lead to what Mullens and Glorieux (2023: 165) described as a decreased lack of informal coffee breaks and a decreased slack time, i.e. time for employees to 'explore new ideas'. Nevertheless, the very malleable way the Pomodoro time management was customised to individual habits and contingencies at Blue also points to how collective efforts are always a possibility. Even though the Pomodoro sessions can be said to have brought an entire constellation of self and collectively governing subjects into being (Fayard, 2019; McKinley and Taylor, 2014; Meinnicken and Miller, 2012), it did so based on a consensus of the value of reduced working hours, as we saw several employees pointing out that Pomodoro sessions reminded employees about what they were working towards as a collective – a four-day workweek. The potential of time management habits thus cannot be foreclosed beforehand. That such habits can lead to Sloterdijkian athleticism does not mean they always do. Indeed, following Dewey, we argue that the cooperation between habits can lead to transformation and employee solidarity. Blue provided a fascinating example of how the personal productivity imperative of time management can also be enacted through collective means and

towards a collective end. Here, the plasticity of habit formation has the potential to lead to affirmative practices that are not reducible to a kind of neoliberal self-disciplining. However, as Mullens and Glorieux (2023, 161) that can, another issue when a goal-oriented time management technology is combined with a reduced workweek is what they described as a decreased lack of informal coffee breaks and a decreased slack time i.e. time for employees to ‘explore new ideas that could be beneficial for innovation’. Indeed, that was also an issue raised by some employees, and some even started to synchronise their Pomodoro time to ensure that coffee breaks were coordinated.

### **Time management habits as material and social assemblages**

As Holdsworth (2020) rightly pointed out, any habituation of time management techniques is part of a relationship between social practices and the material environment. This is the case with a process of habituating personal productivity and collective transformation towards work-life balance. Dewey’s notion of habit, in particular, undermines the blanket assertion that time management can be implemented by the pure willpower of individuals into a concrete environment without due consideration being paid to the social and material particularities that characterise that environment.

As Dewey (1922) kept repeating throughout his book *Human Nature and Conduct*, social change cannot be achieved through verbal instructions and willpower; as such, attempts remove the individual from their social and material environment. Habits are developed within and throughout concrete empirical settings, and so, to have a meaningful effect upon both, we ‘must work on the environment and not merely the hearts of men [sic]’ (Dewey, 1922: 22). As Pedwell (2021: 16) pointed out, the Deweyian habit is thus perhaps best understood as an assemblage—a contingent and temporal arrangement of relations neither reducible to, say, the individual nor the environment. The successful implementation of the Pomodoro technique at Blue has provided us with a clear case of habit as an assemblage. The abstract idea that interruptions should be minimised so that work can be done was insufficient for eventually bringing new habits into being. It was only when material, symbolic and behavioural artefacts of the Pomodoro axiom emerged that individuals became sufficiently enabled to practice what was preached. At Blue, the red lights, headphones and digital dashboard propelled the Pomodoro habit.

This resembles Dewey's point that the imperative to change habits solely by employing self-change initiatives is an instance of what he called magical thinking. Any effective change process, he wrote, involves a 'selecting and weighting of the objects which engage attention and which influence the fulfilment of desires' on the part of changers and changes alike (Dewey, 1922: 20). However, this selection is not made by the individual alone but through ever-evolving interactions between individuals and their social environments. As such, the Pomodoro habit assemblage *might* redirect focus from the organisation and the collective towards the individual. As Holdsworth (2021: 154) suggested, time management as an individual endeavour is a 'red herring'. Rather than investing resources and employees' engagement into time management apps and courses, the focus should be on how responsibilities and work tasks are distributed within an organisation.

However, as we saw at Blue, the Pomodoro habit assemblage was also part of an organisational distribution and coordination of work tasks and responsibilities—a way of collectively dealing with what Wajcman called the growing temporal density, where multitasking becomes ingrained in everyday work (Wajcman, 2014). As Pedwell (2021: 16) put it, habit assemblages are 'constantly revolving'. We cannot beforehand know what they are capable of. At Blue, and in its journey to a four-day workweek, the Pomodoro has become part of the organisational environment with its red lights, headphones and virtual dashboards, as well as been extended and embedded into a social habit of how to interact with each other (when to interrupt and how to engage with colleagues) and oneself (how to create focus during the workday, decomposing large work tasks into more manageable time slots and dealing with dull work tasks). The adoption of the Pomodoro, in other words, is both a means for personalised productivity *and* collective transformation towards work-life balance. Time management and its adoption as a collective habit, such as we saw indications of in Blue's four-day workweek, could consequently be not only an instrument for accelerating busyness and personalised productivity in contemporary white-collar work but also a critical resource for developing new forms of subjectivity and collective and organisational interactions that run counter to such busyness and personalisation of productivity. The development of time management habits that we saw at Blue did not always self-propel into an individual athleticism without a sense of the structural and organisational 'logistical nightmare of achieving synchronicity' (Gregg, 2018: 6); it was also precisely a way of trying to deal with this nightmare by collectively employing time management as a social and material habit assemblage that coordinates work and reminds the staff at Blue that they are working towards the common goal of a four-day workweek.

## Conclusion

Adopting time management technologies such as the Pomodoro technique is a way to deal with the time pressures of contemporary work-life. However, critical voices such as Holdsworth and Gregg have pointed to time management tools' more problematic aspects. They individualise how to cope with time pressure, enhance the norms of busyness and disconnect colleagues from one another. However, as we showed in the case study of Blue, a company that implemented a four-day workweek, this is not always the case. At Blue, the Pomodoro time management tool has not only led to a personalisation of productivity but to collective rhythms of working towards a better work-life balance. Of course, what we don't know is whether employees would have preferred other rhythms. Would for instance some employees have preferred a reduction in daily working hours rather than a full Friday off? This is something for further research to engage with.

As we suggested towards the end of the paper, the habituation of time management can be understood through John Dewey's notion of habit. Deweyan habit points to how time management habits are plastic and open to change while always part of a material and social assemblage. These two features can help us explain why time management tools might lead to personalising productivity and enhanced neoliberal self-discipline. However, these two features of Deweyan habit also point to how time management habits, under the right circumstances, can be part of cooperation and better work-life balance. How time management tools form our subjectivity and sociality is not fixed. As in the case of Blue's four-day workweek experiment, the habit assemblages of time management can be renegotiated, leading to new ways of being an employee and colleague that do not revolve around busyness and personalised productivity.

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