This sub-theme invites researchers who study identity, autonomy, and overwork in professional service organizations, all of which are bound up with the totalizing nature of professional work. Professionals have traditionally been theorized as enjoying higher levels of autonomy regarding the where, when and how of work (e.g. Engel, 1970; Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). Yet, research also reveals that most professional workplaces are characterized by a persistent, autonomy-reducing regime of excessive working hours (60-120 h/week) and escalating availability to clients and superiors (e.g. Costas & Grey, 2012; Lupu & Empson, 2015; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Michel, 2011; Perlow, 2012). Even when firms try to alleviate extra-long hours regimes by promoting work-life balance and flexible work arrangements, overwork usually persists (e.g. Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2015; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Kellogg, 2011; Reid, 2015).

There are many reasons underlying overwork in professional contexts. For one thing, professionals are typically confronted with a highly unpredictable workflow and are expected to respond to surprising and unexpected events at all times 24/7 (e.g. Perlow, 2012; Wajcman, 2014). Yet, even more importantly, the “totalizing” nature of professional work has been shown to have a significant impact on shaping professionals’ identities so that they become “willing slaves” to the organizations they work for, and sometimes own (e.g. Bunting, 2005). Most professional cultures implicitly rely on the normative myth of an “ideal worker”, i.e. someone who always prioritizes work, minimizes obligations outside it, and displays loyalty and commitment through long working hours and constant availability (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Reid, 2015). Arguably, many professionals tend to “hyper”-identify with this professional myth, even up to the extent of becoming “corporate clones” (Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998), unable to recognize how work takes over their lives (Michel, 2011; 2014).

Professional service organizations themselves actively promote such hyper-identification by intentionally selecting “insecure overachievers” and fostering a work environment marked by competition for scarce promotion opportunities (Alvesson, 2001; Empson, forthcoming; Galanter & Palay, 1990; Michel, 2007) and engaging forms of normative and peer control that fuel long working hours and overwork (Costas & Grey, 2014; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2012). Such control mechanisms rely on a more distributed
and unobtrusive forms of power that make them difficult to recognize and resist (Ekman, 2013; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). Many practices that belong to the standard repertoire of human resource management powerfully contribute to constituting the productive subject in a Foucauldian sense (Townley, 1994). Examples include time keeping (Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 2001; Coffey, 1994), socialization procedures (Michel, 2007) and management by objectives (Covaleski et al., 1998). More recently, studies have demonstrated how organizations also employ less visible, embodied forms of control which are experienced as self-chosen by professionals (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Michel, 2011). In such a context, professionals internalise their firms’ disciplinary mechanisms, engaging in self-monitoring and self-regulating behaviour that conform to their organizations’ goals, whilst believing themselves to be acting autonomously.

This sub-theme seeks to advance current knowledge of this totalizing nature of professional work by more explicitly focusing on the themes of identity, overwork, and the autonomy/control paradox in professional service organizations. More specifically, we argue that, whereas the phenomenon of the autonomy/control paradox in professional service firms has been identified, the literature is still vague as to how and why professionals — who are highly educated, skilled, and individualistic — would be so easily ‘culturally doped’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996) into perceiving themselves as autonomous if in fact they are not (Robertson & Swan, 2003). We believe that much can be gained from problematizing how the totalizing nature of professional work is constructed and explicitly addressing the processes and mechanisms that sustain and fuel excessive working hours in professional service organizations. In particular, we want to extend previous emphasis on organizational control and identification, by also exploring how professionals’ bodies (Costas, Blagoev, & Kärreman, 2016; Michel, 2011), reified occupational identities (Ashcraft, 2013), strategic inertia and path dependence (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2015), and the use of communication technologies (Mazmanian, 2012; Wajcman, 2014), among others, are also entangled in reproducing the totalizing nature of professional work.

The sub-theme particularly invites empirical and theoretical papers that focus on one or more of the following questions:

- How have expectations surrounding the “ideal worker” myth and the totalizing nature of professional work emerged and been perpetuated historically?
- How do professions develop an occupational identity — i.e. the shared, socially constructed and evolving character of work — that relies on the “ideal worker myth”? To what extent is this widespread or merely exacerbated by elite professional organizations?
- Is the “myth” exaggerated, part of a process of “mutual seduction” among professionals, to glamorize and valorize their work?
- How do concrete human resource management practices contribute to the totalizing nature of professional work? How can they change regimes of excessive working hours in professional contexts?
- How are individuals’ bodies entangled in the continuous (re-)production of the totalizing nature of professional work?
- What is the relationship between the totalizing nature of professional work, on the one hand, and individual agency, on the other, in particular when individuals do not conform to and/or resist regimes of excessive working hours? How is resistance manifested and/or suppressed in such a context?
- What kinds of working time regimes can foster more humanly sustainable forms of professional work? How are new model professional organizations challenging cultures of overwork in the professional sector?
- What are the potential ethical consequences of the totalizing nature of professional work? When professionalism is defined in terms of total dedication to the client, what becomes of the professional’s traditional role as an ethical gatekeeper?
Sub-theme format
Papers will be available in advance of the Colloquium. All paper presentations will be commented by an assigned discussant from the group. Session leaders will be asked to provide an open and encouraging atmosphere for discussion. Special discussants will be asked to summarize the discussions thereby cutting across the various papers presented. In order to allow for as much discussion as possible among the participating scholars, paper presentations will be restricted to 10-15 minutes.

Convenors
BLAGOY BLAGOEV is a post-doctoral scholar at the Department of Management, Freie Universität Berlin (Germany) and Governing Responsible Business Fellow at the Department of Intercultural Communication and Management, Copenhagen Business School (Denmark). His research focuses working time regimes in management consulting firms, organizational change and persistence, and time and temporality in organizations.

LAURA EMPSON is Professor in the Management of Professional Service Firms and Director of the Centre for Professional Service Firms at Cass Business School, University of London. She is also Senior Research Fellow at Harvard Law School’s Center on the Legal Profession. She has dedicated the past 25 years to researching professionals and professional service firms and has published numerous articles in leading academic journals as well as three Oxford University Press books on the subject. Her current research study focuses on leadership dynamics in professional service firms. Her research into professional service firms has also covered themes such as: governance, mergers and acquisitions, the professionalisation of management, organisational and identity change, knowledge management, diversity and overwork.

RENATE ORTLIEB is Professor of Human Resource Management at the University of Graz, Austria, and chief editor of the German Journal of Human Resource Management. Her current research interests include migrant/ethnic minority employees and refugees, national working time configurations, gender and diversity, academic careers and working conditions of young self-employed people.

References


