HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: EXPERTISE (IN)VISIBILITIES AND (MIS)MATCHES IN MODERN ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

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ABSTRACT

The changing nature of work and organizing makes matching individuals to tasks an increasing challenge. Consequently, there is a growing interest in mapping a workforce's expertise to manage it more strategically. Yet, systems for mapping and matching are often based on an individualist view of expertise. Drawing on research on knowledge and professional work, this paper foregrounds a social view of expertise, showing how multiple forms, diverse versions, and varying conceptions of expertise coexist as bundles. The paper discusses how mapping systems that overlook the plural, multidimensional, and dynamic properties of knowledge create expertise invisibilities – flattening, eclipsing, and marginalizing it – and can thus generate mismatches between workers and tasks. By showing that invisibility and incompetence are important dimensions in expertise dynamics, this paper contributes to research on expertise development, recognition, and mobilization. Furthermore, it suggests that beyond the debate on a potential crisis of expertise in society, at the workplace level, competent expert work hinges on organizational structures that appropriately make expertise visible and align it with tasks.

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INTRODUCTION

Identifying available expertise and leveraging it appropriately in the workplace presents a mounting strategic challenge. Organizations increasingly hire specialists in various domains, leading to a growing volume and variety of knowledge (Barley et al., 2018; Blackler et al., 1993; Monteiro, 2024). Moreover, the dynamic nature of work today, with rapid technological changes and evolving jobs, makes it harder to align expertise and tasks effectively (Barley et al., 2017; Burton et al., 2016; Rogiers & Collings, 2024) (see also Cohen & Bui, 2025). Yet, developing an understanding of the expertise available within an organization is the basis for a range of strategies and processes, including facilitating knowledge sharing and designing mentorship and succession plans (Grant, 1996; O'Dell & Grayson, 1998; Ribeiro, 2013). It is also essential to match people to tasks and balance specialized personnel across departments and projects (Weller et al., 2019). From scientific management to contemporary economic research, we know that developing a productive workforce hinges on "creating better matches between the present labor pool and specialized jobs in the firm" (Minni, 2023, p. 4).

Traditionally, the alignment of expertise and work was achieved through the design of an organization's structure. Jobs are organized in hierarchies, representing not just a progression of responsibilities but also of competence. The organizing principle behind these systems is that positions higher on the hierarchy have a broader oversight and are staffed by individuals with a deeper expertise in a particular domain (Monteiro & Adler, 2022; Weber, 1978). Beyond being vertical hierarchies, individuals also move across organizations through internal labor markets. This occurs either via managers "slotting" them into jobs (Piore, 1971) or through more market-oriented process, such as responding to posted positions (Keller, 2018).

In reality, organizations do not always live up to such ideals, and ongoing changes suggest that linearity of positions and expertise can no longer be assumed. Recent analyses indicate that disaggregation, or the unbundling of "formal job roles into discrete job elements like projects or tasks, and matching these with the knowledge, skills, and abilities of employees in the internal labor market, has become more common" (Rogiers & Collings, 2024, p. 177). In addition to performing the core tasks of a job, individuals often take up add-on roles (e.g., change agents), move between teams (e.g., cross-functional product teams), and work on transient assignments (e.g., a sustainability task force). Technological change can also leave individuals with "positional expertise" due to formal rank or social status while lacking the "effective expertise" to perform work that has been reconfigured (Beane & Anthony, 2023).

Concerns about misalignments leading to incompetent performance have long been encapsulated in the Peter principle, a tongue-in-cheek idea that individuals

are promoted up a hierarchy to their level of incompetence (Benson et al., 2019; Peter & Hull, 1969). Yet, the current challenge for organizations is a broader one: instead of *whether* tasks and competence remain aligned as individuals progress in a hierarchy, the question is *how* they can be continually aligned? Human resource management scholars have started to discuss this question, albeit indirectly, as part of an emerging debate on internal talent marketplaces and related systems for mapping skills and facilitating ongoing matching between individuals and tasks (e.g., Ammerman et al., 2023; Jooss et al., 2023; Weller et al., 2019). The literature, however, does not fully consider that expertise is a complex resource, one that is difficult to identify before it can be mobilized.

Conversely, the growing debate on expertise in and around organizations (Heimstädt et al., 2024), and related scholarship on knowledge work (Barley et al., 2018; Blackler, 1995) and professional work (Anteby et al., 2016; Gorman & Sandefur, 2011), have explored the unique challenges of identifying and mobilizing expert knowledge. Yet, in most of this literature, the division of labor in the workplace is understood as stable. Individuals appear as "pre-matched" to specific tasks. Scholars focus on experts' ability to craft and adjust to tasks rather than exploring how they are assigned to them in the first place. Questions, therefore, usually revolve around how individuals drop, maintain, or perform particular tasks, collaborate with others, generate authority vis-à-vis clients, etc. (DiBenigno, 2019; Evans & Silbey, 2022; Huising, 2015; Sandholtz et al., 2019). Missing here, however, is an appreciation for the effort, work systems, and managers involved in mapping and matching expertise to specific tasks.

This is unfortunate because the processes for mapping and matching affect expertise dynamics. For example, how individuals are mapped impacts their visibility and status in the workplace. This can, in turn, influence their ability to secure work that enables them to develop expertise and specialize, thus affecting their access to resources and career progression (Monteiro, 2024). Mismatches can also generate incompetent performances, which may compromise organizational outcomes. Furthermore, while previous literature assumes that occupations are stable bundles of skills directly connected to tasks, professionals increasingly span many domains (Hénaut et al., 2023), and more fine-grained indicators for knowledge – such as specialties or skills – may better explain workers' profiles and labor dynamics today (Deming & Kahn, 2018; Labussière & Bol, 2024; Marinescu & Wolthoff, 2020).

This conceptual paper aims to bridge conversations and expand the jurisdiction of expertise scholarship. Specifically, it focuses on systems used to map the expertise of professionals or knowledge workers, that is, individuals who leverage abstract, specialized bodies of knowledge as a primary input for their work (e.g., engineers, consultants, scientists, designers, lawyers, etc.). I start by outlining the general features of these systems, such as skills maps, highlighting the individualist assumptions about knowledge commonly embedded in them. Then, leveraging research on expertise and related areas, I describe how a social view highlights the plural, multidimensional, and dynamic properties of expert knowledge. Specifically, it shows how the relationship between individuals and expertise is not one-to-one but rather, one-to-many. That is, multiple forms of expertise

coexist, and there can be diverse versions and varying conceptions of the same expertise. However, mapping systems usually struggle to capture such richness, thus creating invisibilities that flatten, eclipse, and marginalize it.

By expanding the realm of expertise research, this paper suggests that how individuals are mapped and matched can impact their ability to develop expertise; and that issues in mapping can generate invisibilities, affecting expertise recognition. Furthermore, mismatches can prevent organizations from mobilizing expertise and lead to incompetent performance. This implies that beyond discussing the general status of experts in society, represented by the debate on the crisis of expertise, it is also important to examine how organizations make expertise (in) visible and (mis)match it to work.

MAPPING AND MATCHING EXPERTISE

Mapping refers to any system that makes knowledge more explicit – identifying and visualizing it. Such systems may include employee profiles listing specialties, directories with keywords related to knowledge domains, and common representations of workforce talent (e.g., skills maps or competency matrices). Mapping can be based on various criteria. Some focus on skills directly related to jobs (e.g., programming in JAVA for software developers), while others concentrate on knowledge domains and specialties (e.g., software programming, architecture, testing) or more general competencies (e.g., problem-solving, analytical thinking). In this paper, I use 'mapping expertise' to describe systems that identify individuals' ability to perform work based on their mastery of specialized knowledge (i.e., their expertise).

Regardless of the criteria used for mapping, the common goal of these systems is to help identify "detailed information about the employee's qualifications, experiences, and expertise" (Bibi et al., 2021, p. 2). Some systems are built with the explicit goal of matching employees to tasks; others are general platforms meant to be consulted for various purposes, such as knowledge sharing, facilitating mentorship programs, or supporting succession planning. Systems for mapping expertise exist at many levels, including large-scale ones focused on a national or cross-national labor market used for statistical purposes and to inform employment and human capital strategies (e.g., special visa programs for specialists in specific domains) (Markowitsch & Plaimauer, 2009). In this paper, I focus on systems related to organizations and their employees.

Matching involves assigning individuals across tasks, jobs, projects, etc. More specifically, it refers here to matching the demand and supply of expertise in the workplace, with the assumption that proficiency is a key criterion for matches. Thus, mapping supports matching as a meta-knowledge of "who knows what" is essential in matches to ensure that work is carried out competently. Such meta-knowledge of "who knows what" can be implicit, especially in smaller organizations and organizations with a stable workforce that interacts frequently. In these cases, people develop a "transactive memory" about the expertise of colleagues with whom they work (Brandon & Hollingshead, 2004; Ren & Argote, 2011).

The organizational structure also traditionally provides cues about a person's abilities. In principle, the higher the position in a hierarchy, the higher the level of expertise in a particular domain, and the more complex the tasks assigned to these individuals.

However, ensuring that proficient individuals competently carry out tasks proves increasingly elusive. The changing nature of work has brought growing specialization and distribution across space and time, making it harder to oversee the expertise panorama within an organization. Moreover, matching becomes more complex as new ways of organizing make the link between people and tasks more disaggregated and dynamic. For example, in less hierarchical organizations, such as holacratic organizations, tasks continually move across roles and individuals (Lee, 2024), and in some settings, individuals may even self-assign independently to tasks (Raveendran et al., 2022).

Digital technologies are not just changing how people work (Barley et al., 2017) but also creating new tasks or bringing new skill requirements for carrying out established tasks (Pakarinen & Huising, 2023). Careers and employment relations continue to evolve, with mobility within and across organizations becoming increasingly prevalent and uncoupled from preset career tracks (Dokko & Chudzikowski, 2020; Ray, 2024). In light of these changes, industry commentators predict an "evolution from the hierarchical model where you work your way up the pyramid to … [an] organization where people work on multiple projects, move from role to role, and embrace job sharing" (Maurer, 2021), making it increasingly difficult to determine which expertise is required for which job.

In response to this changing landscape, mapping systems have emerged to help clarify the available and required expertise within an organization. These systems do not assume that tasks and expertise can be rank-ordered in a typical hierarchy. Rather, they aim to help distinguish individuals' proficiency in knowledge domains, specialties, skills, etc., across and regardless of their current job. The popularity of mapping systems is fueled by trends such as HR or people analytics (Leonardi & Contractor, 2018) and the popular idea of internal talent marketplaces (Cappelli, 2008), which "infer[] the skills you have and then matches you to jobs for which you have the relevant skills or are a near match" (Field et al., 2022, p. 2).

More broadly, mapping systems are associated with a presumed shift from a job-based to a skill-based organization where employees are categorized and (ideally) valued based on their skills or potential to contribute to various projects and tasks. In these settings, work is organized according to a "flexible and dynamic deployment of employees' competencies, rather than on task-related and pre-defined sets of qualifications, as traditionally has been the case" (Soderquist et al., 2010, p. 326).

Regardless of trends and labels, there is a clear drive to make a workforce's expertise more visible in order to secure optimum fit between employees and work tasks. At least, this is the promise of a host of vendors, consultants, and evangelists in this area and the hope of organizations that use such systems. The US Army, for example, has developed Green Pages, a system "to capture accurate, granular, and timely information on every officer and every duty position" (Colarusso & Lyle, 2014, p. 75). This mapping system utilizes profiles built by

employees featuring their skills that inform matches based on job profiles created by units that detail the required talents (Bukowski et al., 2014, p. 8). Similarly, though more reliant on automatization (Clegg, 2017), IBM's Blue Matching uses algorithms and related technologies that "recommend internal job opportunities to employees, tailored to their qualifications and aspirations" (Kiron & Spindel, 2020, p. 9) inferred from "employees' skills, current job role and pay grade, performance ratings, location preferences, as well as other internal digital footprints" (Broecke, 2023, p. 18).

Mapping and matching systems are expected to benefit employees by helping them find opportunities relevant to their current interests and abilities, as well as aspirations around continuous learning and career progression. Indeed, advocates for such systems claim they help employees find meaningful work within their organization, thus reducing turnover and attrition. The expected benefits for organizations include gaining agility and efficiency, as these systems reveal hidden pools of knowledge and enable organizations to move specialists dynamically. Such systems are also expected to support human capital or knowledge management strategies, such as forecasting future skill needs and upskilling the workforce accordingly. Finally, systems for mapping and matching expertise have been associated with diversity and inclusion goals, as positions are filled based on skills, regardless of formal certificates and similar traditional expertise markers.

How mapping and matching systems are implemented is understood as an important factor in mediating their benefits. In particular, adjustments to the organizational context are seen as fundamental: "What makes talent marketplaces work well is when somebody asks what the component parts of this role are and where might I find those in the organization" (Field et al., 2022, p. 3). Industry debates recognize issues such as missing or inaccurate information, potential biases in how expertise is described, and a lack of harmonious language for expertise across roles and departments. In this paper, however, I examine a more fundamental problem: the often-unexamined assumptions about knowledge embedded in these systems.

FROM AN INDIVIDUAL TO A SOCIAL VIEW OF EXPERTISE

Systems for mapping and matching expertise are often based on an individualist view. More specifically, the assumption underpinning these systems and related industry discourse is that expertise is a static, easily identifiable "thing" attached to individuals. Expertise is understood as decontextualized and homogenous – such as uniform, unidimensional skills that can be easily identified and cataloged independently of work contexts. The emphasis is thus on "capturing" and quantifying skills as if they were artifacts in an inventory or words in an index. Beyond debates in industry, such a view is also present in some academic literature on mapping and matching in operations or human resources research (e.g., Jooss et al., 2023; Shah et al., 2020).

For example, skills maps – a common way to map expertise – center on "individuals viewed as independent of the social and task-specific context in which

[work] performance occurs" even though "skill level is a characteristic not only of a person but also of a context" (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005, p. 30). While some consideration is given to potential differences in how skills are understood and defined, the expectation is that this can be resolved by creating standardized definitions and levels of proficiency. Yet, differences in skills and their combination might actually underpin unique professional specialties, organization-specific knowledge, or idiosyncratic expertise pertinent to particular contexts and goals. Similarly, while it is understood that linking skills to jobs may not be straightforward, there is little appreciation for the fact that skills are not static, but rather stretch and change across tasks, departments, projects, etc. Indeed, extending and molding skills across organizational settings is an expertise in its own right (more on this below).

This individualist view of expertise echoes assumptions about knowledge that see it as a possession (Newell et al., 2009). The implicit idea is that individuals "have" specific skills reflecting cognitive capacities that are more or less unfettered from and homogeneous across contexts – independent from people's understanding of them. That is, expertise is "conceptualized as an intellectual possession, mental achievement, or cognitive state performed [and] examined as independent of and extractible from the people, places, processes, and objects through which it is performed" (Pakarinen & Huising, 2023, p. 2). Such an oversimplified view fails to reflect the social ways in which expertise is developed, recognized, and mobilized in the workplace.

In contrast, some literature on knowledge and professional work offers an alternative view (Blackler et al., 1993; Gorman & Sandefur, 2011; Nicolini et al., 2003b). Specifically, it suggests that expertise and how it is applied to specific tasks is a social process: it is constituted through social interactions and shaped by the history and context of its enactment. This reflects a view of knowledge as situated in practice rather than a property of individuals, highlighting that knowledge is not a single, uniform "thing," and that language, tools, relations, and similar social elements are part and parcel of how it is enacted (Nicolini, 2011; Nicolini et al., 2003b).

Adapting and integrating knowledge is a key aspect of proficient knowledge or professional work. Tellingly, research has shown that experts are better than novices not just at carrying out a particular task but also at adapting to contextual cues to ensure superior task performance (Collins & Evans, 2007; Pakarinen & Huising, 2023). Additionally, experts often draw on multiple skills and bodies of knowledge to accomplish their work. The alchemy through which they may combine these is a central characteristic of expert performance; as is the ability to skillfully draw distinctions to leverage common resources in ways appropriate for the goal at hand (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005). For example, for product managers, familiarity with various technical and administrative bodies of knowledge (Hodgson et al., 2011) might enable them to aptly adjust their work depending on the context (e.g., planning at different levels of detail or according to distinctive priorities depending on a project's technical complexity).

In this section, I explore the challenges posed by the social nature of expertise for mapping systems. Specifically, I show how a social view highlights that

expertise comprises bundles of multiple forms of knowledge. It also highlights the implicit or emic understandings specialists share beyond any general descriptors of their knowledge. Such focus on shared understandings, however, should not distract us from the existence of pluralism, including potential divergent and competing versions and conceptions of expertise.

Multiple Forms of Expertise

Skills maps, competence matrices, or similar systems often assume variation in quantity rather than type of expertise. Yet, what may appear as a single, independent skill in a typical map can actually hide multiple and potentially intersecting skills. That is, multiple forms of expertise often coexist, influencing each other. For example, lawyers do not just require knowledge of legal codes to perform their work; they also require knowledge of practical matters, from IT systems to court rules, filing deadlines, and legal documentation requirements (Sandefur, 2015).

There are many sources for such a multiplicity of expertise. For one, there are many types of knowledge beyond explicit knowledge, such as tacit or embodied knowledge (Blackler, 1995) (see also Pakarinen & Baldessarelli, 2025). Similarly, in addition to domain expertise – knowledge about a specific field or subject area – research has pointed out the relevance of forms of expertise often devalued, such as process expertise, which refers to proficiency in methods and processes that can be applied across different domains (Treem & Barley, 2016).

Furthermore, the social nature of expertise suggests that context is not just a dimension of expertise. Knowledge of context and the ability to adjust to it is also a form of expertise. Reference to this form of expertise is hinted at in the literature through many terms, for example, situated expertise (Sandholtz et al., 2019), contextual knowledge (Barley, 1996), or more expansively, knowledge about the network of relations in which experts operate (Pakarinen & Huising, 2023). Similarly, it also reflects the idea of firm-specific skills: knowledge about "formal processes and informal routines used to do the work, about how to work with specific colleagues, the tools and technologies required on the job" (Bidwell, 2011, p. 373).

Aptly blending expertises—used deliberately here in the plural—is a hallmark of competent knowledge or professional work. For example, product engineers leverage technical knowledge and knowledge of characteristics of specific work settings (e.g., R&D vs technical support departments) or goals (e.g., pre-certification vs post-certification phases) to accomplish their work. By knowing the main deliverables and priorities in different departments and phases of product development, they can better prioritize specific objectives and work at a particular pace (Monteiro, 2024).

Diverse Versions of Expertise

Technological advancements, growing specialization, and diversity of roles challenge the notion of a single and common knowledge core required for competence in a particular job. Moreover, the contemporary world is characterized by a high volume of easily accessible information and growing social fragmentation. Thus, we find multiplicity across and differences within a particular knowledge domain or

form of expertise as well. In short, there are often diverse and sometimes competing versions of the same expertise. For example, project managers can access knowledge related to different institutes and certificates (PRINCE2 vs PMP) with a unique breadth of topics and emphasis on distinctive skills (Karaman & Kurt, 2015).

Diverse versions of expertise can stem from different bodies of knowledge, that is, collections of information, theories, and methodologies that make up a particular domain, which may be defined by professional associations (such as project management ones). Besides, similar to how expertise is enacted differently across work contexts, knowledge production also reflects distinctive sociocultural contexts. For example, different experiences of industrialization and practical conceptions among intellectual elites crystallized into diverse versions of economics (Fourcade, 2009). Finally, diverse versions of expertise can reflect distinctive intellectual traditions, schools of thought, or paradigms. For example, opposing legal traditions in a court (e.g., textualism vs intentionalism), evolving aesthetic schools of thought in architecture (e.g., neoclassicism, brutalism, deconstructivism), or distinctive paradigms in social sciences (e.g., positivism, constructivism, critical theory).

Various versions of expertise continue to emerge as new ideas, discoveries, or changing conditions shuffle the content and boundaries of knowledge domains. For example, sustainable or green versions of expertise have emerged in technical and scientific work in light of concerns about climate change (Howard-Grenville & Carlile, 2006; Howard-Grenville et al., 2017); social movements have fueled new, more patient-centered care paradigms in medicine (Valentine et al., 2023); digital social media have enabled the emergence and popularity of indie economic ideas (Helgadóttir & Grosen, 2024); and digitalization can create new regimes of knowing that value predictive power based on new technologies that challenge traditional forms of knowing based on situated judgment in customer-facing work (Pachidi et al., 2021).

Diverse versions of expertise shape professional performance. Even when specialists mobilize similar methods and tools in comparable settings, they may work differently due to their experience with distinctive traditions or bodies of knowledge. For example, psychanalysts following different schools of thought – such as Freudian, Jungian, or Lacanian – practice similar activities (e.g., dream interpretation) and structure the care process (e.g., duration and structure of session) differently according to unique views of the self, the nature of psychological issues, and the goals of therapy (Elliott, 2017; Wallerstein, 1988).

Varying Conceptions of Expertise

There are also varying conceptions of a single expertise. These are more subtle than multiple versions and relate to different emic understandings among similar specialists. For example, corporate lawyers within the same organization and specialty might carry out similar tasks and reference similar bodies of knowledge but engage differently with clients, peers, support staff, and tools, depending on how they understand and enact the work of managing legal risks (Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009).

Varying conceptions can reflect individual characteristics (e.g., training and career stage), work conditions (e.g., peers, clients, work demands), social factors (e.g., culture and popular discourses), or a combination of these. For example, varying conceptions of nursing in hospitals may emphasize maternal care of patients based on feminized representations of the profession or a more "nurse-as-customer-service-agent" conception that aligns with healthcare paradigms aimed at cost efficiency and patient empowerment (DiBenigno, 2022).

Conceptions are also dynamic, reflecting the dynamic nature of expertise itself, which morphs as individuals work across different settings and with diverse coworkers. Work contexts not only shape the way experts carry out their work but also influence how they understand and conceptualize their own expertise. For example, artists might foreground some aspects of their expertise over others, trying to achieve "believability" when performing live on stage versus focusing more pragmatically on delivering on cue when working on TV sets that involve a range of production constraints besides artistic expression (Anteby & Holm, 2021).

Changing conceptions are most visible in the career progression of professionals. As experts progress, they become better not only at performing the same tasks but at performing them differently. For example, engineers progress from understanding engine design and optimization as aimed at achieving optimum results according to preset technical criteria to, more holistically, considering engine performance vis-à-vis broader goals, such as expectations of car users in which the engine is to be installed (Sandberg, 2000). Such progression, however, is not given, nor is it linear. There can be different conceptions of expertise across proficiency levels (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 1996).

HOW MAPPING CREATES EXPERTISE INVISIBILITIES

Whether and which expertise is visible is a matter of definition. A classic example is the skills related to the work of particular groups, such as "women's work" (Acker, 1990; Star & Strauss, 1999), historically invisible due to the assumption that these skills were nothing more than a general, "natural" ability. Furthermore, every map is a distortion that not only represents expertise but also shapes how it is seen and understood. Indeed, classifications and labels for expertise reveal as much as conceal and may reinforce status hierarchies (Monteiro, 2024).

Despite interest in mapping and matching expertise, consideration is rarely given to how these systems make expertise visible – or not. The reigning idea is that, at worst, these systems make certain specialties, skills, knowledge domains, etc., invisible by not mapping them. However, depending on design and implementation, maps can make certain expertise wholly or partially invisible. The multidimensional, plural, and dynamic quality of expertise outlined above poses additional challenges to attempts to map it. For example, by illustrating that there is not just a range of skills but also a range *within* a skill. However, such variety is rarely captured in mapping systems.

This section outlines invisibilities produced by mapping systems that stem from the social characteristics of expertise. In contrast to invisibilities related to a

complete absence from mapping systems, whereby expertise is ghosted (Monteiro, 2024), these are more subtle, indirect invisibilities. The first, *flattening expertise*, relates to overlooking the multiple forms and dimensions of expertise. The second, *eclipsing expertise*, reflects hierarchies of visibility whereby some forms or versions of expertise are visible while others remain obscure. Finally, *marginalizing expertise* happens when some expertise versions or conceptions dominate over others, which are pushed to the fringes or even suppressed. While marginalization echoes peripheralization between distinctive specialist communities, it refers to dynamics within a single domain (Mäkinen, 2022).

Flattening Expertise

Flattening is a form of invisibility created when expertise is mapped unidimensionally, such as when skills are mapped as independent of each other. In reality, various forms of expertise intersect, and professionals often combine bodies of knowledge to perform tasks competently – especially in unique niches characterized by rare or idiosyncratic combinations of expertise (Ban et al., 2016; Seabrooke, 2014). Moreover, the ability to modulate one's skills according to context distinguishes the performance of proficient experts. Yet, when skills are presented as independent of each other, the result is a flattened picture of expertise.

Flattening is common in relation to the contextual dimension of expertise, or more specifically, the contextual changes expertise undergoes in practice. Some systems explicitly reference contextual knowledge of unique systems, routines, and demands of different departments; or attempt to map "soft skills," that is, those used to interrelate, communicate, and work together. Yet, they generally neglect that domain and contextual knowledge interact. For example, technical specialists may change how they present an analysis depending on the constraints and resources of a project.

Flattening is particularly visible in the case of professionals working in complex settings involving various technologies and specialists, such as in healthcare. While there is a general expectation of competent performance in such settings, the expertise related to context can often be flattened. For example, "floating" programs aim to move nurses across different areas based on staff needs (Gobis, 2001). Yet, when "floating" between different wards or units, nurses may lack familiarity with certain elements – such as the staff in those settings, knowledge of how to work well with them, the codes needed to get supplies, and the particular kinds of patients there. Such lack of contextual knowledge may, in turn, "place patients at risk … cause delays … reduce[] time for patient care and create[] perceptions of disorganization … [and] raise questions about the nurse's credibility" (Ahmed et al., 2023, p. 903).

Flattening is a form of invisibility that is particularly concerning for roles or professionals that bring together multiple skills or bodies of knowledge. Such is the case for product managers with technical and administrative mandates, as well as professionals developing knowledge around new tasks or problems. For example, scientists championing the emergence of sustainable practices

(Howard-Grenville et al., 2017) or aeronautical engineers designing new digital tools for pilots (Monteiro, 2024). In these cases, overlooking the intersection of bodies of knowledge or the blending of skills can mean neglecting experts with a particular ability to work across domains or at the forefront of a specific domain.

Eclipsing Expertise

Eclipsing happens when maps feature some forms or versions of expertise more prominently while omitting or only coarsely featuring others. Instead of being rendered completely invisible, expertise is overshadowed, present but only in a secondary or peripheral position. This may stem from criteria underpinning maps that (implicitly) privilege certain expertise over other, such as by focusing on expertise domains while eclipsing the expertise to coordinate and connect such domains (process expertise) or knowledge related to workplace characteristics (contextual knowledge). Eclipsing can also reflect a more legitimate expertise version defining the skills, abilities, or knowledge to be mapped in a way that privileges a dominant paradigm.

Eclipsing is particularly evident when expertise is mapped with only partially relevant categories. For example, terms related to a project management body of knowledge (e.g., PMBOK) may be used to map the skills of managers coordinating technical projects, thus eclipsing expertise pertaining to technical bodies of knowledge (e.g., systems engineering) (Monteiro, 2017). More subtly, expertise can be eclipsed by being mapped in coarse, generic ways. For example, in technical and highly specialized settings, it is common for "soft" or "non-technical" skills to be eclipsed despite their importance for safety operations (McCulloch et al., 2009). Such eclipsing means that they are not mapped "in sufficient detail so that they can be taught and reliably assessed" (Reader et al., 2006, p. 558).

As maps foreground some expertise and eclipse other, they reinforce status rankings. Indeed, eclipsed expertise is often related to low-status groups or expertise viewed as subordinate to another. For example, classifications in service jobs tend to be based on discrete tasks and usually poorly specify the skills related to awareness, interaction management, and coordination required for effectively performing the work. This thus reinforces the idea that these are "non-skilled" jobs (Hampson et al., 2009). Eclipsing is also common for forms of expertise that are less "objective" and harder to individuate – such as holistic expertise in specialized settings (Bechky, 2020) – or neatly fit into categories – such as idiosyncratic specialties (Monteiro, 2024).

Marginalizing Expertise

Versions and conceptions of expertise are marginalized when one is not only privileged to the detriment of another, as in eclipsing, but when there is also a more pronounced element of dominance. This is most common in the case of competing bodies of knowledge within a single domain where one seems to prevail over another, thus dictating which expertise is mapped. Marginalization is more salient for fragmented domains where specialists struggle for resources. For example, in medicine, some versions of expertise related to mainstream knowledge and the

prevailing curative paradigm might be given more importance and allocated more resources while alternative or holistic domains are marginalized. More mundanely, specialists representing distinctive training or traditions that coexist in the workplace may define categories and terms for mapping in a way that pushes to the fringes or even erases other versions of expertise.

Marginalization may reflect the emergence of different versions of expertise within a domain, such as when a subset of specialists promotes new techniques or frameworks (Mørk et al., 2010), thus redefining which skills are relevant to be mapped. Marginalization may also be a byproduct of social change – such as novel conceptions of expertise brought by new generations vis-à-vis incumbents in a profession (Nicolini & Roe, 2014) – that makes established categorizations of skills obsolete. More indirectly, marginalization may also happen incrementally following changes in staff within an organization. For example, individuals with a particular type of expertise may substitute one another, such as psychologists substituting activists in social or non-profit organizations who bring clinical skills and more individualist understandings to the work, thus marginalizing more social and political understandings (Zilber, 2002). In such cases, enduring labels for expertise may end up describing different forms or versions of expertise.

Expertise is also marginalized when it is misaligned to the context in which it is mobilized, such as when professionals trained in a particular paradigm or with experience in a specific setting move to a new one. This can be seen in the example of migrants with knowledge and broader experience marginalized by (national) accreditation systems or classifications with different, inbuilt expectations regarding proficiency (Diedrich et al., 2011). Similarly, marginalizing may occur in the aftermath of mergers and acquisitions, bringing together distinctive versions or conceptions of expertise (Faraj & Sayegh, 2017), such as medical staff joining a hospital in which existing work systems wither their unique contextual knowledge, traditions, or care paradigms.

Finally, marginalization may be nested into power struggles. That is, manipulating mapping can be a way to erode the legitimacy of versions and conceptions of expertise. For example, as part of colonial domination, western expertise marginalized Indigenous medical knowledge by changing classifications and restricting the "official definitions of medical expertise, toward a reliance exclusively on formal qualifications rather than experientially acquired and inherited skills to demarcate legitimate therapeutic knowledge" (Lambert, 2012, p. 1029). Indeed, controlling the categories and general vocabulary related to expertise is a way to establish domination through marginalization.

DISCUSSION

This paper addresses the challenges surrounding mapping and matching expertise, specifically, the difficulty in rendering expertise visible due to its multidimensional, plural, and dynamic nature. As the structuring of work in organizations changes and jobs become disaggregated and distributed (Barley et al., 2017; Burton et al., 2016; Rogiers & Collings, 2024), aligning expertise and work grows

in both importance and difficulty. In response, organizations increasingly use mapping systems to gain a more refined understanding of a workforce's expertise and better match individuals across tasks, committees, projects, or assignments. Yet, underpinning these systems and the discourse of their champions is often an individualist view of expertise that sees knowledge as homogenous and static.

Leveraging previous literature on knowledge and professional work, this paper articulates a social view that foregrounds the various forms, versions, and conceptions of expertise that dynamically coexist, intersect, and potentially even clash as they are enacted. That is, specialists may bring distinct bodies of knowledge together in unique ways, understand the same issues according to different orientations, and continually shift how they conceive of and leverage what they know. This makes expertise a complex resource and attempts to map it can end up creating invisibilities – flattening, eclipsing, or marginalizing it.

While mapping and matching may appear to be mundane organizational affairs, understanding them holds promise for expanding the current debate on expertise. We often assume that individuals within organizations have the required expertise to accomplish their work, and researchers usually focus on individuals with widely recognized expertise. However, this paper takes a step back, shifting the conversation to *whether* and *which* expertise is present and visible. In doing so, the paper opens new vistas, foregrounding the role of mapping and matching on expertise development, invisibilities in expertise recognition, and incompetence in expertise mobilization.

Mapping, Matching, and Expertise Development

Expertise is typically developed through sustained engagement in increasingly specialized tasks. Traditionally, such learning processes followed socially structured pathways and formally organized careers (Gherardi et al., 1998; Rothman & Perrucci, 1970). Yet, as jobs and careers change and become more dynamic, individuals must craft opportunities to continue learning and remain up to date (Beane, 2019; Hénaut et al., 2023; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). Therefore, examining individuals' strategies for being matched with tasks that provide opportunities to consolidate and refine their expertise is important. We may expect that people may "hoard" tasks or actively seek out assignments to enhance expertise or even to boost status and resources (Wilmers, 2020).

Such strategies may be particularly salient and perhaps more developed in dynamic work settings. As people routinely cycle through tasks, they may face the additional challenge of maintaining awareness of work opportunities that fit their knowledge and career strategies – and avoiding tasks that hold limited interest and enrichment for them. Politicking around matching may also become prevalent in such settings. Individuals may attempt to join high-profile projects or take up prestigious assignments that provide visibility, chances for career progression, and access to resources.

If mapping becomes more common and consequential, workers may also attempt to influence how their expertise is represented – and made (in)visible – to secure specific work and learning opportunities. For example, by lobbying for

labels, taxonomies, or systems that privilege certain forms, versions, or conceptions of expertise—especially those associated with material gains. Or alternatively by making one's expertise less visible to avoid being assigned to undesirable work (e.g., tasks for which there are limited learning opportunities) or to maintain a desirable level of autonomy and discretion (Star & Strauss, 1999).

In work settings where professionals are confronted with considerable transient or temporary tasks, being able to work across contexts – with different colleagues, work systems, and time horizons – might become a type of expertise in itself. Aside from knowledge about different contexts, individuals may also develop an ability to adjust to multiple contexts or "learn to learn" rapidly. This is already evident among professionals who constantly work across projects and take up work that largely fits within their previous experience while introducing some novel elements that extend their expertise in a new direction (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). It is also common among individuals who work across settings and projects, such as in the creative industries (Anteby & Holm, 2021; Smith & Autio, 2022). In light of the changing nature of work, this form of adaptive expertise is likely to become increasingly relevant even within more traditional organizational settings.

Invisibility and Expertise Recognition

Expertise corresponds not just to the existence of specialized knowledge, but also its recognition. Thus, individuals and groups continually struggle to demonstrate the relevance of their knowledge for specific problems vis-à-vis peers, clients, and audiences (Abbott, 1988; Heimstädt et al., 2024). Yet, underpinning recognition are questions around invisibility, given that knowledge is not easily observable (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019). Indeed, it is common for individuals to have a limited understanding of what colleagues or specialists in general know. Thus, the complexity of some expertise domains – including their multidimensionality, plurality, and dynamism – may easily go unrecognized, especially among laypeople. In turn, how expertise is visible can affect access to the benefits associated with recognition (Monteiro et al., 2024). For example, concealing or making expertise invisible can serve as an "objective" way to justify reduced compensation or assign a lower place in a hierarchy (Hampson & Junor, 2005).

Previous research has considered how individuals aim to strategically make expertise visible, alerting us to the potential decoupling of an individual's actual ability and its social recognition (see also Treem & Barley, 2025). For example, individuals may manipulate information in knowledge management platforms, thus leading "others to believe that they are experts in certain areas in which they really have limited knowledge, or that they are not experts in areas in which their knowledge is actually quite expansive" (Leonardi & Treem, 2012, p. 38). Complementing this debate on the political games individuals play with systems for managing knowledge, this paper shows how these very systems may privilege some types or versions of expertise over others. That is, besides some forms of deception to influence visibility, there are also politics embedded in the very systems to map expertise.

Invisibilities may also be produced in social processes through which individuals (fail to) connect to taxonomies and labels mapping expertise. Specifically,

how individuals represent and narrate their expertise may shape whether and which expertise is visible (Barley et al., 2016; Ewick & Silbey, 2003; Fine, 1996). Extant research suggests that people with similar skills may describe their expertise differently depending on their background. For example, they can emphasize their lived experience instead of technical skills or credentials relevant to a job (Portocarrero, 2023). Furthermore, different settings may feature idiosyncratic vocabularies or categories, making some expertise more or less visible and relevant (Monteiro, 2024). Finally, national regulations and classifications may implicitly privilege some forms or versions of expertise (Diedrich et al., 2011).

Invisibility can (unintentionally) reproduce power dynamics across groups and individuals, including inequalities (see Occhiuto, 2025). For example, racialized, gendered, and ethnocentric assumptions about what constitutes expertise may prevent the recognition of the skills of migrants, women, people of color, and other minority groups (Cardador, 2017; Chan & Anteby, 2016; Diedrich et al., 2011; Warhurst et al., 2017). That is, "the recognition of skill/capacity can be driven by ascriptive considerations that have little to do with actual capacities, and even when capacities are recognized they sometimes go unrewarded for the same reasons" (Osterman et al., 2022, p. 1349).

To be sure, debates on the political or socially constructed nature of skills are not new (Warhurst et al., 2017). For example, the gendering of tasks has long been seen as contributing to the devaluing of women's work, especially when it involves care and emotional labor (Acker, 1990; Wharton, 2009). Yet, the creation and popularization of mapping systems for expertise raise new questions about how they may reproduce or even augment inequalities in recognition and access to resources. Indeed, countries increasingly use classifications of skills to prioritize migration and power digital systems for employment search (IOM, 2019; Markowitsch & Plaimauer, 2009). Thus, invisibilities can impact one's career prospects, and mismatches can lead to "brain waste" on a large scale in society (Mattoo et al., 2008).

Incompetence and Expertise Mobilization

Expertise mobilization refers to how individuals deploy knowledge into practice (Nicolini et al., 2003a; Pakarinen & Huising, 2023). While focusing on how expertise is mobilized, prior research has overlooked the more basic questions of whether and which expertise is applied to tasks. Attending to this is particularly important because, as this paper suggests, organizations may struggle to exploit the knowledge of their employees due to the challenges invisibilities pose for matching expertise to tasks. When individuals are assigned to work that they cannot perform competently, such poor matching can lead to ineffective performance, ultimately reducing organizational efficiency and threatening survival. In the long term, organizations may develop employees' abilities and redress knowledge gaps in key areas (e.g., via training or hiring). However, in the short term, organizations and managers face challenges in ascertaining the most appropriate specialist for some work. For example, navigating competing demands between assigning tasks to junior employees to develop expertise or to senior ones who

are already proficient in it; or trade-offs between selecting a readily available individual versus the most proficient one.

Considering mapping and matching complexities also raises new questions about the sources and meaning of (in)competence. Specifically, this paper suggests that what is routinely understood as incompetence might be, in reality, the product of a system that generates invisibilities and mismatches. That is, incompetence is a multifaceted outcome that depends on how available knowledge is made visible – e.g., how people narrate what they know or which taxonomies and assumptions are encoded in systems; and the (changing) characteristics of the work at hand – e.g., which expertise is needed for assignments or the number and kind of assignments. While the role of organizational structures in producing incompetence (Peter & Hull, 1969) or obscuring knowledge (Vaughan, 1999) has long been foreseen, this paper suggests that instances of unqualified or simply flawed expert performances may become more common, given the complexities of mapping and matching expertise.

The topic of incompetent experts has been discussed in relation to claims of charlatanism toward competitors in inter-professional struggles (Abbott, 1988). These may be particularly prevalent among professionals mobilizing non-mainstream knowledge (Heimstädt et al., 2024). Yet, this paper suggests that some forms of incompetence might not be only a feature of individuals and groups or claims surrounding them but also rooted in how individuals are positioned in an organization and the work assigned to them. This richer comprehension of incompetence also provides a new window into contemporary debates on the so-called crisis of expertise, where expertise pervasiveness in society is accompanied by growing skepticism and mistrust toward experts and expert knowledge (Eyal, 2019; Reed & Reed, 2022).

The expansion of expertise, coupled with changes in the organization of work, has created practical problems around which specialists should perform which tasks or speak on which issues. For example, a committee for designing corporate sustainability policies may involve different specialist domains, forms of expertise, and conceptions of sustainability policies (see on the multiplicity of approaches to sustainability in organizations Lounsbury, 2001; Sandhu & Kulik, 2019). Therefore, we would do well to focus not just on the social arrangements that make the expert performance of a task possible (Eyal, 2013) but also on the organizational structures that make expertise (in)visible and (mis)match it to a given task.

BOUNDARY CONDITIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this paper focuses on systems for mapping expertise, various processes enable the identification of the expertise available in an organization. Specifically, social interactions are particularly relevant in allowing individuals to understand "who knows what" by fostering a transactive memory (Ren & Argote, 2011). Yet, such understandings might be more or less shared; and experts might have distinctive mental maps of which expertise is available and relevant to tasks (Brandon & Hollingshead, 2004; Nicolini, 1999). Thus, examining the co-constitution and

potential (mis)alignments between implicit "folk" maps and those featured in formal systems would be promising. This may reveal, for example, the prevalence of invisibilities and the benefits of mapping vis-à-vis its costs and alternatives.

How expertise is mapped is also increasingly important for online labor platforms (e.g., Upwork), where labels for skills and competencies are central to the matching process between workers and clients. Furthermore, the growing popularity of online professional profiles, such as LinkedIn, has made how expertise is visible particularly consequential for career advancement and opportunities. Interestingly, current research suggests the existence of substantial heterogeneity in skill content within occupations (Labussière & Bol, 2024) – a potential result of the prevalence of gig and project-based work that may lead professionals to pick up new skills as their career progresses (Hénaut et al., 2023). Focusing on how expertise is mapped in online platforms can help us understand how visible the diversity and dynamism of expertise might be and its potential implications for career processes and job mobility.

Finally, understanding the limits of systems for mapping expertise invites us to consider the role of other factors beyond them, most notably, the role of managers (Foss & Klein, 2022). As technological and organizational changes reconfigure work, managers must develop (new) skills to evaluate specialists' knowledge and fit for tasks. This raises questions about matching responsibilities between managers and specialists. While managers may better understand task characteristics, specialists may better know their skills. Interestingly, employees report in industry surveys that securing pertinent opportunities for developing skills is highly dependent on their managers (Cantrell et al., 2022), and recent academic research suggests that "good managers facilitate the discovery of workers' aptitudes… which results in workers finding positions that are better matched to their skills" (Minni, 2023, p. 5).

CONCLUSION

This paper is grounded in a long tradition of scholarship drawing on ideas about knowledge to enrich assumptions in emerging debates on strategic, technological, and administrative systems to manage expertise. The foundational insights emerged from the realization that "information technology inspired but cannot deliver knowledge management" (McDermott, 1999). Accordingly, research and practice contrasted the limits of codification and knowledge databases – built on the assumption that knowledge is a "thing" that exists external to individuals who can capture, store, and transmit it – to a view of knowledge as a social process (Newell et al., 2009; Nicolini, 2011; Nicolini et al., 2003b).

Subsequently, researchers examined how an information processing perspective has underpinned the strategic debate and elided semantic and political barriers to knowledge sharing (Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2004); and how ideas on competence prevalent in human resource systems were rooted in an individualist and decontextualized view of learning and career progression (Lelebina & Gand, 2018; Sandberg, 2000). Recently, in light of technological changes,

scholars pointed out how evaluations of AI tools privilege a focus on the know-what of professionals (explicit and codified aspects of knowledge) instead of their know-how (accumulated expertise, rooted in situated, social, and tacit practices) (Lebovitz et al., 2021); and, more generally, how a substantialist view of expertise underpins debates about the impact of algorithms and similar digital technologies on professional work (Pakarinen & Huising, 2023).

This paper continues this tradition. Advancing a more social view of expertise may enable organizations to understand better the available expertise in their workforce, such as the unique skills related to their work context or idiosyncratic employee profiles that synthesize knowledge in unique ways. It also suggests that unlike the objective process cast by the veneer of (new) technologies and their promoters, mapping and matching expertise actually requires many considerations in light of the plural, multidimensional, and dynamic nature of expertise and its relation to work.

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