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**Cultural Control and the ‘Culture Manager’: employment practices
in a consultancy**

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Cultural Control and the ‘Culture Manager’: employment practices in a consultancy

This article explores the use of ‘company culture’ as a means of management control. It reports on research conducted in a consultancy that aimed to secure loyalty from its employees through a conscious policy of organised ‘play’ at company socials. Employees were given a certain amount of freedom over their working lives in exchange for accepting company regulation of their social time. Here it is argued that this normative control differs from historical attempts to ensure that employees were of good moral character. In earlier interventions social and community obligations were emphasised, now every ‘virtue’ encouraged is designed to be exercised in the workplace, often at the expense of the individual or the community. Further, that while control through organisational culture does have some of the advantages claimed for it in the prescriptive literature, it also extends the employment contract to areas previously outside the managerial prerogative.

Despite the problems and pitfalls inherent in the topic, the notion of ‘corporate culture’ continues to fascinate both academics and practitioners. Accounts of idyllic and successful cultures are readily available (see, for example, Peters and Waterman 1982; Deal and Kennedy 1982; Goldsmith and Clutterbuck 1984; Peters and Austin 1985), almost all of which claim to resolve the tensions inherent in the employment

relationship by substituting ‘active employee commitment’ for ‘resigned behavioural compliance’ (Ogbonna 1992/93). According to the literature, this dramatic shift is to be secured by shifting the emphasis of managerial control from behaviour to attitudes and norms. Kunda (1992) drawing on Etzioni’s (1961) work, calls this emphasis ‘normative control’ and describes it as the regulation of the employee’s *self*, rather than the work they are engaged in (p. 2):

Normative control is the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts and feelings that guide their actions. Under normative control, members act in the best interest of the company not because they are physically coerced, nor purely from an instrumental concern with economic rewards and sanctions. . . . Rather, they are driven by internal commitment, strong identification with company goals, intrinsic satisfaction from work. . . . Thus, under normative control, membership is founded not on the behavioural or economic transaction traditionally associated with work organisations, but, more crucially, on an experiential transaction, one in which symbolic rewards are exchanged for a moral orientation to the organisation.

The means of controlling these “underlying experiences, thoughts and feelings” vary but have included focused training courses (Kunda 1992; Höpfl 1992; 1993; Hochschild 1983), the deliberate articulation of a corporate ‘mission’ (Watson 1994) and the introduction of ‘soft’ human resource practices (Storey 1992; Legge 1995).

Unsurprisingly, the claims of the prescriptive literature have attracted a great deal of critical scrutiny and academics have responded at a variety of levels with thoughtful overviews (Guest 1992; Anthony 1994; Legge 1994; 1995), theoretical critiques (Willmott 1993) and empirical accounts of the impact that such practices have in the workplace (Rosenthal *et al.* 1997; Höpfl 1992; 1993).

Much of the empirical work on culture has focused on corporate attempts to use normative control to overcome legacies of troublesome employee relations and the difficulties involved in this process have been well documented. Keenoy and Anthony (1992) note that shortly after the TSB launched its cultural change programme (which aimed to construct an 'achievement oriented culture') it announced that some 5,000 staff were to be made redundant; British Airways' much vaunted high regard for its staff was not apparent either in Höpfl's (1992; 1993) description of the company's training programme or its behaviour through the industrial action of 1997 (*Financial Times*, 15 July 1997); and Ogbonna and Wilkinson's (1988; 1990) account of cultural change in supermarkets describes practices that are very stressful for the checkout operators told to implement them. Given these difficulties, it is hardly surprising that most academic accounts of 'cultural change' point out that managerial interventions aimed at re-shaping shop-floor culture are rarely successful (Rosenthal *et al.* 1997; Storey 1992; Marchington *et al.* 1992).

A variety of lessons can be drawn from such unsuccessful initiatives. As both Hill (1995) and Keep (1989) note, employees are not 'cultural dopes' and rhetorical flourishes towards commitment from top management are rarely convincing unless

they are matched by more tangible evidence of goodwill. Equally, shop-floor culture is not a vacuum into which senior management may pour whatever attributes and emotions it desires (Anthony 1994). Management is not the only source of cultural meanings and numerous accounts have highlighted the distinctive nature of individual workgroups (see among others, Anthony 1994; Gouldner 1954; Ackroyd and Crowdy 1990; Collinson 1992; Burawoy 1979).

More recently, some authors have started to explore the active ‘management’ of culture in environments where staff are willing participants in the process (Kunda 1992; Kidder 1981; Casey 1995). These are companies in which (it seems) the reality matches the rhetoric and responsibility is given as well as demanded. This article draws on material gathered in a British company that appeared to match the successes highlighted in these American accounts. It describes an environment in which employees are engaged in interesting, well remunerated work and are the subject of conscious culture manipulation.

It makes a number of points. Firstly, structural factors were at least as important as cultural ones in this process of ‘culture management’ and the activities observed here were promoted and supported by recruitment, pay and work design. Secondly, and more broadly, that reminiscent as this may be of earlier attempts to influence and control the moral character of employees, new culture management practices are highly distinctive. While traditionally social life and participation in appropriate community activities were considered just as important as diligence within the workplace, modern character formation emphasises workplace participation to the exclusion of all else. The work provided is often interesting and responsible, a

degree of autonomy may be granted; but the price paid for doing interesting work is that the employee has little opportunity to do anything but work. 'Free' time is captured and colonised by the employer. Finally the implications of this form of management control are considered.

Control, commitment and 'charisma'

Richard Edwards's (1979) seminal study of control begins with 'simple control' where daily contact with the owner/manager often secured the direct and personal loyalties of employees who identified with both the owner and one another. In Edwards's account, such loyalties were doomed to decay once the organisation grew above a certain size. Deprived of daily, routine contact with their employer, employees would not form emotional ties with him or her nor would this emotional investment be transferred to a reification of 'the organisation'.

Edwards maintains that such personal ties were possible only in the smallest of companies and his description of it suggests that it is a *natural* rather than a *conscious* process. As companies grow, such personal loyalties are superseded by structural controls that are either technical (imposed by the technical requirements of the machinery) or bureaucratic (and involve hierarchical relations and the 'rule of law').

Adopting Edwards's definition, control is taken to be (p. 17) 'the ability . . . to obtain desired work behaviour from workers'. This can be achieved in a variety of ways. Management may control employees' movements, the time they spend on tasks or their environments (Fox 1971); control may be articulated through the development of particular forms of technology or organisational rules (Edwards, R. 1979); and, more broadly, it may take the form of either direct control of employees' work or the

granting of responsible autonomy (Friedman 1977; see also Harbison and Myers 1959). Traditionally rule-bound bureaucratic forms of governance are presented as restricting freedom. Storey (1983:135):

The essential contrast is between low-discretion, rule-bound, hierarchical organisations versus high-discretion, low-specificity, decentralised modes.

This emphasis on the extent to which forms of control regulate tasks, appropriate as it is for many organisations, automatically presents normative control as liberating (Mayo 1933; Kunda 1992) not because it is, but because normative control does not seek to regulate tasks. Yet, as will be seen here, it is possible to devise a system that combines a great deal of discretion over work with substantial regulation elsewhere.

ConsultancyCo

This case study was conducted as part of a larger project into employment practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that was financed by the European Regional Development Fund. Fieldwork was divided into two elements, a simple attitude survey (conducted in every company) and a more detailed qualitative work. Three researchers were involved in the study and all visited 'ConsultancyCo' while the study was being carried out. Most of the time spent in the company was devoted to observation and in-depth interviews were conducted with both management and employees. In addition to this the company offered (enthusiastic) access to internal paperwork and provided us with documentation, a consultants' report on the organisation and the company video.

ConsultancyCo specialises in software for telephony, IT and security services. Its set-up was well timed since an economic up-turn in Britain (where most of the company's business is based) coupled with an increased interest in out-sourcing by many large organisations meant that the company's growth and profitability have been impressive. By 1998, when this research took place, ConsultancyCo employed some 150 workers, including 12 directors, most of whom were based in their Manchester office. Some smaller subsidiary offices had been set up in Edinburgh and Dallas, and, since ConsultancyCo targeted and won a blue-chip clientele, its consultants and engineers might be based at client offices anywhere in the world.

The workers were largely well educated and the company supported many in training. About 65% of the employees were graduates including four with doctorates. All directors were taking the Institute of Directors' examinations at a local university, thirty staff had attained membership of the Institute of Electronic Engineers (ten more are working towards it) and several were enrolled on MBA courses. ConsultancyCo itself had gained Investors in People and ISO9001 awards as well as a prize in a national small business competition. Further, the company subscribed to numerous professional magazines, was willing to invest in the latest software for its staff and encouraged both consultants and engineers to give papers at professional conferences worldwide in order to win clients and network with other organisations.

ConsultancyCo was founded in 1993 and its rapid growth meant that personal contact with the founding owner was no longer an effective means of control. The practices presented in this article were all attempts to institutionalise this simple, personal control. In common with many other SMEs, ConsultancyCo employed a

range of sophisticated HR practices (Duberley and Walley 1995; Bacon *et al.* 1996), but these were used as an active alternative to bureaucratic control rather than as a justification for ‘harder’ employment policies (in contrast to Bacon 1999; Keenoy 1997).

The means of management control observed here, like many of the ‘commitment-centred’ management practices at the heart of HRM (Guest 1998), were designed to systemically preserve the personal loyalties characteristic of ‘simple’ control, to prevent the ‘routinisation’ of ‘charisma’ (Gerth and Mills, 1948). ConsultancyCo had succeeded in using ‘simple’ forms of control very effectively. Its social, extrovert managing director had taken great pains to establish friendly relations with every member of his staff. He was on first name terms with them all and all spoke highly of him. As Edwards, R. (1979) notes of organisations in which ‘simple’ control is practised (p. 27):

Loyalty had a direct and personal meaning for workers, and many were reluctant to break the bonds it formed.

In ConsultancyCo, while most employees had been with the company for only one or two years (the period of ConsultancyCo’s most dramatic growth), there was little evidence of rapid turnover or high levels of absenteeism. Most employees seemed pleased to be where they are and a survey, conducted in tandem with the case study research, revealed very high levels of satisfaction, 89% of respondents claimed that they were fully committed to the company, 95% that their colleagues were; 94% disagreed with the contention that management showed no consideration to employees and 87% agreed that management viewed employees as the company’s best assets

“This is culture: work hard, play very hard”

The means that ‘Ian Reese’, the founding owner-manager, devised to institutionalise ConsultancyCo’s “distinctive culture” were rather unusual. In 1993, when the company had consisted of a group of twelve friends, it had been common practice for them to socialise with one another. As the company grew these social events continued and came to be seen as an important part of the way the organisation was managed. Every senior member of ConsultancyCo’s staff that we interviewed used the phrase “work hard and play hard” to describe the company’s culture. Accordingly, when ‘Anna Culbertson’ was formally appointed ‘culture manager’ in 1997 with responsibility for both culture and training one of her tasks was to manage this ‘play’. It was not clear whether these social events had ever been a natural process. Certainly, by the time Anna became culture manager they were an integral part of a conscious system of managerial control. She was given a budget of a minimum of 2% of the company’s turnover (increased to £250,000 in the financial year described here) to actively control (and preserve) the company culture. Anna Culbertson:

The culture is part of a managerial tool which involves a lot, it’s a lot of time and its a lot of resource which take shape in loads of ways. The way people feel at work is very important to us. We don’t want people coming to work, doing their job and going home. I know that’s what they do. But it’s also more than that . . . we want our people to have a sense of belonging which makes them loyal. So it all starts at the top, its not something someone thought might be a good idea. It’s ingrained and something which is kept alive, all the way to the bottom.

The social events included weekends away (with families invited), nights out in pubs, sporting competitions (in which the men competed and the women, dressed

as cheerleaders, supported them), ‘dress down’ days in the office and charity fundraising events. A surprisingly large number of activities involved staff wearing some form of fancy dress, encouraging, perhaps, a more complete immersion of the ‘self’ than would be achieved in everyday wear. So group discos became 1970’s fashion parades, days out meant dressing as (anachronistically armed) cavaliers and a group outward bound course was made more challenging by the group outfits. Even the barge trip was undertaken in costume, though this time staff were given free rein in their choice of era and theme. Anna again:

It’s important to involve new starters in our extra-curricular activities . . . so I’ll have a budget for culture development, and - like we’ve had six new starters recently - I’m thinking of a few things at the moment which has been prompted by new people coming in. I don’t know whether to have a night out bowling or just pick-up the bar bill in a pub. I quite fancy a Chinese meal night - I just don’t know yet. We like new people to feel part of the culture right from the start and get involved with everyone socially - this is work hard, and then we all play hard.

These events were social activities and held in employees’ ‘own’ time but participation was only notionally voluntary. Employees were expected to *want* to participate and to actively enjoy themselves when they did. The line between work and home, already blurred by the expectation that employees would regularly attend ‘playful’ events organised by ConsultancyCo was made even more hazy by the inclusion of families in the invitations.

Anna Culbertson and Ian Reese were clear about what these events were designed to achieve. They were an extension of work rather than an excursion away

from it. They provided an opportunity for employees to relax and let off steam but this was not one of their primary functions. Rather, organising play was expected to encourage social rather than contractual relations within the firm. It was hoped that socialising together outside work would encourage employees to co-operate with one another in work, that meeting managers in informal surroundings would break down barriers and that benefiting from free and subsidised social events would encourage loyalty.

To a certain extent these expectations reflect many of the traditional ways in which professional workers have always been controlled. Professional work, and professional workers have always presented a problem to most control systems. Their work is often complex, intangible and resistant to simple forms of measurement. In other studies of managing 'trusted' workers authors have noted that social interactions and 'being known' often form the basis for judgements about an individual's competence in the workplace. In the absence of tangible, daily production targets, 'trusted' employees may be judged on their looks (Barnard 1962), their gender (Moss-Kanter 1977), their relationship with their line managers (Jackall 1988), the impression of competence they convey (Gowler and Legge 1983; Heller 1972; 1996), their membership of certain groups (Dalton 1966) or the stories other employees tell about them (Lewis and Stewart 1958).

Social events effectively reinforced the appropriate behaviours set out in the company culture statement (see Fig. 1). Sometimes this reinforcement was implicit and employees were expected to take their behavioural cues from more experienced staff. On other occasions desired behaviours would be explicitly stated and the

‘social’ designed around them. Such purposive game-playing was also a feature of ConsultancyCo’s internal training courses.

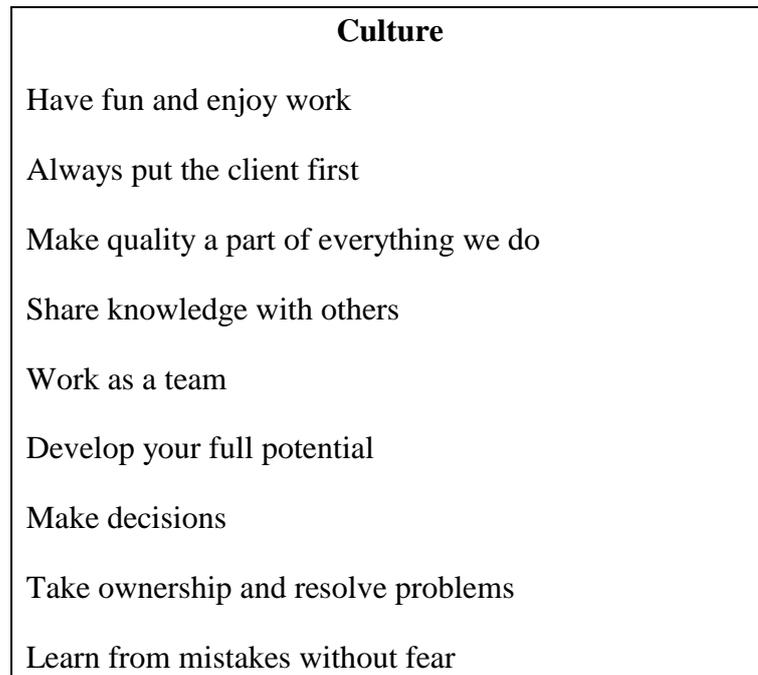


Fig. 1 ConsultancyCo’s culture statement

The company was willing to sponsor many of its employees on external courses to pursue qualifications that would enhance their technical skills but its internal training activities (aimed at all staff), were almost entirely designed to support the company culture. The most significant were the twice-yearly training days. During these the Manchester office was left in the hands of two telephone operators and all other employees were taken to a hotel. The day would begin with a briefing from Ian Reese on his plans for the company’s future after which Anna Culbertson would run a series of sessions designed to improved ‘soft’ skills. Staff might dress as sheep, build models or use their teamworking skills to ‘save the world’. The fancy dress that was provided for these events was similar to that worn at company socials and employees played similar (purposive and developmental) games at both training

days and socials. Families were even encouraged to attend the training days, just as they were encouraged to attend the socials. So, while work socials blurred the line between work and non-work time, 'developmental' games blurred the line between work and non-work activities. Activities designed to be 'fun' and to encourage particular behaviours might be played at a company social as readily as they were played on a training day. Turnout for training days was always high. Despite the growing geographical diversity of the organisation and the frequency with which consultants worked from client's sites every one of these training days was attended by over 90% of employees.

This emphasis on involvement and participation was reinforced by the existence of employee teams (Wilkinson *et al.* 1998). ConsultancyCo boasted multiple teams, each linked to a different initiative. There were improvement teams, product teams, quality teams, senior management teams and (of course) a team for every business unit. Each team held regular team briefings with minutes posted on the company's intra-net and everyone was actively encouraged to work on company procedures and improve them.

Genuine improvements were certainly made (these would be bureaucratically approved by the Quality Assurance team before being instituted into 'best practice' in the company manual) but the plethora of teams also served to reinforce the company culture. Team-working may result in improvements to product but it also (in theory) changes the work process itself. This apparently irrational duplication of teams was deliberate and aimed to stimulate ever increasing levels of (appropriate) participation.

Individual contributions were enthusiastically acknowledged and everything

from major contracts (those worth over £1 million were called ‘big elephants’) to suggested improvements to the in-house manuals would be announced at briefings. Ian Reese made a point of congratulating good performance in person or by e-mail and various awards existed for presentation to model workers. These included the somewhat less prestigious ‘brick’ awards. These marks of achievement (in reality a foam brick) were presented to a different employee each month. At the team briefing we observed the brick was won by a director who succeeded in locking himself into a toilet in an unfamiliar company office.

In managing the culture ConsultancyCo’s management provided attitudinal training to encourage valued qualities, offered in-house teams as a forum for attitudes to be exhibited and ensured, through specially organised socials, that employees’ ‘play’ both developed these and improved relationships within the organisation. But employees were not only expected to possess these personal attributes, they were also (under certain circumstances) expected to *act* as though they possessed these personal attributes. Directors were explicitly expected to act as behavioural role models for other employees at all times and any member of staff could volunteer to run a training session. ConsultancyCo held a regular series of employee presentations which was (rather ambitiously) titled the ‘ConsultancyCo University’. Reinforcing the company culture was a key aspect of all ‘university’ presentations. Effectively, taking on the mantle of ‘trainer’ was seen to confer responsibility for illustrating, exemplifying and propagating the culture. Anna Culbertson exercised editorial control over sessions and all attendees would be asked to give feedback on culture as well as content. Presentations might focus on new software systems, ways of dealing with clients or

lessons learned from particular contracts but they invariably involved acting out the desired persona.

Anna Culbertson was also the official incarnation of the office grapevine. She was a pleasant, chatty extrovert and as part of her work she made sure that she spoke to everyone. Staff within the Manchester office were generally relatively straightforward to contact. Those elsewhere were not exempt. We gained some insight into the level of this contact during telephone interviews with employees based in Edinburgh and South Africa. Our telephone interview to South Africa was held at mid-morning (their time). By that stage the consultant we spoke to had already had two telephone conversations with Anna and one with Ian Reese. The clerical worker in Edinburgh, interviewed early afternoon, had spoken to Anna three times that day. In addition to this Anna e-mailed employees with snippets of gossip. Everyone who worked for ConsultancyCo was assiduously kept in touch with events in the organisation.

Selecting suitable ‘souls’

This conscious character formation was assisted by ConsultancyCo’s selection procedures. Participation was assumed to be so central to work at the organisation that it formed a key part of both selection and induction. While ConsultancyCo had only just started using formal psychometric tests, individual attitudes had always played an important role in selection. Indeed, one member of the company’s management maintained that they looked for a suitable “character and . . . profile” *first* and, only when they were satisfied with this, asked about technical skills.

The personality ‘type’ that ConsultancyCo aimed to recruit was personable,

sociable and energetic. They targetted extroverts who were prepared to participate in the organisation's own particular form of social activities. The directors were clear about the type of behaviours required and enterprising in their efforts at seeking them out. Every year the company's graduate open day was planned to coincide with Red Nose Day with the result that interested undergraduates arrived to find most of the office in fancy dress. Life sized versions of Mickey Mouse, bunny girls and teddy bears ran round the office, playing pranks and waving collection buckets at their colleagues, while interviews would be conducted with the interviewers still in costume. It was this type of participation that directors were seeking in new hires and Anna Culbertson quietly noted the interviewees' reactions.

Essentially the selection process sought to replicate the characteristics of the small group of friends who originally set up the organisation, institutionalising Moore's (1951) 'homosocial reproduction'. Their characteristics were also replicated in other ways. Almost all ConsultancyCo staff were white, male and aged between twenty and forty. Of the 150 employees only twenty-three were women and the majority of these women employees had been assigned to low-level administrative posts. There were five exceptions, three women technicians (the rank below 'consultant'), 'Anna' the culture manager and 'Helen' the HR director. Minority staff were even more poorly represented. The lists of employees boasted almost no names that were not of British origin and the only non-white employee we saw was a board director of Chinese descent. This physical homogeneity was magnified by the (unofficial) dress code. Every male employee wore shirt sleeves in the office (jackets were the preserve of women and visitors). All wore suits, generally with dark trousers

and coloured shirts and ties. It was not clear whether this parade of shirt sleeves was simply rather studied informality or whether it self-consciously intended to present the impression of professional ‘busyness’.

Once these like-minded people had been appointed there was an induction process to immerse them in the ConsultancyCo culture. A key part of this process (and an occasional feature of the company’s recruitment practices) was the company video. This was produced at great expense by a professional director but it was filmed in the style of a home video. It starts with a clip of Ian Reese, standing at a podium in shirt-sleeves, then moves to a long lingering shot of the ConsultancyCo company logo. The logos of the firm’s blue-chip clients appear in rapid succession, speeding up as they move past the camera and are followed by a lingering shot of the ConsultancyCo logo. There are no words. In the background the song *Search for the hero inside yourself* starts to play. The scene shifts to a day in the office. The camera moves through the open plan area and employees, unprepared for the intrusion, react with varying degrees of embarrassment, cheerfulness and flamboyance. There are smiles and waves, one or two poke their tongues out, some of the women shield their faces from the camera and most laugh nervously. The music gets louder and exhortations appear in capital letters at the foot of the screen. Enthusiasm. Respect. Communication. These messages continue as the camera switches from ‘office’ shots to film of several company social events before culminating in an extended and uninterrupted section that shows ConsultancyCo employees at a trade fair, enthusiastically and professionally selling their company’s services. The last office shot shows about fifty male workers sitting round a conference table, smiling and

waving at the camera. The video only includes speech once. Half-way through, one employee, speaking into a microphone at a company social proclaims, “this is culture: work hard, play *veerrryyy* hard”.

Employees at ConsultancyCo were extremely carefully selected and little time was lost in conveying the behaviours desired of them. The series of company socials, behavioural training sessions, in-house presentations and officially stimulated chat that each was expected to engage in meant that social time and often social lives were colonised by ConsultancyCo.

Structure

However, these restrictions on employees’ social freedoms contrasted sharply with the lack of bureaucratic controls over their work tasks. While corporate control of employees’ social lives was both tight and demanding, formal control over working lives were more rare and, as might be expected from a system of normative control, expectations were set rather than bureaucratically ruled on (see Kunda 1992). There were few formal job descriptions and, while line managers were assigned, employees were encouraged not to restrict their work to their ‘own’ specialist group. The chest-high partitions that sectioned off individual work groups were (intentionally) flexible. Employees could sit with different groups to discover other aspects of the business, pool particular skills for a contract or simply socialise with people outside their own area. Consultancy, engineering, technical and (less often) support staff could work from home if they found this effective or base themselves in clients’ offices.

More fundamentally, professional staff were trusted to manage their own

work. This was occasionally a contrast to previous employers, Mike:

I only really have [my previous employer, a now privatised utility] to make comparisons with, and there use to be real silly things I can remember which would make you laugh. Like if a senior manager was due in the section, we'd be told to 'make ourselves look busy'. How you do that I don't know. Managers took this very seriously though, 'making yourself look busy'. Then there's things what you can and can't do. I mean, here, I could experiment with software if it meant making a client happy and satisfied. At the [utility], none of us could do things without approval and I guess that had a lot to do with power and control, who's above you and that. That's one of the real big advantages I've found here, the divide between those higher up isn't really part of the working environment.

This lack of a "divide" may not have been an accurate description of the way authority was allocated in ConsultancyCo but it certainly seemed to capture the spirit of the pleasantly informal internal social relations. This informality was not confined to professional employees. First names were used by everyone and all our interviewees commented favourably on Ian's friendliness and approachability. Sean, an office junior who had completed GCSEs some twelve months before voiced the general feeling when he said:

It's a happy office, everyone's approachable, you're never left on your own and being a good team member is regarded as an important thing. I mean, there's no problem having a laugh with anyone. [Ian] is approachable as anyone.

Almost every member of junior staff we spoke to (though none of the senior ones) mentioned the 'family-feel' in the organisation.

The pay was good. ConsultancyCo aimed to pay only slightly below London

rates. All employees had company pensions and consultants enjoyed company cars and private health insurance. Most would be surprised to learn that pay scales existed since ConsultancyCo kept them a closely guarded secret and encouraged the belief that each employee was rewarded on an individual basis. We were supplied with pay scales by the finance director (see Fig. 2) who warned us not to reveal them to Anna, the culture manager.

Senior Consultant	£32 - £45K
Consultant	£28 - £38K
Senior Engineer	£24 - £32K
Engineer	£18 - £26K
Technician	£14 - £22K
Line managers (non-consultants)	£20 – £26K
Administrative Support (sub-divided into three bands)	£7 - £20K

Fig. 2 ConsultancyCo Pay Scales

A new title had been introduced one month before our research began, that of principal consultant. Three existing senior consultants had been promoted. We were told that pay scales existed for this role but denied access to them.

Many employees were computer enthusiasts and hobbyists. Stephen, an engineer, specialised in putting sound onto internet pages, an area he had been encouraged to develop for himself:

I came here to work on internet files and systems. I developed this sound role by expanding what had been a hobby for a number of years, long before I came here. . . .
 What it came down to is, I persuaded Ian Reese that this is

something the company can sell. . . . it's mapped out a role for me in the company which is also a hobby of mine.

Most of the staff worked long hours. Internal competition and the expectation that employees would win contracts meant that ten hour days were commonplace. Whole teams would work through the night when necessary (as happened during our fieldwork). Since consultants' bids generally included delivery dates and since it was standard practice for clients to hold 'beauty parades' of several different consultancy firms before awarding a contract, these long hours did not stop once the work was secured. Taking responsibility for the bidding process itself probably helped to ensure that individual employees would be more willing to work long hours during the contracted work. Unsurprisingly, most said they neglected families and hobbies (see also Kunda 1992; Kidder 1981; Casey 1995).

This extension of working time was not restricted to consultants. Clerical workers (all of whom were on salary) were expected to devote additional hours to their work on a regular basis. Most were so pleased with the pleasant way in which their office was run that they were prepared to do this. One, who had previously been employed at a local university, said:

The hours are about the same [as the university], 8.30 to 4.30. But I'm happy to work later here, I wouldn't at the university. There's no overtime pay or anything like that, but you feel that you have an important job to do and if a document needs finishing off, then it doesn't bother me staying till 6 or 6.30 because I actually like doing it. Its all about team working. Consultants, directors or [Ian] will stop and talk as much as anyone else. If there's something you need to ask, you don't get that feeling that you're pestering someone. They all seem

very happy to help.

It seemed that a degree of autonomy within work was provided but only when an excess of work was performed. As one of Kunda's (1992) High-Tech employees jokes, "you can choose which twenty hours of the day you work".

Official and unofficial misbehaviour

Put simply, these workers gained a degree of freedom over their work in exchange for accepting restraints over their play. Even traditional forms of employee misbehaviour were incorporated into this play. The 'brick' awards mimicked the official rewards and the corporate video showed employee misbehaviour with individuals poking their tongues out at the camera and one demonstrating live fire eating with the aid of his cigarette lighter. Yet because these were officially sanctioned their capacity for resistance was effectively contained. The brick awards mocked official awards but they also reinforced the corporate prerogative of judging and the video clearly moved towards, and resulted in, 'proper' work behaviour. Steps were even taken to ensure that no one took the fire-eater too seriously. The original shot of him attempting his feat had the word 'Responsibility?' as a caption. Responsibility was one of the few exhortations to be repeated later in the video and the second time it appeared it was under a shot of one of the older engineers wearing a hard hat and physically installing a security system.

This is not to argue that all forms of dissatisfaction, misbehaviour and dissent were successfully subsumed into official activities, though many did seem to be either captured or noted. Two of our interviewees, both of whom were low-level administrative workers, complained at the lack of overtime pay and the long hours.

One, based at a subsidiary office, felt aggrieved at being excluded from both the Manchester mainstream and interesting work. Anna Culbertson seemed to be aware of this discontent and, after the interview, sought out the interviewer in an attempt to persuade him to discuss the employee with her. Occasionally employee dissatisfaction was expressed in a way that was neither official nor expected. One employee, working on a web page for a major blue chip company launched the page as a stinging attack on both that client and ConsultancyCo while another spent a client meeting criticising ConsultancyCo's culture management and telling the client how dreadful it was working there. Both were sacked.

Each of these are examples of active resistance that might be expected to attract the attention of management. Passive resistance and simple non-participation is often much harder to take action against and may be a vehicle for expressing less passionately held grievances (see, among others, Hochschild 1983; Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). However, here, non-participation was also penalised. The importance placed on company socials has already been considered above. Officially, attendance was neither demanded nor monitored. Yet because these events formed the axis of ConsultancyCo's system of cultural control the voluntary nature of participation was only notional. Employees were expected to attend and regular absence was taken seriously. This was rather dramatically illustrated by the dismissal of 'Helen' the HR director. While we were in the organisation Ian Reese sacked Helen. This was not because her work was of poor quality, indeed, her work was not mentioned at all. Rather, it was because of her unwillingness to immerse herself in the company culture.

Because a system of normative control relies on shared understandings and because company cultures are often built around the idealised attributes of model workers these understandings and attributes effectively become implicit parts of the employment contract. As a result, employees not willing to conform were seen as not fulfilling their part of the bargain, regardless of how well they completed the tasks allocated to them. Helen's participation in ConsultancyCo socials had been irregular and reluctant, such that the other directors believed that "[she] isn't really a people person, but a procedures person". Anna, the culture manager, summarised the official view of this dismissal. Helen, she said, "would not be missed" since she "did not fit in with [ConsultancyCo's] 'people' way of doing things".

The impact of this on the other workers was predictable. Helen had, reputedly, received her dismissal notice by letter. When, a short time later, appraisals were distributed in envelopes marked 'confidential' several people voiced the fear that they too were being dismissed and Anna's attempt to joke them out of it was not successful:

when I said (rhetorically), 'do you really think we'd ever do anything like that?', they said 'yes, isn't that how it happened to Helen?'

Essentially, ConsultancyCo's "people way of doing things" required all people to adopt the company line wholeheartedly with even minor divergences discouraged. Earlier it was noted that the survey carried out in ConsultancyCo resulted in an exceptional level of positive responses. While we thought these worthy of note the directors focused almost solely on the negative ones (specifically that two employees had said they did not trust management and nine were not sure). All expressed both

surprise and hostility at this.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, by considering the contribution that the management of organisational culture had on ConsultancyCo's employees we are, to a certain extent, confining ourselves to the terms of reference espoused by that company's directors. Social environments are complex and it is simplistic to draw out one single variable from that environment and ascribe particular effects to it. Accordingly, attempts have been made to locate these cultural interventions within a description of organisational structure. ConsultancyCo is a very successful firm. Its employees are well paid (we conducted our research shortly after pay rises had been announced and most confided that they were very satisfied with what they had received), the environment is pleasant, colleagues are approachable, and the work is (generally) stimulating. Any or all of these elements might contribute towards the high levels of satisfaction and commitment noted here and it is unclear whether this satisfaction could be maintained against more adverse financial conditions.

That said, these intensive efforts to regulate employees' consciousness (Willmott 1993) were not without effect. A great deal of attention was paid to selecting suitable employees, developing desirable qualities and attributing praise and blame. In return, the employees' response was expected to be both in line with corporate expectations and unconditional. Most did respond appropriately. Many were vividly aware of the purposive nature of social events and approved of them wholeheartedly.

These attempts to institute a system of normative control, both at

ConsultancyCo and elsewhere, mark a qualitative shift in the nature of the employment contract. Certain aspects of it are familiar. Like managers elsewhere (Barnard 1962; Dalton 1966), the way these employees behaved at company events influenced the degree to which they were known and trusted. Pollard (1965) cites many examples of land- and factory-owners taking an active interest in the moral character of their workers and tenants, and Ford's Sociological Department (Beynon 1984) made home behaviour and regular church attendance a condition of the \$5 day. But current practice differs by more than the change in valued qualities noted by Flecker and Hofbauer (1998). Each of these earlier interventions emphasised the social, religious and (sometimes) citizenship responsibilities of the workforce: employees were judged not simply on the behaviours they exhibited at work but on their activities outside it. Here, by contrast, attention is focused on the firm itself and the qualities developed are expected to be devoted exclusively to the organisation (Kunda, 1992). Work is so intense and often so interesting that employees have little opportunity to devote time to hobbies or families (Kidder 1981) and attitudes encouraged in the workplace may be carried over, in a dysfunctional way, into the home (Casey 1995; Hochschild 1983). The managerial prerogative is effectively extended to cover the whole of employees' lives and it is becoming increasingly difficult for individual employees to draw boundaries between home and work.

We also found this form of control morally problematic. The mechanics of conversation, social events and shared jokes that fuelled its success are also the stuff of which more innocent, social relationships are made and we felt uncomfortable with their commodification here (French 1998). But, at the same time, as Legge (1996)

argues elsewhere, we also felt that such sentiments were patronising. If ConsultancyCo's (intelligent, articulate) employees chose to engage in these activities and claimed to genuinely enjoy them, what right did we have to argue that their consciousness was false? Moreover, it is difficult to condemn a bargain that results in such clear material benefits (Kunda 1992).

It may be that such ambiguity is an inevitable feature of workplaces. As Edwards, P. (1995) argues, unitarism and pluralism are not self-contained perspectives. Conflict is not pathological but neither is unitarism unrecognisable in organisational reality. So here, many of the techniques used made working conditions pleasant (Ezzamel *et al.* 1996) and control of culture was welcomed by many employees. But neither these pleasant conditions nor this welcome makes non-conformity unreasonable or illegitimate. Further, given the imbalance of power in the employment relationship itself it is difficult to maintain that every acceptance of ConsultancyCo's culture was a matter of unconstrained individual choice (Ackers and Preston 1997). Perhaps the real contribution that empirical accounts of 'successful' normative control can make is to emphasise this continuing tension. Normative control is not a system that will entirely liberate employees from alienating regulations, nor (contrary to the writings of Huxley and Zamyatin) will it inevitably deprive them of agency. It has the potential to offer certain freedoms and contains distinct totalitarian tendencies but these are set against one another and mediated through the employment relationship.

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