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# The temporal order in boundaryless work

Annette Kamp, Henrik Lund, Helge Hvid, Helle Holt

## Abstract

Work becomes more boundaryless, and that makes it more difficult to understand and study the interaction between time and psychosocial strain. Traditional work time studies focusing on the placement and length of working hours can't capture the complexity of the strain in contemporary boundaryless work. Such studies require new concepts, which in this article are developed with inspiration from time sociology, where the subjective perceived and experienced time is conceptualised. Four theoretical concepts are tested in empirical studies: rhythms, time environment, orders of time, and time regimens. The study shows that individualized time conflicts make a major psychosocial working environment problem while conflict resolution and coordination displace immersion and longer-term development. The article ends up with some perspectives for interventions promoting collective rhythms.

## Introduction

The transformations of work we have seen in recent decades have fundamentally changed the dimension of time. Task orientation is a key word; keeping the deadlines are more important than the time spent. Furthermore new production and management concepts suggest that the individual employee has considerable autonomy in terms of how, when and where the task is solved. This means that the rhythms of work are becoming more individual, time and space in the work becomes increasingly dominated by boundaryless, 'self-regulation of time' is in itself a major task (Allvin and others 1999, Lund and Hvid 2007, Kamp and Lund 2008). Time therefore plays a new role in the work and recent research suggests that time patterns is essential to understand the qualities and pressures of working life (Hvid 2006).

Concepts that can enable us to understand and study the different time rhythms of the modern boundaryless work, and very few empirical studies dealing with the problem.

In this article we are inspired by modern time-sociology (Nowotny 1994, Urry 2000) in our search for a concept of the new time environment in work. Generally we focus on the tension between different time regimes of work. New time regimes characterized by fragmentation of time, lack of space, unpredictability and de-synchronization. Recent studies suggest how these regimes are in contrast to a traditional fixed-regime characterized by long time horizons and gradual process, and how the coordination, synchronization, increasingly appear to be a problem for the individual management of time. To provide time for the 'real work' seems paradoxically to be a main theme in the discussion of contemporary work (Sørensen et al 2008).

Against this background we discuss how to understand and study the problems associated with the

boundaryless, and we ask: How can 'time environment' be improved? How can healthier common rhythms within the framework of the modern working life be developed?

### **Time environment in the boundaryless work**

'Boundaryless work' is an increasingly used term for the kind of work where there is no fixed pattern of where, when, how and how much work (Hirschhorn and Gilmore 1993, Allvin 2006, Lund and Hvid 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, Lund 2007).

To study opportunities and constraints in the boundaryless work for the psychosocial work environment we have developed 5 analytical dimensions of boundarylessness: 1) Temporal and spatial boundarylessness, 2) organizational boundarylessness, 3) political boundarylessness, 4) cultural boundarylessness, 5) subjective boundarylessness.

#### *Temporal and spatial boundarylessness:*

It is known that the temporal and spatial boundarylessness may have some negative effects on psychosocial working environment: balance between work and leisure may be disturbed to disadvantage for family life (Albertsen 2007a, 2007b). Work can become more intense (Buser 2008). However the dissolution of the fixed time schedules may also contain some possible advantages: Midwives that can follow the rhythms of the parturient mother rather than the time shifts at the hospital can have a more meaningful work (Beck and Sanders 2008). They experience that they are in the right place at the right time. In reverse it can be extremely boring to be at work when there is nothing to do.

#### *Organizational boundarylessness:*

The organizational boundarylessness, where employees are working in accordance with objectives, in project groups and in an organisation which is changing all the time, is associated with time environment with few repetitions and routines. A time environment without monotony, but also a time environment with low predictability. A time environment with many interruptions and few natural breaks.

#### *Political boundarylessness:*

The political boundarylessness leads to a situation, where the individual has to defend his or her own interests and aspirations related to working hours. The political boundarylessness can also mean that decisions are taken informally. This may mean that you must be present at the right time in order to influence working conditions.

#### *Cultural boundarylessness*

Presumably cultural boundarylessness, created in a work setting with a high degree of team spirit, passion and creativity, reinforce the effects on the time environment, mention above. Cultural

boundarylessness can make it harder for the employee to set boundaries between work and leisure, and cultural boundarylessness may intensify passions in the boundarylessness work, and make work more intense and unpredictable.

### *Subjective boundarylessness:*

The subjective boundarylessness, with a strong but individualised work identity, could probably lead to more time spent at work. The reason for the longer working hours could be the fear to fail (Hallsten 2005), or it may be because the work is so compelling that it is not possible to leave it. So when using more time and energy at work, it may also be because it provides something that is difficult to obtain elsewhere

In most studies of working time, time is studied as something objectively measurable. In our view, time in the boundaryless work cannot be studied with these methods, since time cannot be captured without the involvement of the employees' subjective experiences and perceptions. The environment of time depends of the experiences and perceptions of for example:

- being presence versus wanting to be in several places at the same time,
- stress and busy versus hectic but exciting activity
- interruptions versus flow
- common performance versus individual performance

We cannot understand the qualities of time without the understanding the common routines, habits, breaks, norms and meetings that occur through the inter-personal relationships.

To obtain our concept of time environment in the boundaryless work, we will draw on insights in the time sociology.

### **New concepts of time and work**

Clock time is a certain time regime, which implies that time is detached from activities and events. This linear time regime wins hegemonic status in the industrial era - not least in working life. Time turns out to be a resource, which should be used as optimally as possible, and activities are separate and streamlined independently in order to achieve maximum efficiency (Hvid 2006). It is possible to divide the time in universal mathematical entities.

Globalization, individualization and increased use of ICT have created new time regimes. Several researchers such as Manuel Castells, John Urry, Helga Nowotny and Thomas Hylland Eriksen emphasise the dramatic change of time seen as a social institution. They give different contributions to describe the time-regime in the late modern (or postmodern) society. However, all of them identify a new time regime characterized by compressed and accelerated time, many things must

take place simultaneously and at asynchronous – there are many individual, not coordinated time rhythms.

Urry (2000) develops the concept of instantaneous time to capture the new time regime. Instantaneous hours are a time regime in which space and time effectively disconnected. The space will be virtualised. The increased speed means that time horizons are becoming shorter, and sometimes become fragmented. Finally, human activities - work, leisure, meals, etc. - are increasingly following individual patterns. People follow different time patterns and are infrequent present simultaneously in the same room. One can therefore say that there is a de-synchronization of time-space-activity relationships.

Another pioneering researcher in this field, Helga Nowotny, develops the concept of the extended present (Nowotny 1994). With this concept she wants to capture the fact that people live in a constant state of haste and do not have time to make plan for the future. We live from project to project, while the daily routines of daily life come in the background. We are always ready to respond to new stimuli and information. Unpredictability has become an unavoidable condition.

Hylland Eriksen (2007) builds on Urry and Nowotny and dealing with the consequences for everyday people. He observes that the time in modern society is increasingly made up of short and intense moments - quick time - and this rapid time strangle the slow time: the time for immersion, time for building relations, and time for the long-term horizons. He also points out that the breaks, that previously were 'natural' now are filled out with quick time. For example, waiting at bus and train is now filled out with text messages, checking emails etc. Eriksen believes such breaks play an important role in human life for reflection, and creative distraction.

Allvin etc. (1999, 2006) is one of more researchers, who have applied the understanding of new time regimes to studies of working life. He emphasises the increasingly individualization, virtualization and self-management in work. Information technologies make it possible to exceed the boundaries in time and space and challenge what presumably were natural rhythms. The technology also allows people to pack more and more different activities together in the present; multitasking becomes a characteristic feature. Self Management of time is important focal, and becomes a qualification in its own right.

Elgaard Jensen and Westenholz (2004) also observe that a new time regime develops in the world of work, but it exists together with the old time regimes. This is confirmed by recent studies of time and work, which suggests that the time conflicts - conflicts between different time regimes - are characteristic of modern work and plays an important role for psychosocial stress. An example is Ylijoki & Mätylä (2003) study of the collective 'orders of time' in academic work. They want to understand the experience of lack of time and pace that characterizes the work. The aim is to capture the collective common time perspectives that people use when they present their work. Ylijoki and Mätylä identified, based on their interviews of more time in academic work, orders of time that are in conflict with each other.

Perlow (1999) has studied the new time regime within a group of IT engineers, who produce programs. She shows how the fragmentation of time and conflicts between individualization of time and the need for synchronization can explain their "long hour's culture". The main conflict in the work time is the conflict between time to do what is perceived as the core task and 'interruptions'.

These studies are all based on an understanding of time, where structures in the form of institutionalized time systems play a role, but isn't determining. Time order is not the same as what we above previously was called time regimes. Time orders are institutions that are shaped in local contexts, and which expresses certain standards in relation to the quality and length of time, tempo, requirements for synchronization and sequence. With emphasis on the conflicting orders of time and the actors' active negotiation of time orders. The actors are seen as co-producer of time orders. Co-producers who reproduces and transforms time orders.

Quality time is therefore in focus. It is not primarily the length of the workday, which is the focus, although extending the working day is one of strategies to live with time conflicts. Time orders and quality time is closely connected to the tasks completed. Here are the collective standards of professionalism important, influencing the individual time strategies. Self-Management means that people must solve the dilemmas that arise when different time systems are conflicting. However, these strategies often contribute to an acceleration of the pace and intensity. To solve the puzzle can in itself be a burden, but also that solutions can be stressful.

Below aspects of the new regime, such as orientation towards the presents, intensity and acceleration, which is not highlighted as much in these studies, but in relation to psychosocial work environment may be significant factors which can contribute both positively and negatively to the quality of work. Some of these elements are highlighted in the empirical study of the time and the boundarylessness in primary schools is presented below.

### **The environment of time in a public school**

In the TIGA-project we are mapping the environment of time in 6 case workplaces: two factories, two conference centres, and two public schools. We have not finished the case studies jet. However, here we will shortly present the result of the mapping of one of the schools – the Watherfrontschool.

### **Time and Boundaryless work in a primary school**

In the previous section, we developed a conceptual framework that we have used in the analysis of the time-environment in a case study. The aim is to illuminate some of the employees experienced relations between time and psychosocial strain and well-being in contemporary boundaryless work.

We below present a case analysis of a primary school in a bigger Danish town. We call it the Waterfront school.

The method of the case study: We did ten days of observation at the school, often following a single teacher for a day. This gave us insight into the quality of time in terms of: intensity, fragmentation of the time, breaks, multitasking, unpredictability, etc. The observations were followed up by debriefing interviews about use of time, the values and norms related to the work, dilemmas related to clashes of time, experienced stress and work-life balance problems. To get an insight into the time rhythms and timing strategies around the clock 24/7, we had four schoolteachers writing diary for a week. Again, these are followed by short debriefing interviews. In addition, there are conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with teachers and management.

Characteristics of work: Work as a teacher in primary school is seen as an example of a work, which in recent years has evolved towards greater boundarylessness. The selected case school is distinguished as one of the front-runners in this area e.g. work is conducted in many places, it is organised in teams, the school bell is abolished, week schedules is renewed every week, and there is a high level of involvement in all kind of development activities. The teacher must have a high degree of time-consciousness to achieve teaching flow in an unpredictable environment. The teachers are covering for each other in case of absence, and teach outside their own disciplines. Each employee performs management duties e.g. planning activities, being chair of meetings etc. Demands and expectations from management and each other are unclear: roles and division of work is random and ad hoc. The traditional classes are replaced by a variety of groupings determined by the character of the teaching activities and the pupils' social needs. There are many theme based project weeks. Use of IT - including communication with pupils, parents and colleagues - is widely used but differently handled from teacher to teacher. The teachers who seek work on Waterfront school, have high professional ambitions, and are willing to work with them self to develop their skills, in order to make the very best school for children.

In the case we did find five orders of time, which serve as orientation points in the organization of the time:

#### *Scheduled time*

At the Harbourfrontschool as in other primary schools the lessons create a structure of work with short breaks between. Besides teaching in the lessons, there are regular meetings of teams and division, student interviews, school-home meetings, etc. The organization reflects the administrative standards that are based in law and in collective and agreements. The scheduled time also implicitly structures work activities at home. This includes not only preparation for each lesson, it also include the making of a plan for each student, which is the basis for school-home interviews.

#### *Learning*

The ideal of the good teaching is that there is flow – a flow that moves the minds of the children. Learning is a gradual process that requires a certain extent in time and a certain concentration without interruptions. That allows students individually and collectively to work with problems. Learning sometimes requires longer periods of time, and sometimes only few hours can do a difference. Learning requires improvisation with time.

### *Relational time*

The school is also a social space. Students must learn to resolve conflicts, be friends, working together etc. Good social relationships are also a prerequisite successful learning. Social conflicts create their own agenda; they occur suddenly and must be solved - if possible – here and now. It is necessary to create time for this kind of relational work; during the lessons, during breaks, and also outside the school - dependent on the nature of the problems. Problem solving request empathy, being in the presence and suspension of the clock time.

### *Fast times*

Some tasks in the school are perceived as 'here and now tasks'. It is tasks that must be resolved before we can proceed, and because of that they overrule other tasks. These 'her and now tasks' are among others coordination of work among colleagues, short communications and agreements with students, communication with parents, etc. Some communications can be done virtually. This means that it is done via email, phone or sms. Thus, it can in principle take place anywhere, and when it fits into the rhythm. However, ICT also offers opportunities to communicate immediately, and because of that this kind of communication is pressed into many small breaks, or the teacher interrupts him/her self.

### *Slow time*

Slow time is present in privacy. For the teachers work and leisure, to some extent flow together. It has always been like that, and it is seen as a part of the job.

It is obvious, that there are many conflicts between these five orders of time, and it is obvious that current development of the work of teachers in primary school is strengthening the conflict.

### **Perspects for improving the environment in time borderless work**

In current workplaces with boundaryless work is different time orders often exist beside each other, which together form the time environment. Time environment in current jobs will often be marked by conflict and confrontation between differing time orders, as we saw in the school. It creates an environment where there is never enough time. Where there is never time for breaks. Where repetitions are banned. Where slow time, time for immersion, constantly is threatened. Where working hours are eating into leisure. And where the solution of conflicts between the different time orders is left to the individual - even though individual solutions always will be inadequate. It is for example up to the individuals to find time for breaks. However, it is impossible for individuals to find the time because the collective norms say that each and everyone must be available all the time for coordination and planning - fast times trump al time regimes.

It is not a simple task to improve the environment of time, because the solutions most often will be filled with dilemmas. Conflict between working hours and leisure could be resolved by establishing a demand saying that all work of the teachers must be done at the school. When the teacher goes home, she is finished and free. This time order will however reduce the freedom the teachers



appreciate so much, and it will threaten the slow time, which the teachers mainly experience back home. It is also possible to reduce the fast time's attacks on other regimes by creating rules for the fast time: when it is allowed to send mails, how often should the mails be checked? Prohibit work during the lunch breaks. Such rules, however, can easily become annoying obstacles for the daily work.

There is probably no perfect solutions to the various dilemmas of the time environment, but making the environment of time to subject for discussions create probably openings for improvements. To realize that there are different orders of time at work, and that they are in conflict with each another is in itself a beginning to improve time-environment. Our experience in the school indicates that it may be difficult for managers and employees at a workplace to observe their time environment, and therefore it can be very fruitful to get somebody from outside observe the time environment.

Awareness of the environment of time may contribute to the development of rhythms of work, which creates a certain structure in the different time regimes, without falling back on bureaucratic management principles. Here, we propose:

1. Create a rhythmic relationship between work and regeneration. Create rhythms of work, which included formal and informal breaks.
2. Create rhythms of work and leisure. This implies that the work at the workplace is conducted at certain periods of time, and paid work conducted at home similarly has certain time periods.
3. Demarcate the fast time - allocate specific time periods to coordinate information exchange
4. Define specific core tasks and core competencies for each person in order to reduce the burden of coordination and the predominance of rapid time.
4. Establish a rhythmic relationship between different types of tasks: between easy and difficult tasks and between immersion and quick tasks.

In addition, an awareness of the time environment may perhaps open up the taboo no one in working life: the high quantitative demands that exist in a great deal of work. When initiatives are taken to improve psychosocial working environment, it is very rare that attention is directed towards the quantitative demands. We are busy, but it is a condition we cannot do anything against - even if the environment of time becomes chaotic, tasks solved half, and short-term orientation dominants. Initiatives to improve psychosocial working environment usually is orientated to the compensation of high demands: to provide an overview, reduce waste, encourage employees to prioritize. By studying time environment it may be obvious that the great quantitative demands are unreasonable, unhealthy, unnecessary and inappropriate.

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