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Cognitive and emotional experiences of working in a glass office: a case study on normative control

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Purpose/Research question. The increased opportunities for surveillance in glass offices motivate the study to pursue the following research question: how does normative control operate in a glass office working environment?

Design/Method/Approach. A case study approach was adopted in order to explore the phenomenon in its context. The empirical data consist of twenty semi-structured interviews conducted at the business school of a large UK-based university.

Findings. The article reveals the cognitive and emotional experiences of working in a glass office. Normative control is exercised through the building's design and through managerial discourse. The study also captures employees' response to the control attempt related to resistance to exposure and impression management.

Theoretical implications and Originality. Prior literature that investigates the concept of organizational space as a structure of control links it to bureaucratic control functioning vertically through direct managerial supervision and instructions. The present article demonstrates how control can work on the horizontal level through the management of beliefs, norms, emotions, and social influence.

Research limitations/Future research. To the limitations of this research belong issues concerning internal validity, such as the inability to use multiple sources of data generation (observations, document analysis) in order to ensure triangulation.

Paper type – empirical.

Keywords: case study; normative control; glass office; resistance to exposure; impression management.

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Когнітивний і емоційний досвід роботи в офісі з прозорими стінами: ситуаційне дослідження нормативного контролю

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Мета дослідження/Дослідницьке питання. Збільшення можливостей до спостереження за співробітниками, що працюють в офісі з прозорими стінами, ставить дослідницьке питання: яким чином здійснюють оперативний контроль в робочому оточенні зі скляними стінами?

Дизайн/Метод/Підхід дослідження. Для експлоративного дослідження даного феномена був застосований метод ситуативного аналізу (case study analysis). Емпіричні дані представлені двадцятьма полуструктурованими інтерв'ю, зібраними в бізнес школі при великому університеті Сполученого Королівства.

Результати дослідження. Охарактеризовано когнітивний і емоційний досвід роботи в офісі з прозорими стінами. Наголошено, що нормативний контроль здійснюють за допомогою проектування будівлі та за допомогою системи спілкування менеджерів (managerial discourse). Описана реакція співробітників на спроби контролю, яка виражається в уникненні виставлення напоказ (resistance to exposure) і самовираженні.

Оригінальність/цінність/новизна дослідження. Раніше література з дослідження концепції організаційного простору як структури контролю пов'язувала її з бюрократичним контролем, який працює вертикально шляхом прямого менеджерського нагляду і директив. У даній статті показано можливості контролю на горизонтальному рівні шляхом управління переконаннями, нормами, емоціями і соціальним впливом.

Обмеження дослідження/Перспективи подальших досліджень. Обмеження даного дослідження – проблеми внутрішньої валідності, такі як відсутність множинних джерел даних (наприклад, спостережень і аналізу документів) для створення ефекту триангуляції.

Тип статті – емпірична.

Ключові слова: ситуаційне дослідження; нормативний контроль; офіс зі скляними стінами; уникнення виставлення напоказ; самовираження.

Когнитивный и эмоциональный опыт работы в офисе с прозрачными стенами: ситуационное исследование нормативного контроля

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Цель исследования/Исследовательский вопрос. Увеличение возможностей к наблюдению за сотрудниками, работающими в офисе с прозрачными стенами, ставит исследовательский вопрос: каким образом осуществляется оперативный контроль в рабочем окружении со стеклянными стенами?

Дизайн/Метод/Подход исследования. Для эксплоративного исследования данного феномена был применен метод ситуативного анализа (case study analysis). Эмпирические данные представлены двадцатью полуструктурированными интервью, собранными в бизнес школе при большом университете Соединенного Королевства.

Результаты исследования. Охарактеризованы когнитивный и эмоциональный опыт работы в офисе с прозрачными стенами. Сакцентировано внимание на том, что нормативный контроль осуществляют посредством проектирования здания и посредством системы общения менеджеров (managerial discourse). Описана реакция сотрудников на попытки контроля, выражаемая в избегании выставления напоказ (resistance to exposure) и самовыражении.

Оригинальность/ценность/новизна исследования. Ранее литература по исследованиям концепции организационного пространства как структуры контроля связывала ее с бюрократическим контролем, работающим вертикально посредством прямого менеджерского надзора и директив. В данной статье показаны возможности осуществления контроля на горизонтальном уровне посредством управления убеждениями, нормами, эмоциями и социальным влиянием.

Ограничение исследования/Перспективы дальнейших исследований. Ограничения данного исследования – проблемы внутренней валидности, такие как отсутствие множественных источников данных (например, наблюдений и анализа документов) для создания эффекта триангуляции.

Тип статьи – эмпирическая.

Ключевые слова: ситуационное исследование; нормативный контроль; офис со стеклянными стенами; избегание выставления напоказ; самовыражение.

Introduction

In the present article, normative control is examined in a knowledge-intensive organization occupying a glass office working environment. Glass offices commonly have floor to ceiling walls and doors that due to their transparency allow individuals from outside or inside the building to observe the actions of the office occupants.

Literature Review

Normative control in a knowledge-intensive organization

In the present article, I adopt the provided by Costas (2012, p. 2) definition of control as the exercise of power to secure sufficient resources and orchestrate individual and collective action toward certain ends. One can differentiate between more traditional forms of control such as bureaucratic and technocratic control, and more contemporary ones such as normative control. The first set of control mechanisms mentioned above is connected to Weber's (1922) notion of bureaucracy and relies on strict formal protocols, managerial surveillance and monitoring that directly targets outputs and behaviour.

Normative control is associated with culture management, which attempts to indirectly alter employees' selves by the management of meaning and the introduction of norms, values, beliefs and ideals, beneficial for the company (Alvesson, & Willmott, 2002). According to Kunda (2006, p. 11), normative control represents the "the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of [organizational] members by controlling the underlying experience, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions". Normative control constructs and maintains symbols embodying a particular meaning and its preferred interpretation. Its aim is that individuals encode the corporate culture's values and norms, internalize them and engage in behaviour that is aligned with the organizational goals.

The present study investigates normative control in a knowledge-intensive organization. Knowledge work represents an ideal of high-end employment that is often contrasted with bureaucratic and industrial forms of work. Knowledge workers are seen as highly qualified, talented and creative solvers of complex problems. Due to the sophisticated and often intangible nature of their work, which requires a high degree of self-organization, knowledge workers usually enjoy more autonomy. The team structures are relatively loose and there is a lack of direct supervision from management. However, knowledge work does not take place outside of managerial control, but is often regulated through normative control to "make people inclined to do the right thing voluntarily, and in the absence of monitoring" (Alvesson, 2004, p. 130). Hence, normative control is essential for knowledge-intensive firms.

Organizational space and control

According to Baldry (1999, p. 18), organizational space is "deliberately structured for the purposes of social control". Work building environments represent cultural artefacts and provide information about values, social and economic preferences, hierarchy, and status. These environments also facilitate managerial control over the work process "enabling both the co-ordination of production through the division of labour and the construction of systems of surveillance" (Baldry, 1999, p. 3). The present article is a response to Baldry's (1999) call for the reintegration of the working environment, as a socially constructed space, in the study of work.

The work experience of every worker is closely influenced by the organization and qualities of the physical working environment. Work building layouts have impact on the occupying workforce through symbols and cues for behaviour. Those cues reinforce the organizationally approved practices. The office occupants decode the messages sent out by the building's design and encode and internalize this information to preserve it for future use (Baldry, 1999).

According to Harvey (1990), social control is primarily exercised through the management of space and time. He defines space and time "through the organization of social practices fundamental to commodity production" (Harvey, 1990, p. 239). According to Giddens (1979, 1984, 1987), the command over space and time is essential to all bureaucratic forms and to social theory in general. For example, the separation of the workplace from home is essential for bureaucracy because it allows for its impersonal functioning (Weber, 1922).

According to Foucault (1979), surveillance is a tool that incorporates managerial control. In the study of increased time-space surveillance in the UK insurance industry by Collinson and Collinson (1997), after the reorganization of the company, senior managers wanted to install a new competitive and aggressive organizational culture. Part of this strategy was the implicit introduction of working longer hours through senior managers that had to "set an example" (Collinson, & Collinson, 1997, p. 388). Time, visibility and presence at work became the leading criteria for evaluating managers' engagement. Managers felt social pressure to commit to the strategy when seeing their peers working late.

Gabriel (2005) argues that in many cases present-day work is hard to manage. For this reason, bureaucratic control is replaced by control mechanisms operating through language, emotion, space and exposure. Organizations create spaces with continuous exposure.

Research question

The resulting increased opportunities for surveillance (one of the main tools of managerial control (Foucault, 1979)) motivate the study to pursue the following **research question**:

How does normative control operate in a glass office working environment?

The question is worth investigating, since to my knowledge, prior literature puts emphasis on the relationship between organizational arrangements and bureaucratic control, and the topic of space and normative control is rather neglected.

Methodology

The empirical data for the present research were collected at the business school of a UK-based university termed NEW BS (NEW Business School) placed at THE CITY. A case study approach was adopted in order to explore the phenomenon in its context (Eisenhardt, & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). The NEW BS was chosen for this research project due to its physical characteristics (glass office design) and the fact that it is a one of the largest business schools in the United Kingdom employing people with different responsibilities and in different ages. The case is intriguing because academics tend to have more flexibility and are often able to work from home. The study is of interpretative (Burrell, & Morgan, 1979) and exploratory (Saunders et al., 2012) character due to the necessity to investigate a social phenomenon in its natural environment, and due to the open research question.

The present article is of inductive nature and aims to develop new theoretical claims. The collected data were used to explore the phenomenon, recognize themes and patterns and develop a conceptual framework. With induction theory follows data (Saunders, & Lewis, 2012).

The empirical data consist of twenty interviews. For the sample selection, I relied on a non-probability sampling technique. In particular, snowball sampling was used. I contacted one of the participants who forwarded my research proposal to his colleagues. As a result of self-selection, nineteen more employees decided to participate in the research. The interviews were semi-structured, had an approximate duration of 30 minutes, and followed an ethnographic research guide. The collected data were transcribed according to Kruse (2015) and analysed qualitatively according to the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012)

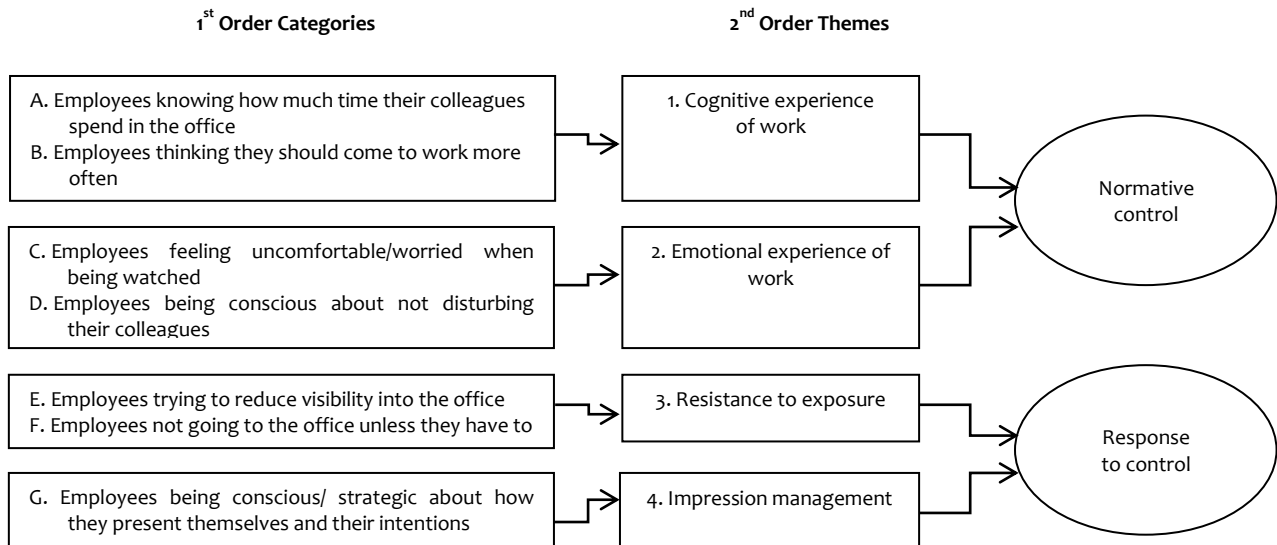


Fig. 1. Data structure

Findings

Normative control

Cognitive experience of work. The glass office environment at the NEW BS creates opportunities for both employees and managers to precisely observe when the office occupants come to work and how much time they spend there. In the present article, however, I put more emphasis on the responses of the employees and not on the managers, who also play significant role in office dynamics:

Quotation 1. I think that (.) management would like us to be in our offices more often and there was=I have a coupled of conversations with my line manager about the fact that were are part of the management department. So we really should go to the 5th floor, but we are on the 6th floor=on the 6th floor in=in this 4 person office. Ehm and he has said that you know (.) ehm , this other people got their eyes at our office. So the marketing department they are on the 6th floor, you know, they=they=they stop by our offices and they are kind of "you should really be there more often, so that people think you're using it, so that we don't get challenged to=to take the office back. Many interviewees gave examples revealing that they are aware of the work time habits of their colleagues. One participant concluded that a high level of employee presence could be observed:

Quotation 2. I think most people are in a lot of time.

Managers at the NEW BS tried to influence employees through what I would suggest is normative control. They crafted a narrative about spending more time in the office due to increased interest in that space from colleagues who may challenge them "to take the office back". In that manner they made employees more sensible about the issue of presence and affected their beliefs by putting social pressure so that one participant would disclose:

Quotation 3. I don't come to work probably as often as I should.

Emotional experience of work. As seen above, normative control in the NEW BS has cognitive effect on the workforce. Besides, it has also its affective dimensions. They have predominately negative connotations. The interviewees revealed that at many occasions they feel observed by their colleagues and the students. The respondents generally dislike it:

Quotation 4. I just don't think, people like to be on show.

Quotation 5. I feel (.) I would=I would have preferred, if (.) there was no (.) window from the corridor IN: the office, (.) because (.) even (.) you know (.) I don't like people looking at my screen,(.) whether I'm doing something private or not.(.) ehm (.) and you know it's a tendency of human being that you know, you PASS and (?look?)(.) and then you tend to look. (.) and people DO: look inside your office when they pass around the corridor. Being aware of the unpleasant emotions that prolonged observation evokes in those observed, some employees try to control their desire to look continuously in the offices of their colleagues. They would, however, use the glass environment to have a very "small peek" to secure that their colleagues are not occupied if they want to approach them:

Quotation 6. So this is in a sense a try to (.) make sure that I'm not intruding other peoples (.) eh work to be honest.

Response to control

Resistance to exposure. Some employees responded negatively to the control attempt by trying to decrease their level of exposure. This is exercised trough moving pieces of furniture, such as desks and bookshelves, in order to create "barriers", and by hanging out posters on the glass walls, "so people can't look in". One participant relates this disruptive behaviour to the effort of the employees to escape managerial control:

Quotation 7. ... even you put me in a glass fronted office you know, but you can't make me act like a goldfish you know? I'll=I'll take some action, I'll you know create my own working space. Many reviewees further revealed that for activities that require deep concentration, such as research, marking exam papers and scripts, they would prefer to work from home:

Quotation 8. If I want to do research or marking (.) MOST of the time I stay at home.

Quotation 9. So certainly a lot of my colleagues don't come in if they don't have to, don't go to work if you don't have to be in. Impression management. Employees at the NEW BS consciously attempt to impact the perception of others, such as managers, colleagues and students, which I have termed impression management. This is particularly the case in the example provided by a female participant related to the employees' effort to reduce visibility and control by using posters. According to her, her colleagues need to gain legitimacy in front of the managers by "strategically picking the right sorts of posters, so things the university is trying to push". She further explains:

Quotation 10. I think people need to be more creative to make it look we're not really just trying to=to hide, we're actually trying to advertise something that's important for the students.

Self-representation, as the attempt to impact the perception of one's own image, plays an important role at the NEW BS. Due to the increased visibility, employees tend to avoid certain actions that may shed a negative light on their professional appearance. Two nice illustrations supporting this claim are provided by one participant who admits that when it is noisy, she would:

Quotation 11. ...stick my fingers in my ears, so I could concentrate, but you think when students are looking through the wall at you, it doesn't look very professional.

Besides, she would be reluctant to check her Facebook account on her computer at work, because passengers in the corridor might see pictures related to her hobby on the big screen of her computer. This might "look very weird, so I won't be looking at my Facebook page when somebody can be looking behind me, and it does influence what you're doing". In order to escape this situation, she would use either her mobile phone or her laptop.

Conclusion

The value of this study is in the illustration of how normative control operates in a knowledge-intensive organization occupying a glass office setting. Besides, some of the possible reactions to those control attempts have been revealed.

Prior literature that investigates the concept of organizational space as a structure of control puts great emphasis on bureaucratic control. An example for this is Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison design. According to Foucault (1979), panopticon principles are often used by organizations such as factories, hospitals, asylums and schools. In these settings control functions vertically through managerial supervision of the employees and direct instructions.

In the present article, on the contrary, control works predominately on the horizontal level through the management of beliefs, norms, emotions, and social influence, to which I refer as normative control. Due to the rather intangible character and high complexity of knowledge work performed at the NEW BS, control is exercised through the building design that reveals the behaviour of the office occupants. Besides, managerial discourse is used to make employees sensible about the working habits of their colleagues and to legitimize the need for visibility. As a result some employees feel social pressure to commit more to the organization after observing and evaluating the engagement of their peers.

Many interviewees in the present study engaged in impression management. They would not necessary attempt to build an image of working long hours employees by using time-space manipulations (as in the study by Collinson and Collinson (1997)), but would avoid actions that would have a negative impact on their professional appearance and would be "creative" when trying to legitimize their attempts to decrease their visibility.

Glass offices enjoy a wide popularity in present days (Shellenbarger, 2012, online). Their adoption is related to the notion that they can make an organization appear more progressive and innovative (Meyer, 1997), and more transparent and trustworthy. This office design could also be used as an instrument of normative control, as argued in the present article.

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