Emotions online

Exploring knowledge workers' emotional labour in a digital context in an agile IT company

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Emotions Online: Exploring Knowledge Workers' Emotional Labour in a Digital Context in an Agile IT Company

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Abstract

Digital technologies and new ways of organising transform the way we experience work. This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of the role of digital emotional labour (EL) among knowledge workers. We investigate the EL involved in digital communication practices among co-located knowledge workers employed in an agile IT-consultancy firm with a relatively flat hierarchy. Based on rich qualitative data, we analyse how the specific socio-material infrastructures of a democratic communication technology called 'Flow-dock' give rise to EL (Hochschild in *American Journal of Sociology, 85*(3), 551–575, 1979, *University of California Press*, 1983). The study contributes theoretically by developing work on EL in a digital context by engaging with Oudshoorn's (*Sociology of Health & Illness, 31*(3), 390–405, 2009) term 'digital proximity'. This implies opening up EL to a more dynamic and situated approach and contributing to the organisational research scrutinising the EL of backstage professionals. The paper concludes that online communication creates new demands of managing emotions in relation to 4 themes key to agile organising: (1) working as whole persons, (2) creating partnerships, (3) unclear decision-making and lastly (4) informal power dynamics. We discuss implications of the overall finding that knowledge workers face increased demands mixing social and technical skills.

Keywords Emotional labour · Technology · Agility · Power

Introduction

Emotions are central capacities in everyday experience at the workplace, where beliefs and actions are permeated by emotion (Fineman, 2000; O'Brien & Linehan, 2019). In particular, Hochschild's work on emotional labour (EL) has drawn attention to the otherwise invisible work that workers do when they manage their emotions in a work context both when providing service and care 'frontstage', and more recent studies have drawn attention to EL 'backstage' such as collegial EL, where workers manage their own feelings and assist colleagues in managing theirs as a core aspect of the job

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(Rivers, 2019; Theodosius, 2008). According to Hochschild (1983), we manage our emotions according to social conventions both privately (emotion work) and professionally (emotional labour), and it is the latter which is foregrounded here.

This empirical study zooms in on the EL arising from communication online among staff in an agile, IT-consultancy firm. The study was conducted before the pandemic; however, the research question in focus and the findings are increasingly relevant in light hereof as well as the widespread hybrid work today. Today, it is no surprise that relational work in a broader sense is indeed present digitally (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Van Zoonen et al., 2021), and the challenges involved in blurring the lines between home and work have become clearer.

By focusing on the digital EL among co-located knowledge workers, we shed light on the overlooked complexity between analogue and digitalised social interactions. We understand the online communication as a 'track' that runs parallel or alongside analogue communication. The study is not based on a flat ontology, but rather on an ontology in which social interactions emerge and interweave face-to-face and virtual spheres. Our aim is to enhance our understanding of the specificities of EL involved in digital communication, which—especially in light of the pandemic—and across professional fields is part of most knowledge workers worklives influencing social dynamics and emotional life in organisations.

Based on Hochschild, we view emotions and emotion management as key in relation to communicating digitally in an IT firm. We share Hochschild's critical aim as we seek to identify potential problematic ways of relying on emotions and emotion management. Doing so, we also contribute to the interesting strand of research 'highlighting the manifold problematic and unexpected effects of digitalisation for organisations and organising' (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021, p. 9). While digitalisation has been widely problematised in relation to enabling poor working conditions of precarious workers such as Über (Walker et al., 2021) and Upwork (Bucher et al., 2021), less attention has been given to the problematic aspects of digitalisation of work in more traditional organisations, and there is a need to theorise and 'to develop an empirical sensibility for the potentially unexpected ways how and where digitalisation's dark sides come to the fore' (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021, p. 20). Also, we need to understand in which ways digital work affects inclusive organisational behaviour, both in terms of identifying the challenges and the possibilities for promoting knowledge workers' sense of cohesion and meaningfulness in the organisation (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021).

Based on rich qualitative data from the case of an agile IT consultancy company, we develop the EL framework in relation to a digital context. We do so by exploring how IT knowledge workers experience working on a digital communication technology termed 'Flowdock'. Flowdock is a technical infrastructure for desktop, mobile or web, where documents can be uploaded and collectively assessed, and folders with 'in-real-time' chat function is widely used. It is designed for agile work practices emphasising team work and democratic decision-making on par with the case company's ambition to be relatively flat hierarchical organisation. On Flowdock's commercial website, the goal of Flowdock is described as 'to make a tool that transforms your team into a singular thinking organism with one memory and brain' facilitating 'real-time chat for your entire organisation'. In the analysis, we explore more critically the everyday experiences working on and with colleagues and partners using this tool to better understand what demands such digital practices put on emotion management.

Knowledge Workers Communicating Online in an Agile Company

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digitalisation increasingly play a part in structuring and shaping (work) life for knowledge workers today (Döveling et al., 2018; Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021; Moore, 2018). Mobile connectivity and cloud-based technologies enable new ways of organising and designing work. Virtual work, telecommuting and telework refer to workers doing work elsewhere than on the employer organisation's premises (Breuer et al., 2019; Gilson et al., 2015). However, the focus here is on co-located knowledge workers sharing an office. Digitalisation and automation, characterised as the 4th industrial revolution, place new demands on knowledge workers, defined as workers who primarily 'think for a living' and apply non-routine problem solving and involve the use of intellectual and analytical tasks (Alvesson, 2004; Jarrahi & Nelson, 2018). These workers have to manage large amounts of data, be able to make real-time decisions and navigate in a terrain with multiple stakeholders who all have a say in a decision-making process (Johansson et al., 2017).

Atanasoff and Venable (2017) review current organisational practice in regard to the widespread use of digital communication and find that over half of the organisations sampled do not have clear policies, guidance or training in place supporting employees with regard to technology-enabled work. They identify the sheer volume of email traffic, lack of training and infrastructure to support ICT-enabled work and an absence of appropriate support as key challenges. Conducting empirical studies that allow us to better understand the organisational lives of knowledge workers today is crucial in developing necessary organisational policies.

In order to adapt to the rapidly changing global labour market, agile ideology and supportive technologies are spreading (Rubin, 2013; Varma, 2015). The case organisation reflects timely demands on organisations to be flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances enabled by rapid technological developments (Lee, 2016; Rose, 2015). Rooted in the software industry, agile project management is more dynamic and adaptive, redistributing responsibility and decision latitude to teams rather than traditional hierarchical organisational structures (Gemino et al., 2021). However, there is still some unclarity associated with the multidimensional concept agility and as Niederman et al. (2018, p. 6) suggest this might be associated with the lack of theoretical grounding of agile organising beyond the renowned agile manifesto cementing key values such as people as the company's most important aspect and processes of systems and bureaucracies (Beck et al., 2001). Proponents advocate the liberating dynamics setting staff innovation free as they become more autonomous; however, critical perspectives highlight the need for critically exploring agility in practice (Hodgson & Briand, 2013). Hodgson and Briand (2013) note that while digital communication tools in principle allow management and employees to participate on equal terms, the premise of considering a communication technology to be democratic has been challenged, as so much hidden or silent work is involved in the informal structuring of power and decision-making processes. Hodgson and Briand (2013, p. 25) state:

> Although Agile and Scrum emphasize collegiality, mutual adjustment and rational democracy, the study indicates how this is undermined by regular interventions from senior management and also by the persistence of an emphatically hierarchical division of decision-making power within the team

While agile organising involves a democratic ideal, it is necessary to further investigate how this plays out in everyday work practices by scrutinizing the experiences of knowledge

workers. It is against the backdrop that we seek to contribute to the empirical gap in current studies of EL in organisation. Theorising on the basis of an empirical case of an agile case, we explore and theorise about the EL in digital communication. This is a modest contribution to the overall aim of shedding light on organisational practices as well as the tensions inherent in agile organising.

In the current context, technology is envisioned as supporting the organisational goal of flat hierarchy among co-located colleagues; however, we aim to explore that through empirical investigation. Exploring what actually happens on Flowdock allows us to dig deeper in terms of understanding what digital communication implies in relation to EL. Our research question is 'What emotional labour (EL) is involved in the use of digital communication technology (Flowdock)?' To address this research question, we turn to the literature on EL and we place ourselves within the situated EL approach put forward by O'Brien and Linehan (2019). We go on to further develop the situated EL approach to a digital context by engaging with Oudshoorn's (2009) term 'digital proximity'. Following that, we present the case more elaborately, describing the methods applied and explaining why. We then scare out the EL involved in activities on Flowdock as well as discuss how EL interweaves with analogue social dynamics in the organisation. We make clear that EL is not a peripheral phenomenon at the workplace but rather constitutes and changes important aspects of the daily life. We discuss implications of findings and the theoretical contribution customising the EL framework to a digital context in a time where increased complexity and demands on technical and social skills affect the worklives of knowledge workers.

Towards a Situated EL Approach in a Digital Context

In order to begin answering our research question, we rely on the theoretical framework of Hochschild (1979, 1983), who pioneered organisational psychology by looking into the importance of the informal aspects of the organisation and especially the work on emotions (Hochschild, 1983). The framework targets the unwritten and largely invisible dynamics that in subtle ways play a role in the organisation, and especially the emotional life here, including relational work between people. An organisation with seemingly flat structures also calls for a theoretical framework geared at looking beyond the tacit; hence, for the current purpose, this framework proves to be fruitful. The emotional labour involved in online communication might be subtle, calling for a need to customise the theoretical and methodological approaches in order to develop the necessary sensitivity.

Historically, it was particularly the EL of front-end service workers that was scrutinised, but backstage professionals have increasingly entered the empirical stage (O'Brien & Linehan, 2019; Rivers, 2019; Theodosius, 2008; Pultz & Dupret, In press) and we contribute to this strand of research. Its relevance is well-established beyond the service professions such as studies in universities (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004), among paralegals (Lively, 2002), in nursing (Lopez, 2006) and among unemployed people (Pultz, 2017, 2018; Pultz & Sharone, 2020). O'Brien and Linehan (2019) also advocate the need to study emotions more broadly, particularly when it comes to understanding the complexity of the EL of what they term 'backstage professionals' defined as people who do not provide neither service or care, but who nonetheless still have to do emotion management as a key element of their paid labour. We concur with O'Brien and Linehan (2019) and add that this is especially the case with knowledge workers who face demands of increased complexity as organisational life consists of a mix of analogue and virtual social interactions and new demands creating collaboration within the organisation as well as

outside it with external partners and stakeholders. On this ground, we argue that EL is just as important a dimension of knowledge work as is the case in the health—and care sector.

According to the EL framework, emotion management is founded on an understanding of emotions as inherently social and dynamic and shaped by the immediate surroundings as well as within larger cultural and societal structures. Hence, emotions are neither isolated nor intrapsychological entities, but rather the experience of feelings is shaped by an ongoing negotiation embedded in social relations as well as in power structures (Hochschild, 1983). Simpson et al. (2015) explore the emotional dimensions of entrepreneurship and note that emotion conceptualisations either fall into the category of psychological theories focusing on inner feelings and states or social constructionist approaches focusing on contextual understandings and meanings of emotions, and they place Hochschild in the latter category. Overall, we agree with that characterisation and emphasise the promising ways that the EL framework can be applied and further developed in a situated fashion and hence sensitive to enlightening social psychological dynamics.

Emotion management is 'guided by certain 'feeling rules'' also referred to as 'social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 563). These feeling rules carry tremendous impact on what is demanded of staff in a given workplace (Hochschild, 1983; Van Maanen, 1991). Hochschild elaborates on what different expressions emotion work can have 'by "emotion work" I refer to the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling. To "work on" an emotion or feeling is, for our purposes, the same as "to manage" an emotion or to do "deep acting"'. There are various ways of doing emotion work, where the overall aim is to create an appropriate feeling for a given situation; one can show a feeling one does not sincerely feel (termed 'evocation', p. 561); one can hide feelings sincerely felt (termed 'suppression', p. 561). Furthermore, there is a difference between trying to change the expression of a feeling ('surface acting', p. 558) and trying to actually transform the underlying emotions ('deep acting', p. 558). While Hochschild has uncovered important distinctions or aspects with the concepts surface and deep acting such as explaining the exhaustion that service staff might experience, we agree with Theodosius (2008) who points out that the distinction between surface and deep action does not do justice to the wide range and complexity of emotions that people experience at work. The terms have been developed on the theoretical premise of an a priori existence of a true self which could then be estranged qua the commodification of emotions at work leading to a 'false self'. There is an inherent problematic individualisation in this conceptualisation and also a risk of missing out on important context sensitive information shaping organisational life in organisations. The application of the framework sometimes leads to an overestimation of managerial control of emotions (Theodosius, 2008). As also Simpson et al. (2015) note, surface acting can evolve into deep acting and the other ways around and treating them as ontologically distinct categories is too simplistic. We agree with Brook (2009) that these weaknesses can be overcome within the EL conceptualisations rather than moving beyond them as Bolton (2005) advocates. We explain below how we conceptualise the key concepts applied in the analysis.

A Situated Approach to Emotional Labour

A promising strand of EL scholars try to overcome the challenges in Hochschild's (1983) work identified above such as (1) overemphasising managerial control of emotions and (2) individualising EL and thus missing out on context-sensitive understandings. Along with Ashforth and Schinoff (2016), O'Brien and Linehan (2019)

aim to move the EL conversation away from the topic of 'true' vs. 'false selves' and instead explore the variation and active construction of various salient identities, which makes room for more agency than what we see within Hochschild's own work and perhaps in particular the ways her framework has been applied. This situated approach highlights the importance of contextual factors and thus goes against an individualising EL approach. O'Brien and Linehan note (2019, p. 1552): 'There is certainly struggle in interactions involving EL, but not a struggle between authentic and inauthentic selves'. Rather, they deem it a matter of 'situated struggle' (O'Brien & Linehan, 2019, p. 1552).

A situational approach opens up towards an obligation to understand not only individuals but also their surroundings, including socio-material ones including the technology with which they engage. Within research on human-technological interaction, it is widely argued that technology is not neutral or strictly instrumental in relation to human agency (e.g. Akrich, 1992). Every aspect of organisational life today is mediated by all sorts of technologies (Nicolini, 2007; Orlikowski, 2010). Our social world is maintained through material 'frames' such as tools, calculations and computer networks. (Latour, 1996). These frames have an inscribed meaning that initiates, maintains, limits, mediates and structures our interaction. We perceive technologies as socio-material infrastructures that afford particular ways of working together and communicating (Berg & Mol, 1998; Oudshoorn 2009), and these infrastructures are important to take into consideration when scrutinising digital EL.

Oudshoorn (2009) notes that particular ways of working enabled through digital technologies can produce feelings of proximity in virtual fora as if in a face-to-face encounter, and she distinguishes between physical and digital proximity in healthcare. Traditional forms of proximity, for example in care work, such as nursing, are drastically challenged by tele-healthcare services because these systems separate the professional from the patient. Tele-healthcare technologies replace face-to-face contacts between nurses and patients by contacts mediated by telephone, television, webcam and/or electronic networks. The absence of physical contacts scripted in these technologies introduces a lack of vision (for phone- and computer-based systems) and touch (for TV- and webcam-based systems). Oudshoorn (2009) provides an important insight into how staff manages and develops (new) skills and competencies to cope with these challenges in which knowledge about the software used and understanding of the standards of the monitoring elements of the system are key to maintaining the relationship with clients. Building on Oudshoorn's (2009) work, we explore the El involved in digital communication in an agile context, and we investigate how the sense of digital proximity is created through acting more as 'whole' persons meaning that the employees should not only show professional dimensions at work but also engage in a more social and personal way, sharing leisure content, communicating in an informal tone, and in real-time or rapidly in a digital context. This study highlights the need to address the role of technology directly based on an understanding that people do not just use technology in an instrumental manner (Schraube, 2009). The exact design, the inherent possibilities and limitations and the actual material make-up influence the users and co-create them. What happens virtually places particular demands on knowledge workers and adds a layer of complexity because virtual social interactions intersect and interweave with analogue social practices in organisations.

The Case of an Agile IT Company

The study is based on in-depth qualitative research conducted in an IT consultancy firm located in Copenhagen[1]. The 23 staff members include 6 partners, among them the CEO. They have various backgrounds, some with formal digital and programming training, others are self-taught programmers; however, they are all knowledge workers. Most of the staff work in both the frontend dealing with partners and engaged in sales and the backend developing software products, and their primary service and product is to provide web solutions.

The agency creates websites, apps and complex integrations that rely on technologies such as Drupal, React and Laravel. Increasingly, they take on consultancy in relation to agile organising, as they have strong experience within this field. They are inspired by the ideology of holacracy understood as the aim of replacing conventional top-down management hierarchy and giving staff greater ability to quickly respond to customer needs (Robertson, 2015). The company combines these sources of inspiration with agile organising processes and project management tools (Beck et al., 2001) both in relation to internal processes and in relation to customer relations.

Approximately four years ago, the staff started to rethink the organisational setup in order to adapt to future markets. It was agreed that a new approach to the company's services was desirable both with respect to customer relations and internal work procedures. From the outset, there has been a focus on staff well-being and not solely on economic commercial benefits. Throughout this period, the company has undergone an internal organisational change process with the goal of implementing and making more explicit their agile mindset. On an overall level, this implies all three criteria of agility: (1) the use of iterative and incremental development methods (Rubin, 2013), such as sprints, tickets and prototyping; (2) as an organisational capability to learn, explore and exploit knowledge and through the focus on complexity, flexibility and responsiveness through weekly collective meetings and team meetings focusing on knowledge sharing and discussion of mindset, etc. (Moe et al., 2010); (3) and as 'collective agility', which is seen as a performance of daily practices by social actors. All staff members are invited to comment and be involved in the formulation of new values, and the partner group spends monthly meetings developing principles of decision-making processes, customer relations, strategies and concrete operationalised working tools. Every month, staff is updated on the change process, and ongoing experiments with new decision-making processes are conducted.

Researching Digital EL Among Knowledge Workers in an Agile Context

For the analysis we rely on rich qualitative data consisting of fieldwork, interviews and focus groups (see Table 1) as this allows us to pursue and explore the dynamic of EL in a case study (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Yin, 2014). We conducted fieldwork from September 2018 to June 2019 as part of a research project investigating different aspects of the future of knowledge work. The fieldwork consisted of making observations during meetings, seminars with management alone and meetings with management and employees, as well as during meetings with customers/partners. During these events we took elaborate fieldnotes. This informal work provides important background knowledge regarding the

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[1] The case drawn upon in this article is part of a three year's research project investigating the future work of knowledge workers.

Table 1 Sample characteristics of participants

	Sex	Position	Training
Focus group interview			
Søren P	M	CEO	Self-taught
John P	M	Adviser	Formal
Sara P	F	Project manager	Formal
Michael P	M	Technical manager	Formal
Simon P	M	Senior developer	Formal
Dave P	M	Software developer	Formal
Interviews			
Søren P*	M	CEO	Self-taught
John P*	M	Adviser	Formal
Sara P*	F	Project manager	Formal
Michael P*	M	Technical manager	Formal
Simon P*	M	Senior manager	Formal
Dave P*	M	Software developer	Formal
Julia L	F	Project manager	Self-taught
Barry L	M	Project manager	Self-taught
Monica L	F	Project manager	Formal
Eric L	M	Project manager	Formal
Adam V	M	Developer	Self-taught
Phil V	M	Developer	Formal
Jonathan V	M	Developer	Self-taught
Billy V	M	Developer	Self-taught
Summary	Interviews 14		
Males	11	1 CEO, 1 adviser, 1 technical manager, 1 senior developer, 1 software developer, 2 project managers, 4 developer	
Females	3	3 Project managers	

*Participated in focus group interview and individual interviews

organisational framework in which the employees in the study work over an extended period of time providing us with a rich dataset. On the basis of the fieldwork, we became interested in the link between EL in a digital and agile context, exploring how they experienced the flat and informal organisational culture and the particular demands involved in this. This issue proved to be one of the interesting windows into the intricate ways that EL plays out in a digital context in the organisation both internally in the organisation between colleagues and with partners, placing new demands on knowledge workers and their ability to mix technical and social skills. The main data analysed in this context consist of 15 semi-structured interviews with employees and management as well as the two focus groups. However, without the ethnographic empirical being present in the organisation, we would not be able to get the insight into the daily practices needed to ask elaborate questions on discrete and subtle matters such as emotion management. There is an overweight of men in the case company as well as among participants in the study.

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted at the workplace when it best suited the worker. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The small-n case study is a prerequisite for exploring the dynamics, processes and reflections in relation to Flowdock. Focusing on processual aspects such as the experience of emotions affords data that contain the complexities and level of detail enabled by interview material (Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2008).

The interviews were conducted on the basis of an interview protocol aimed at understanding experiences with agile organising in general and specifically in relation to EL. We asked questions about how the interview participants experienced working with agile methods (scrum, sprints, prototyping, planning poker, etc.). We also asked questions about overall well-being, work environment, self-management, level of autonomy, decision latitude, experience of management and conflict in the organisation. The interview material was recorded and transcribed. Initially, we read the transcripts, identified relevant themes and conducted a thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) with some categories reflecting existing psychosocial research (work environment, autonomy) and others more directly inspired from themes relating to agility (team work, decision-making processes). We drafted a coding manual with the team, focusing particularly on a set of dilemmas relating to the intersections between agile organising, EL and well-being. The coding manual and analytical categories were introduced to both managers and employees in order to secure validity and relevance of the research. The focus group sparked more discussions about working on Flowdock and provided an insight into the emotional side to it.

Each interview was transcribed ad verbatim, allowing us to repeatedly read the interview material and discuss it in the research team. Each team member (the authors and 2 research assistants) identified relevant codes identifying features of the data, and we discussed the relevance of each code as well as the content. After discussing the codes, we developed a code manual defining each code in descriptive terms. Following that, each member coded the same interview and, on that grounds, we discussed matters of disagreement or variation and we revisited the structure between individual codes and more overall themes. We abandoned codes that were only rarely applied; however, we discussed each code in relation to a qualitative understanding of prevalence based not only on how much or many times the code appeared in the data but also based on its 'keyness' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82) in relation to the research question. We then collated codes into more overall themes, and these can be viewed in the table below. This gave us a sense of the data and the central themes as well as providing us with initial ideas about their interrelatedness. Each theme was named and described in a couple of sentences to ensure that it was clear to us and to the reader what the theme was (and also was not). Table 1 below summarises each theme. Through iterative discussions we identified passages involving Flowdock and EL and we then sorted them into categories. We identified key issues relating to agility (Table 2).

All the material is treated according to research ethical standards, and all personal information on the participants is handled in accordance with GDPR.

While the fieldwork provided us with important insights into the emotional make-up and dynamics of the place, we rely on the narratives about experiences primarily with Flowdock to answer the research question. We focused on narratives about Flowdock and focused on descriptions about emotions and descriptions about staff members managing their emotions in relation to Flowdock. We have paid special attention to how staff describes their concrete and embodied experience communicating on Flowdock. Is it fun, overwhelming, intrusive, joyful? When is this the case, and for whom? When does communicating give rise to a sense of digital proximity and when does it create distance,

Table 2 Key issues and EL demands

Key issues	Description	EL demands related
Working as whole persons	The employees should engage not only as professionals, but also engage in a more personal and social manner	Working as whole persons contributes to blurring the lines between private and professional spheres as employees work on their emotions to create a sense of community in the workplace
Creating partnerships	The agile ideology involves using soft and personal skills to engage with clients as partners rather than customers	Creating partnerships puts pressure on investing in a more personal way and contributes to an erosion of the boundaries between professional and private.
Unclear decision-making	Unclear decision-making covers the challenges involves with the seemingly flat hierarchy and the lack of clear communication around decision taking	Unclear decision-making is related to emotional volatility and hence involves demands on emotion management; suppressing frustration and worries.
Informal power dynamics	Informal power dynamics refer to the unequal volume the different voices in the organisation carry	Managing informal power dynamics involves dealing with disappointment and feeling misunderstood and can challenge initiative and innovation.

fragmentation or even conflict or exclusion? Notions of surface and deep acting were apparent but not easily separated, and experiences of the one sometimes evolved into the other revealing a more muddy and complex process of EL.

Exploring the Emotional Labour on Flowdock

In the analysis below, we explore (1) working as whole persons, (2) creating partnerships, (3) unclear decision-making processes and last (4) informal power dynamics.

Working as Whole Human Beings and EL Demands

Unsurprisingly, interview participants describe how they manage their emotions in relation to experiences on Flowdock. One of the key characteristics that stands out relates to how Flowdock becomes an extension of informal social interactions both between staff and between staff and customers. Jonathan, a programmer, describes that Flowdock has a chat function, allowing them to share material of both professional content and leisure content online 24-7 in a way that engages him professionally, as well as personally:

> Yes, and many of us have it on our mobile phones too, so if you are away from the computer, you can constantly have a look anyway. But it is also very social, and we also have this language where you can share things you find on the web, whether it's for fun or professionally, or just something interesting. There is also a flow that is only about American politics for those with that hobby.

To Jonathan, Flowdock is a tool that creates social cohesion as the ongoing digital conversation about both professional and social content give rises to a sense of digital proximity. Having Flowdock on mobile phones enables him to be constantly connected ('constantly have a look'). To him, being on Flowdock and contributing to the ongoing conversation in the organisation is pleasurable as it enables a sense of digital proximity—he feels part of the team and connected to the company as well as to his colleagues. Flowdock is practiced in a way so that professional and social content is mixed, and in that sense, the technology opens up a space where staff come to work as whole persons as it is also stated in the agile manifesto and in accordance with the agile normative goal. Jonathan explicitly values this practice, even though he uses his spare time (without being paid for it) which contributes to the erosion of boundaries between work and private life; a theme that traverses the material. Informed by Hochschild (1983) and the theoretical framework that excels at identifying exploitative dynamics in which emotions are commodified, we highlight the increased demands on EL that staff members have to meet while navigating work/life balances as they are encouraged to engage not only in professional conversations but also conversations of more social character. Importantly, the conversations are ongoing 24-7 and thus challenges work-life balances.

Creating Partnerships and EL Demands

Flowdock provides a space for informal and collaborative interaction between staff and partners/customers. Staff has to relate to partners in a more informal way, more as whole persons in accordance with the agile ideology. Each partner has their own channel, and here, Jonathan explains what that entails:

It is a slightly more informal way of communicating. So it is of great importance, also because there is something cultural about the way of communicating, where - with some customers - you can have a 'language' that is only found there. If the customer understands it and you have a common understanding of the language there, it's like having a really fun meeting with the customer, where you can make all sorts of insane jokes together and you are on the same wavelength. You can have that feeling there too. It's like in the old days when SMS language was 'a thing'. (…) You use some different elements with emojis, funny comments and jokes and animated GIFs. (…) It's much more interactive [on Flowdock] and much more real-time than emails are. Emails tend to get too formal because you sit down and write and reflect on your words and you write 'Sincerely', etc. It just has a much more formal tone.

He emphasises how Flowdock affords another kind of social contact with clients as it is more interactive, real-time and stripped of the formalities and politeness characteristic of emails. Jonathan identifies timing and responding quickly as a key. The activities on Flowdock enable, encourage or afford using a playful and informal language filled with insider references and entertaining memes supporting a bodily experience of trust, partnership and being 'on the same wavelength'. For Jonathan doing this relational work and engaging in these informal interactions provide him with a sense of joy and are directly linked to his job satisfaction.

Exploring the EL from the perspective of the technology and social practices related to it allows us to understand how the rhythm and framing of chat messages (rather than longer emails, for instance) in Flowdock presents a script (Akrich, 1992; Latour, 1996) that encourages a more informal communication compared to emails. Based on Jonathan's account, we come to understand that Flowdock affords informal behaviour among users, who are encouraged to relate to each other more like private persons instead of maintaining a professional distance, again pushing boundaries between private and professional spheres. The informal social rules on Flowdock make it possible to share information in a flat, transparent and democratic way. This allows for more intimate communication, which is crucial when establishing partnerships in the agile organisation, and trust, which is necessary for making quick decisions and relying more on competent craftsmanship than standardised procedures and systems. Flowdock communication places new EL demands, both internally in the agile organisation as Flowdock activity enables a sense of digital proximity in relation to the company and colleagues, as well as externally, as informal Flowdock activity is part of the EL implicated in constituting a partnership rather than interacting with customers. Having to interact informally as a whole person and with a sense of humour is not just icing on the cake, but rather a central task to live up to the demands in the company creating a sense of digital proximity both internally and externally. Feeling the 'right' feelings and evoking the 'right' emotional feelings in partners are not epipheral, but rather key to create a partnership that is built on collaboration and trust.

Unclear Decision-Making and EL Demands

In alignment with the agile manifesto, there is an opposition against systems and procedures, leaving decision-making processes relatively unclear. This opposition works as a normative ideal creating certain social rules making some emotional reactions more legitimate than others. According to Sophie in conversation with Benjamin below, it becomes extra challenging to decipher whether a decision is being made on Flowdock compared to

analogue encounters. Communicating digitally entails that the conversation is stripped of non-verbal cues and that sometimes results in what she terms 'bad tone':

> Sophie, Team Leader, Consultant: I think it has replaced a lot of dialogue. We don't talk so much in a forum where we have an agenda, a decision to be made. The culture is like this – we don't know when we are in the process of making a decision on a flow. (…) I think a lot is lost when you can't see facial expressions. Much communication is lost in that. There is often a bad tone in there.
>
> Benjamin, Junior Programmer: Everything is visible to everyone and it's a flat hierarchy. There are also some other issues; the tone and that things can be misunderstood over text.

The lack of clarity is increasingly a problem in virtual communication, as interaction here is stripped from clues that might help decode the level of importance. Sophie describes how aspects of communication are lost without facial expressions and they both recognise a problem with the 'tone'. Due to problems interpreting verbal expressions without facial cues, people are more likely to perceive a neutral or direct quote as hostile or angry. Words, emojis, etc. therefore have to compensate for the lack of the comforting eye contact or warm smile we use to convey the right messages. The lack of clarity creates an emotional volatile milieu resulting in EL demands as staff has to manage a sense of unclarity and perhaps frustration and also interpret and respond to emotional cues without a well-known source of knowledge.

The seemingly flat hierarchy seems to result in high levels of insecurity among staff. Simon says: 'It takes very little before everything blows up in the air, right?' and he elaborates: 'We have so much history, so much strength in that… very flexible, agile processes, etc… so every time somebody tries to put things into boxes, there is a lot of resistance.' The volatile milieu is also described by Simon, who notes that 'emotions run high because [the staff] constantly change between talking generally and in relation to what we are going to do concretely. There is a nervousness'. The EL is affected by a general atmosphere that runs in the organisation and shapes what is needed in terms of emotion management, both in terms of suppressing nervousness but also in terms of evoking calmness. The impact of this volatile milieu is also experienced by Monica:

I think I have been a lot more frustrated than I have ever been in other jobs. Despite the fact that I feel that we are doing a lot of things right, and I really think it is a good company in many ways, I just think there is something in the culture, or whatever the hell it is… I can see it in my colleagues, something is happening here (…) It is a culture with a lot of feeling, I mean, people have a lot of feelings about their work somehow. That is what I experience as relatively new here. There is this resistance towards power, but if there is no agenda, then what is a meeting? It is simply a battleground for attitudes and if nobody knows what we are doing right now, then you easily misunderstand one another.

It seems there is a heightened risk of misunderstanding when you mix agile organising, flat structure and emotional investment. This mix has implications for the demands on EL in a digital context. In alignment with Hochschild's rich descriptions of the importance of EL, it seems hard for Sophie to put her finger on what is going on, but she spends a lot of energy registering emotions and dealing with them.

Related to constant connectivity and the unstructured information on Flowdock, managing large amounts of data has been related to experiences of stress (or techno-stress) (Atanasoff & Venable, 2017). During a focus group interview with employees, three colleagues discuss what they term the 'overflow' on Flowdock meaning being overwhelmed by data they have to keep track of:

Nicolas, Team Leader, Programmer: (....) They [the staff, ed.] don't know where to look. There is an *overflow* [our italics]. In Flowdock, we have, maybe, 73 flows. 'Where did you hear about that? '. You miss something if you are not everywhere. It creates fragmentation. I have a workflow where I check everything continuously to determine if I should keep up.

Sophie: For me, it means I often spend half an hour or an hour of internal time that you can't bill. Everything can be relevant and everything can be irrelevant. That's the downside to it. Also from an organizational perspective, economics.

Benjamin, Programmer: There are many things that start out as irrelevant but which then become important through the talk. I can definitely recognise that.

Continuously keeping track of conversations is necessary as 'you miss something if you are not everywhere.' Nicolas quotes a common question posed by staff: 'where did you hear that?' The question indicates a sense of insecurity and a fear of missing out, echoing the volatile milieu noted above. Benjamin notes that it is impossible to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant flows as these are always emerging in new and unpredictable ways. In that sense, every new piece of information shared on Flowdock calls upon rapid, real-time responses as this is the nature of communicating informally on Flowdock. It is necessary to keep track of how relevance evolves and is produced in the ongoing virtual conversation. As irrelevant and relevant information is weaved together, and navigating that is key to doing the job. That also involves emotional management and the ability to manage these feelings of being overwhelmed, frustrated or even fearful. Alvesson (2004) similarly points out that knowledge workers are self-managing, and this often involves a sense of ambiguity. Part of EL for staff involves managing an ambiguity as they continually ask themselves, what do I risk if I am not everywhere, all the time? Staff has to do deal with a constant doubt about whether to be connected at all times (with the risk of being overwhelmed) in order to be part of the organisation and contributing as well as experiencing the positive aspects of digital proximity enabled here with particular demands of EL.

For some staff members (especially those with limited resources), the manifold invitations become overwhelming. Notably, only one (Preben) among the 23 employees has decided to be inactive on Flowdock. The fact that they have a colleague who signed out underlines the intricate and subtle power dynamics at play. Jonathan says 'so it is not something that is dictated from above that you have to join' supporting Jonathan's experience of it being voluntarily. Participating on Flowdock is not mandatory; however, not being there has consequences, and it seems clear that contributing on Flowdock is a central forum for creating digital proximity which seems to be considered appropriate. Preben (team leader, senior programmer) describes 'I'm not exercising my opportunity for influence. That way, I isolate myself as an employee. It is a waste of time and ineffective. It has a consequence for me, but also for the organisation'. Preben describes being isolated, supporting our claim that activities on Flowdock build a sense digital proximity among staff. He is unable to take part in decision-making processes, and while he is aware of the individual problems of this, he also points to the organisational problem.

Informal Power Dynamics and Emotional Demands

The use of Flowdock is described as a technological enactment and support of the organisation's flat hierarchy. Anybody can voice their take on a subject on equal terms with colleagues and management. In general, in the interviews and focus group interviews, everybody talked about a democratic ideal facilitating self-managing and

engaged workers and a high level of autonomy, but also that participation was not equally distributed. Partners in the company stood out as having a particular and more potent voice. Seniority and specialised knowledge were pinpointed as crucial currencies in negotiating authority. It is commonly known that flat organisations with a less formal hierarchy experience an increase in informal hierarchies (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011) and that these hierarchies are less transparent and function on the basis of status and other norms. Flowdock provides a forum for staff to bring up new ideas on supposedly equal terms. However, during the interviews, it becomes clear that the informal power operates through classical stratification lines, such as seniority and possibly also gender, as Julie describes:

> It is impossible to avoid that when somebody with a lot less seniority brings up an idea, then that… brutal feedback comes. Perhaps it was a bad idea. But anyhow, now he is gonna think that it was a bad idea, because [the boss] said so. Not necessarily because it was a bad idea.

Part of being an autonomous and innovative employee means taking initiatives. The purpose is to test ideas in the professional community in a rapid and agile fashion, but as described, it is impossible to isolate the professional content. While each voice in principle has equal access, the weight of the different voices is very different. Similarly, Sophie describes:

> My sense is that [one of the partners] tries to be a little bit present everywhere which is a little inappropriate, because it's not very motivating to get a comment from the CEO who has not really had the time to properly understand the work you have been doing.

Getting quick feedback on Flowdock is sensitive according to Sophie, and the voice of the CEO naturally carries a lot of weight. In addition, when he is present everywhere, all the time, we suggest that plays a role in negotiating what is conceived of as an appropriate level of engagement. This gives rise to ambivalence for Sophie: On the one hand, she wants to be creative and innovative, but doing so comes with a risk, as she notes, 'it becomes sensitive. I think it becomes too much for me to do it'. The idea is that staff presents new ideas on Flowdock in a democratic fashion and that the conversation is strictly professional; however, the lived experience indicates increased EL demands. In the absence of structured procedure in terms of receiving feedback, we identify here a risk of interpreting rejections as personal. Either way, it requires EL to manage the emotional side to the informal power dynamics. When agile organising seeks to enable innovation and initiative, it might be important to take into account the emotional atmosphere and the EL involved in the concrete analogue and digital practices.

The subtle dynamics and unwritten rules that guide behaviour become extremely important in relation to dealing with conflict on Flowdock. While real-time responses are possible, we identify issues of *timing* as important as this comes to show in relation to a specific event in the organisation.

Overall, the conflict concerned a disagreement about how to define the organisation in terms of ideology. Three staff members participated in a conference abroad, and here, they met some representatives of another company who were interested in alternative ways of organising and who sought out consultancy on the matter. Being flattered and intrigued, the attending staff members worked out a draft describing the company in holacratic terms. Doing so sparked an enormous conflict on Flowdock, described by some as an "explosion":

Hey, why does it say holacracy? Why sociocracy? What's this about? What the hell has that got to do with our web page? You know it's going crazy. The people who respond do not know what the text has to be used for. So it just explodes (…). There are other people who react and you just think "what the hell".

John describes that Simon P. was at a meeting, so he had not seen what had happened: He accessed the flow later and thinks: 'What the fuck!'' John P. notes that they are 'shouting'. From an EL perspective, the choice of words is interesting as they share the common denominator of being almost tactile. Through specific wordings and the use of exclamation marks, it is possible to convey not only factual information but indeed also emotionally charged information. In sharp opposition to creating digital proximity, such wording and digital behaviour result in fragmentation and conflict. The incident uncovers how EL is linked to the rhythm of the communication. Due to the conversation taking place on Flowdock, they communicate out of tune with one another. All staff members are simultaneously part of other rhythms, such as participating in analogue interactions, while the event unfolds online without them knowing. The virtual and the analogue realities intertwine and co-constitute each other in complex ways. One colleague passing the other in the hallway results in him being pulled into the flow. The timing and fragmentation of the event play an important role in its emergence.

Leaving the communication forum unmanaged invites a whole range of explosive affective reactions and hence demands for managing emotions in the company.

Discussion: The Role of EL in a Digital Context

The article set out to explore the EL involved in the use of a digital communication technology among co-located knowledge workers in an agile IT consultancy firm with a seemingly flat organisational structure. It teases out the less visible aspects of organisational life by applying the theoretical framework of emotional labour (EL) and adapting it to a digital context by ways of Oudshoorn's concept, 'digital proximity'. This allows us to explore the embedded and enacted scripts of the technology. The findings show that exploring the EL in a digital context is fruitful and necessary to understand an important aspect of new ways of organising as well as the increased complexity of knowledge work mixing analogue and virtual social dynamics. Understanding the pitfalls and potentials of digital work and inclusive organisational behaviour is 'key to promote organisations' and leadership into new and sustainable directions (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2021). We outline the theoretical contribution and move on to identify and discuss implications of the findings.

The study contributes to understanding how EL constitutes a promising theoretical framework when it comes to understanding technology as part of a socio-material complex—it is shaped by how it is used, but it also shapes the users (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003). Overall, the framework of situated EL has proven useful when it comes to understanding the informal, often invisible aspects of organising that shape work life. Applying the situated EL approach with inspiration from O'Brien and Linehan (2019) provides a good foundation for developing the framework for a digital context. The frameworks enable an exploration of the built-in affordances in the technology as well as an investigation of how these are taken up and given meaning in everyday organisational practices. Flowdock is not used neutrally by workers, but rather its meaning and script are co-constituted through the actual use among colleagues. Here, the concept of digital proximity helped

opening up the field as a way of understanding the specific links and intertwinement between practices online and the emotional experiences and demands they give rise to.

Flowdock affords organisational commitment by offering an informal script enabling a sense of digital proximity. Activities on Flowdock give rise to a sense of digital proximity among staff, and while this is pleasurable and valued, we also see how it places increased EL demands as staff is encouraged through unwritten social rules and ideas about appropriate behaviour to engage and relate both to colleagues and partners in informal ways, acting more as private persons (whole persons) than professionals. This issue is directly linked to the increasing erosion of boundaries between private and professional life

How is EL in digital context compared to an analogue? The digital communication in some ways mimics social interactions and practices in everyday life based on face-to-face encounters and adds a layer of complexity to this (such as continuing a joke or continuously being on wavelength with customers on Flowdock), and in that sense, it is unsurprising that we find EL present outside—or alongside—face-to-face encounters based on ever emerging ontology. At the same time, digital EL is qualitatively different from analogue EL. We draw attention to a number of these qualities. First, taking the technical script as a point of departure, the unstructured manner of Flowdock shapes interaction. Relevance develops through the online flow of conversation, and this has a particular emotional side to it. Keeping oneself up to date in a fragmented knowledge-sharing forum involves enormous invisible work by staff, which gives rise to frustration and the demand to manage that challenge, individually and organisationally. Managing large amounts of data is a pivotal task in the organisation; however, it seems close to impossible to keep track of all flows. In real life, it is impossible to know everything that is being said and done in an organisation; however, *in principle*, it is possible to keep track of the digital conversations as these leave digitalised tracks that remain on Flowdock. Managing the many possibilities becomes key for knowledge workers today who have the opportunity to be connected at all times. 'Constant connectivity' is a term for all staff members; however, our analysis tentatively suggests that there is an uneven distribution of participation that we see in the data under these conditions, with young men without families having the best possibilities compared to women and men with families. Here, seniority and gender play a key role (Oudshoorn et al., 2016); however, more research is needed to explore this finding as also Georgiadou et al. (2021) advocate.

In the analysis, we identified an inherent script encouraging staff to participate more as 'whole persons' and contributing to digital proximity by ways of spending leisure time and acting more informally both in terms of a mix of professional and social content, but also responding in real time, rapidly and in short remarks rather than longer emails. Flowdock enables a strong community in which staff invests not only their professional opinions but also engage more informally as part of a social coherence in accordance with the Agile Manifesto (Beck et al., 2001). This gives rise to a sense of joy and community for some; however, it raises familiar issues of work/life boundaries that become increasingly eroded. Being informal and reacting real-time are part of constituting customers as partners, and in that sense, the issues of work/life balance might be accentuated in agile organisations. Living up to the EL demands involved in this task is key to working the case company. In that sense, our theoretical framework proved to be a fruitful choice as it has enabled us in understanding the subtle ways that emotions and emotion management are commodified in agile companies.

This study contributes with additional support to Hogdson and Briand (2013) by demonstrating how EL in a digital communication practice characterised by an ambition to be democratically flat but which de facto involves less visible categories such as

seniority and hierarchy as structuring factors. Technology is neither neutral instruments nor merely determining behaviour, the normative ideals and everyday social practices come to shape what is considered the appropriate level of participation online in a given organisational culture. Not explicitly managing this culture might imply excluding staff members in decision-making processes, as was the case of one staff member. Advancing our understanding of the implications for the EL is a key contribution here. If management is absent in terms of structuring/prioritising, the space does not become power-free or neutral. Rather, it is increasingly governed by increasing EL demands, informal hierarchies and the risk of techno-stress or of exclusion is indeed present with grave implications for inclusive organisational behaviour.

Conclusion

Investigating the EL involved in the use of a digital communication technology as a way to support a flat organisational hierarchy has allowed us to identify some less explored and critical aspects of working life in agile organisations. Flowdock activities mix professional and social content and afford responding real-time and rapidly to enact an informal tone and establish an experience of digital proximity both in relation to colleagues and to partners. However, much activity is unpaid and invisible, eroding boundaries between work and non-work domains. 'Constant connectivity' is a term for everybody; however, it is unevenly distributed among staff with differing possibilities of participating. Agile organising involves relating to customers in a new way, more as partners than traditional customers, and that alone puts more pressure on social vis-à-vis technical skills. Despite flatter organisations, implicit hierarchies continue to exist, and their lack of transparency makes it more difficult to navigate, and therefore, studies exploring EL are called for to bring these shadow effects into the light. Understanding the backstage EL demanded at a particular workplace is key when investigating staff well-being. This study has been a modest contribution to how we could begin shedding light on EL in a digital context, documenting the importance of this issue to knowledge workers navigating a terrain void of formal power structures but ripe with informal hierarchies.

Declarations

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