Professional workers – unionized, but unable to protect their employment?

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Background

• Two comprehensive studies of knowledge work found changing employment relations towards ‘permanent temporariness’
• Threat to their employment did not result in protest or mobilisation of their unions, but in looking for another employer
• Why? My answer is that it is a shame for a professional to be dependent upon a union to manage his/her working life and career
My argument

• Neoliberal ideology and practices has had an enormous influence upon:
  - The self-understanding of professional workers and their position
  - The ‘post-bureaucratic’ organization of work where the workers are offered freedom, but made responsible for the market
  - The financialisation of the economy and shareholder value

This has eroded the employment relation as a relation between a responsible employer and the workers that are hired.
The power of neoliberal ideologies

• The workers are constituted as powerful actors through the discourses of knowledge as capital (Peter Drucker). They are offered freedom and autonomy at work in exchange of meeting the demands of the market.

• Discourses of generation X,Y etc. contribute to the interpretation that the workers are responsible for their careers and should leave when they are dissatisfied or not succeed.

• New employment practices of the firms are seen as the respons to disloyal ‘capital bearers’
Post-bureaucratic organizations

• The employees are offered freedom and autonomy to plan and organize their work, but made responsible for their and the firm’s success in the market

• They are controlled through performance measurement and disciplined thorough a culture of threat (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006)
Financialization of the economy

• The importance of financial investors through public and private funds (incl. ‘our’ pension funds) results in a focus on the stock market

• Central management focus on shareholder value and and short-term profit to attract investors

• Short-term economic results become more important than ‘the knowledge capital’
Neoliberal practices

• Recruiting by seducation and careful selection
• Hired on trial: having to prove their potential
• Competition for a permanent position in ‘boot camp’
• Being ‘coached out’ if they did not succeed

What counted was the will to do what it took and succeed in the market
Financialisation of the economy

The importance of earning power

Two examples:

1) Billed hours vs. customer base in wage bargaining: short term income vs long term loyalty

2) NPM and tendering in contract research creating franchise relations
Managing by short-term financial results

- Increased central control of economic results
- Individual responsibility for market relations
- Individual performance measurement making individual earnings visible

Disciplining the workers through freedom and responsibility for the market and economic results
Market failure: failure in the market

• Market problems experienced as personal failure revealing the workers as not fulfilling their potential
• Failure in the signals that they are not able to manage in the market and therefore of no or not enough value to be ‘kept’
• Asking help from the union would indicate that you are begging to be kept on despite your failure to carry your load
Shame

• Shame comes from comparison; being compared and not found good enough
• Individual performance measurement compares contribution to the economic results; the monetary outcome decides whether you are a success or a failure
• Neoliberal ideology of the power and freedom of the actor makes it shameful to need help
Measuring in the finance economy

• What happens when everything is measured and compared as it is in neoliberal indirect governance?
• And when the standard is not your professional performance or what you do, but the result of what you do in the market?
Some publications from the studies


