

Digitalization of office work – an ideological dilemma of structure and flexibility

When office
work is
digitalized

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Eva Lindell
*Mälardalens Universitet,
Västerås, Sweden*

Irina Popova
University of Brighton, Brighton, UK, and
Anna Uhlin
*Mälardalens Universitet,
Västerås, Sweden*

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Abstract

Purpose – The ongoing “digitalization of work” is one of the major phenomena shaping contemporary organizations. The aim of this study is to explore linguistic constructs of white-collar workers (WCWs) related to their use of digital tools.

Design/methodology/approach – The framework of ideological dilemmas (Billig *et al.*, 1988) is mobilized to investigate the conflicting demands WCW interviewees construct when describing the ongoing digitalization of their office work.

Findings – This study shows how “digitalization of work” is enforcing an organizational ideological dilemma of structure and flexibility for WCWs. In the digital workplace, this dilemma is linguistically expressed as the individual should be, or should want to be, both flexible and structured in her work.

Practical implications – The use of language exposes conflicting ideals in the use of digital tools that might increase work–life stress. Implications for managers include acknowledging the dilemmas WCWs face in digitalized organizations and supporting them before they embark upon a digitalization journey.

Originality/value – The study shows that the negotiation between competing organizational discourses is constructed irrespective of hierarchical positions; the organizations’ digital maturity; private or public sector; or country. The study confirms contradictory ideological claims as “natural” and unquestionable in digitalized office work.

Keywords Digitalization of work, White-collar worker, Discourse analysis, Ideological dilemma

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The “digitalization of work” (Pfeiffer and Suphan, 2015) as part of the “second machine age” (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014), and the “fourth industrial revolution” (Skilton and Hovsepian, 2018) is one of the major phenomena shaping contemporary organizations (Pfeiffer and Suphan, 2015). Adoption of digital technology calls for an understanding of the social, intangible processes of organizational change through discourse-based approaches (Oswick *et al.*, 2005).

A discursive psychology approach discerns how language is used to construct social phenomena, highlighting social interaction as the focus of academic interest instead of

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human's intentions, thoughts, or reactions (Billig, 2001). Words are not only sounds or grammar, but utterances in interaction mold the common practice of how we live and understand our lives. Hence, the use of digital tools in organizations becomes relevant through the mediation of language; as rhetorical claims are repeated, organizational practice develops. In this paper, we mobilize the discourse analysis framework of ideological dilemmas (Billig *et al.*, 1988) to investigate the conflicting demands white-collar worker (WCW) interviewees construct when describing the ongoing digitalization of their office work.

Golden and Geisler (2007) show how users of digital technology linguistically construct parallel segmentation and integration of work–life boundaries, whereas Ivory *et al.* (2020) describe technology use as imbued with conflicting emergent and structural discourses. Further, Whittle (2006) demonstrates how white-collar workers (WCWs) struggle with conflicting discourses through organizational change processes. Following the call by Whittle (2006) and Golden and Geisler (2007) the ambiguous, contradictory working life discourses in digitalization of work needs further attention. By adopting the theoretical lens of ideological dilemmas (e.g. Billig *et al.*, 1988), we can advance our understanding of contradictory linguistic constructions in organizational communication.

Billig (1991) emphasizes the need for studies that focus on how time and place affect the nature of individual thinking, as based on historically constructed and socially shared maxims and values. Applying this lens, we investigate the conflicting, dilemmatic assumptions that interviewees in two different (one private and one public sector) organizations in two different countries (Sweden and Great Britain) use to describe the digitalization of their work.

We argue that the ongoing “digitalization of work” (Pfeiffer and Suphan, 2015) calls for attention to the parallel, empirically derived competing discourses of *stability* and *flexibility* that are co-constructed among WCWs. The use of language exposes conflicting ideals in humans’ understandings of technical tools and organizational requirements that might cause work–life stress as the WCW should be or should want to be simultaneously structured and flexible in her use of digital tools. Hence, our findings highlight the conflicting nature of organizational demands in the digitalized workplace.

This article follows: after the introduction, the second section provides an outline of digitalization as ideological process in working life of WCWs. In the third section our theoretical and methodological lens of ideological dilemmas. In the fourth section we present an analysis of empirical material under two subsections: *Being flexible* and *Being structured*. Thereafter, a discussion, and finally managerial implications.

Conflicting demands on white collar workers in the digitalized workplace

Defining WCW work has engaged researchers for decades (see, for example, Bain and Price, 1972), with the traditional understanding being a worker engaged in managerial or administrative office work. In the critical management literature, the *new knowledge worker* similarly has been described as the qualified professional engaged in knowledge intensive work (Alvesson, 2004), that faces a porosity related to the time and space of work due to the blurriness between work and non-work spaces (Fleming and Spicer, 2007). The detachment of designated hours of work from a specific geographical place at a specific time is a current trend especially in WCWs digitalized work life. This detachment has been described as a discursive construction of “win-win”; employers get a more efficient and effective workforce and employees get a better work–life balance (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Such a seemingly democratic approach in relation to the WCW, can however be contested (Jemielniak, 2012).

Flexible working conditions enabled by digital tools can enhance work–life balance (Maruyama *et al.*, 2009), and flexible or remote working can have positive consequences for work effort, reduced stress, and job-related wellbeing (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). However,

the discourse of the “speed-up-society” implies an ambiguous construction: as digital tools allow employees to conduct many tasks faster than ever before, more tasks are being allocated to each individual, with a large increase in time spent on using digital tools (Sullivan and Gershuny, 2018). Paradoxically, the same study shows no evidence of increased stress among lower occupational status workers, but an increase in stress experienced by WCWs (more likely to work flexibly) during the same period. Time pressure and increased stress in digitalized work therefore seems to be a problem related to WCW work despite, or even due to, the increase of digital tools.

Some scholars claim that digitalization brings disruption of inequalities and foresee an alteration of social power relations (Ziemann, 2017). Others claim that digitalization merely reproduces asymmetrical inequalities in working life (Aroles *et al.*, 2019). Others again claim that digitalization enhances a “new digital Taylorism” or “hyper-Taylorism” of standardization, increased surveillance, and increased productivity (Parenti, 2001; Andersson *et al.*, 2021).

Digitalization pervades every segment of contemporary society and has become so integrated in our everyday lives that we tend to perceive digital technology use as non-ideological (Fejes and Rahm, 2017). However, Billig *et al.* (1988) describe common sense in any organizational or societal change as ideological processes. Similarly, Wetherell and Potter (1993) define ideology as discourses that construct, legitimize, and preserve social patterns. To this end, ideology comprises the contrary themes of common sense in all everyday events that allow individuals to puzzle over their social worlds. Expressions of common sense in social interaction expose patterns of power, as “individuals, as they speak, do not create their own language, but they use terms that are culturally, historically and ideologically available” (Billig, 1991, p. 217). The theoretical lens of ideological dilemmas emphasizes the conflicting nature of common sense, that comprise the preconditions for difficult decisions that people face in their everyday lives (Billig *et al.*, 1988).

Several scholars have acknowledged ideological dilemmas in contemporary working life: co-workers need to simultaneously construct themselves as similar to an organizational ideal, and as unique (Coupland, 2001); or the ideological dilemma of organizational inequality and difference and equality and sameness (Kelan, 2008). Kelan (2009) expanded the theoretical frame to show how dealing with ideological dilemmas might lead to organizational fatigue. Ideological dilemmas are up for negotiation in social interaction and is, as Edley (2001, p. 209) describes it, “a battleground upon which the struggle between these opposing ideals is played out”. Hence, previous research on organizational change often highlights contradictions between intended policies and actual outcomes that increase stress, frustrations, and work-life conflicts (Kelan, 2009; Kirby, 2000; Myers *et al.*, 2013; Edley, 2001).

Clearly the ongoing “digitalization of work” (Pfeiffer and Suphan, 2015) comprises contradictory discourses: either the improved, creative working life or the working life of increased unemployment and de-skilling (Pfeiffer, 2018). In the digitalized workplace the self-driven, flexible employee is described as an ideal (Franco, 2019; Garsten, 1999). But digitalization has also increased bureaucracy; standardization, control, and measurability of employee performance, creating conflicting demands, with WCWs simultaneously experiencing increased monitoring, increased self-determination and boundarylessness (Gullstrand and Brännebo, 2013). In parallel, the informalization of work-life has led to an emphasis on the individual having the “right attitude” to be able to participate successfully in contemporary digitalized organizations (Allvin *et al.*, 2011). How this “right attitude” is discursively constructed and internalized among WCWs is, however, not known.

Methodological procedure

Data for this paper were collected ethnographically in a six-year funded programme in the UK and Sweden, performed before the COVID -19 pandemic.

The UK case study comprised three local authorities sharing a common ICT service team. The three organizations merged their ICT departments into one shared service to underpin digital transformation and cut costs. The merger included: a new digital portal, an ICT roadmap replacing the three councils’ old legacy systems and a desktop modernization project. In this paper, data from “Local Authority (LA) Anywhere” were used; a desktop modernization project providing staff with laptops and Office 365.

The second author joined the ICT team when the LA Anywhere project rollout had not yet started, but all the documentation and hardware had been set up and purchased. The second author participated in 17 senior management meetings related to the general digital transformation of the councils: project meetings, workshops, and training sessions with staff. In addition, 9 semi-structured interviews with a total of 10 senior management, management, and transformation staff (see Table 1). The interviews were all conducted face-to-face on council premises.

The Swedish company (The Company), is a multinational industrial company. Digitalization is a major feature of company strategy which focuses on digital solutions throughout the entire product and service offering. In terms of organization, digitalization enables a new structure with regional and global teams, almost exclusively mediated by digital technology.

The third author observed two HR-related teams within The Company: Team A, responsible for developing, facilitating and running management trainings, and team O working with recruitment to WCW positions. Team A consisted of five employees in three countries, including one operational manager. The entire team had never met face-to-face although individual members had met face-to-face on a few occasions. Team O consisted of 18 employees including one manager, based in three different locations in Sweden. The entire team rarely met face-to-face, and team meetings were normally run virtually.

Interview #	Interviewee	Duration
<i>The UK councils</i>		
1	Andrew, Senior Director, council S	74 min
2	Brian, Senior Director, council H	89 min
3	Felicity, Senior Director, council C	54 min
4	Peter, Head of Digital and ICT (shared ICT service)	82 min
5	Jane and Carl, business analysts	97 min
6	Owen, former councillor	81 min
7	Lucy, LA Project Manager	71 min
8	Jim, Assistant director for Transformation, council A	60 min
9	Elena, Head of Transformation, council B	47 min
<i>Sweden, the Company</i>		
1	Hanna, Employee, Team A	42 min
2	Gunilla, Employee, Team A	48 min
3	Nina, Employee, Team A	40 min
4	Hanna, Employee, Team A	41 min
5	Stefan, Manager, Team A	120 min
6	Adam, Employee, Team O	62 min
7	Stina, Employee, Team O	45 min
8	Karin, Employee, Team O	56 min
9	Robert, Manager, Team O	50 min

Table 1.
Overview of interview
material

Five semi-structured interviews with team A members were conducted. One employee was interviewed on two occasions. Two interviews were conducted over Skype and the remaining three at The Company premises. In addition, the team's weekly (Skype) meeting was observed on five occasions. In team O, four interviews were conducted, and twelve weekly meetings were observed. Three interviews were done at The Company premises and one over Skype (see Table 1).

To this paper, only interview data were used. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The analysis process followed four stages: the first stage consisted of in-depth reading of interview transcripts. All three authors jointly read the British interviews, the Swedish interviews were read only by the first and the third author. During this first round of reading, we tried to discern patterns and similarities within each of the two studies and between the studies.

In the second round of coding, we looked for linguistic patterns; coherent collections of linguistic styles that described or evaluated digitalization of work; linguistic negotiations of what should be considered facts, right, wrong, or common sense in the local context (Wetherell and Potter, 1993). Together we discerned two repertoires of expressions across the two cases: being or wanting to be flexible; and being or wanting to be structured. The criterion in this phase was that each of the repertoires embraced a consistent linguistic pattern of statements, claims and expressions (Ostendorp and Steyaert, 2009), though, showing the parallel use of discourse, both repertoires could be present in the same extract (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

To understand these competing linguistic constructions, in the third stage, we investigated the theoretical framework outlined by Billig *et al.* (1988). During this third round of analysis, we went back and forth between the theoretical framework and the empirical material to make sense of the parallel, competing discourses-in-use.

In the fourth stage we carefully selected exemplar empirical quotes that show how the ideal of the WCW, as well as the variations within the two repertoires, was linguistically constructed. With the selection of quotes presented in this paper we aim to show variability between and within interviewees' accounts (Talja, 1999).

Findings

In this section the repertoires of *being flexible* and *being structured* will be outlined.

Being flexible

So it [LA Anywhere] is more about enabling us to work flexibly wherever and whenever there's a good internet connection.

UK, Peter, Head of Digital and ICT

The "us" used by Peter could refer to individual employees in the organization, people outside the organization (such as customers or users) or the organization as a whole, working flexibly. However, the construct of working wherever and whenever there is Internet suggests that "us" refers to the behavior of individual employees rather than the whole organization (even if the exact line between what divides employees from organizations might be blurred), and that the driver behind the digitalization of work is becoming more flexible. This changing behavior of the employee is further elaborated:

I guess for me it's kind of the way we work, is not it, and the way the work is changing [...] there's nobody here, cause everybody is working virtually or working in, in a different place

Sweden, Nina, Employee Team A

Nina positions herself as the one defining the digitalization of the workplace: according to her, the change that has occurred is “everybody” working “in a different place”. As a result of digitalization her colleagues have been enabled to become more flexible with regards to where (space) to work from. A similar construct is made by Hanna:

Hanna: Well, we try to have a more modern approach to learning. Interviewer: And what do you add into that concept “more modern approach”?

Hanna: Well, [...] parts of the trainings you can conduct from anywhere and at any time you like and maybe through phone, via computer and so on.

Sweden, Hanna, Employee Team A

In this quote, the “more modern approach” is training anywhere (irregular of space) and anytime (irregular of time), through a variety of digital tools. This variety is further elaborated upon:

Flexible working, for me [...] It could be different times, it could be different locations, it could be different tasks.

UK, Brian, Senior director Council H

Brian constructs flexibility of working in relation to different spaces and different times, and adds that flexible work involves the possibility or the prerequisite to perform different tasks (how). Thus, the flexibility of working anywhere, at any time and on any task is also constructed not only as a possibility, but also as an organizational *requirement*:

Partly because it allows people to sit anywhere, so they can sit amongst other teams, whereas before people felt, rightly or wrongly, that they were more tied to a desk. Some have embraced that very, very well. Others need more support to embrace that, and still want to be within their sort of ... So, we're putting in place- some teams, for instance, there might be a broad area where you might still sit if you happen to be in the office, but you're not allowed to sit in the same place on any given day.

UK, Felicity, Senior director Council C

Felicity says that before the digitalization project people felt “tied to a desk”, however this was either felt “rightly or wrongly”. Whereas some employees have embraced flexibility, others needed organizational support to embrace the possibility of working anywhere. This is handled by the organization by prohibiting sitting in the same place several days in a row, and hence flexibility is regulated (structured) in the workplace by organizational rules to promote an appropriate way of acting in the digital workplace. Thus, the possibility of working flexibly is enforced by certain new rules and policies, or in other words a new structure.

Being flexible in the digitalized workplace is further built on the idea of speed, where WCWs' individual characteristics and abilities to adapt are put center stage:

The more digital, the faster, our thesis is that it builds on your potential learning agility, because you will always need to be curious and learn new things considering the speed of change.

Sweden, Adam, Employee Team O

Here, the characteristic or ability to stay “curious and learn new things” is constructed as a prerequisite for being an employee with an appropriate attitude in the digital organization.

As flexibility was most often described as a virtue, it could also be constructed as a vice:

We have a lot of sources, that's a problem, I think. We have private, we have our Facebook, we have LinkedIn, we have Insta, we've got email, we've got lots of different emails, not just one email address but for a lot of different purposes, kind of. Then we have regular mail at home, it's almost non-

existent. And you've got phone, and I do not know all, other, in apps there can also be, as in workout apps where you can have a lot of communities here and there.

Sweden, Gunilla, Employee Team A

Here the blurring of private and work–life boundaries (that is implicit in working anywhere and at any time) is highlighted through the description of different work-related and private digital tools, and the variety is described as “a problem”. The variety in itself becomes almost overwhelming to list, as Gunilla says “and I don't know all”.

In summary, the construct of the flexible WCWs' working life revolves around time (when to work and speed of work), space (geographical and virtual), and tasks (how and what to do). Flexibility is constructed as a forced organizational requirement and as a preferred internalized quality by the employees.

Being structured. As it became clear in the last quote above, the variety of digital tools that enable flexible work must be managed in some way by the user to avoid organizational chaos. Here is the continuation of the quote from the previous section:

Gunilla: But Yammer at least has [a function] so that you can subscribe, so if you have email as your source, you can get an email with an update in Yammer that you subscribe to. So, I have that for certain groups. For example, this internal, there I have it because I do not want to miss something. The other I do not have it because then my mailbox would be full[...] so there you need to have super structure and remove and kind of channelize and ... takes a lot of time.

Sweden, Gunilla, Employee Team A

Gunilla explains how the variety of digital tools and virtual communication channels requires her to “have super structure” by handling different channels in different ways. This handling by the individual is described further:

[...] you do not want to send an email with a stupid question, but in a platform like that [Yammer] it's quite informal, you feel like you could ask anything and it's not a stupid question cause it's not kind of taking someone's time out of the day to log on to their email and read it, it's something that they can kind of come and go to as they want,

Sweden, Nina, Employee Team A

Nina describes how she uses her feelings to navigate which digital space to use for different messages. If she feels that what she asks is “stupid”, she will use the more informal online space (Yammer). This self-regulation based on one's feelings highlights the need for the employee to, amid the overwhelming range of digital communication tools, find a structured way to address appropriate questions in the appropriate channels. This structure and form of organizing work does not depend on a written rule or policy but should be self-created by the individual.

However, non-managerial WCWs are not the only ones needing to change the way they work due to digitalization. In the following quote, the interviewer asks Peter a question on remote management since his subordinate's work from anywhere (laptops) using digital tools.

Interviewer: How do you manage remotely?

Peter: It takes a lot more effort. I think you tend to focus on output driven activities, and you also need to keep lists of what you ask people to do. It's very easy when you see seven people every day and you say to Bob on Tuesday, “Bob, can you do X?” and then you see him on Friday and you go, “Oh Bob, have you done X?” It really is helpful like that.

When you're remote from staff, understanding what you've asked them to do, you need to be able to manage yourself to understand exactly what you've asked everybody to deliver. But then you need

to follow it up, so I think you become more output driven in terms of your management style. Which means you tend to oversee more; you tend to micromanage a little bit more because you do not see the output. UK, Peter, Head of Digital and ICT

The flexibility of Peter's workforce forces him to structure his own work, he needs to "keep lists" to remember and to manage himself. The change that Peter refers to is related to becoming "more output driven" than before (when the workforce was less flexible in terms of working with different times, spaces, and tasks). Increased flexibility on the part of the employee, at both managerial and non-managerial level, because of digitalization of work, has led to a need for more organized ways of working, introducing different tools to micromanage and structure one's work.

The need to self-manage is further described related to tasks of remote e-learning:

This you could [...] easily do as an e-learning where you go through different steps, you analyze to [...]. OK, what have you done the last weeks [...] what did your agenda look like and how did you work and in which box would you then put it? Is it important and urgent, is it important and not urgent or, well you know, that square.

Sweden, Hanna, Employee Team A

Hanna describes the necessity for the WCW to structure her work, to be able to priorities and distinguish between what is important and what is not, urgent and not urgent. Hanna constructs the digitalized workplace at any time, any place and on any task as requiring a more structured, self-organized employee.

In summary, digitalization requires the structured WCWs to manage doing the right task in the right (virtual or nonvirtual) space, addressing the right (remote) person in the right time (urgent or non-urgent). Structure is both described as built into organizational requirements and constructed as a preferred internalized quality by the individual due to digitalization of WCW work.

Discussion

Ideological dilemmas rarely have solutions (Billig *et al.*, 1988). The ideological dilemma in this study constructs the situation of "equally good, equally bad" or "damned if you do, damned if you don't" for its WCWs. In the digitalized workplace, the two ideals of being "flexible" and being "structured" both carry possibilities that are constructed as positive for the individual, but also as soon as you choose one ideal, you inevitably fall short of the other.

In "digitalization of work" (Pfeffer and Suphan, 2015), the flexible employee has been described as an ideal; the individual should be or should want to be a self-driven worker who works when and where is suitable (Franco, 2019; Garsten, 1999), putting emphasis on the individual having the "right attitude" for appropriate organizational behavior (Allvin *et al.*, 2011). Discursive constructs of workplace flexibility have been described as a fuzzy but ubiquitous reason for organizational change (Dunford *et al.*, 2013), placing responsibility on the individual on how to become an ideal employee (Myers *et al.*, 2013). Further, research has pointed to various workplace flexibility initiatives as attractive on both managerial and employee levels, but often unsuccessful due to mixed messages related to how to be or become such an ideal employee (Kirby, 2000; Myers *et al.*, 2013). In the analysis, the ideal of being or wanting to be flexible is constructed as an organizational requirement but also as a preferred, internalized quality that the individual employee should or must deploy.

Similarly, we have identified the lack of organizational policy and rules, or structures, to help employees organize their work when working flexibly. WCWs explain that instincts guide them to choose how to organize their work in the digitalized workplace. The digitalized workplace has forced both managerial and non-managerial staff to self-regulate and self-organize their work: being flexible creates the need for a new structure, a structure that is

informal and self-imposed, as a felt, internalized quality. There are certain organizational attempts to enforce flexibility through rules and policies if flexibility is not embraced, but their meaning is literal rather than enabling the workforce to structure their work in the face of digitally induced flexibilization. Employees were not told when to use different tools for communication and how to become more output driven.

Previous research on the digitalization of work reports conflicting findings (Pfeiffer, 2018; Gullstrand and Brännebo, 2013; Aroles *et al.*, 2019; Felstead and Henseke, 2017; Maruyama *et al.*, 2009; Sullivan and Gershuny, 2018; Ziemann, 2017), but offer scarcely explanations. The theoretical framework of Billig *et al.* (1988) elaborates on conflicting discourses as context related, which makes our findings noteworthy, as they can help come to grips with conflicting findings in the work of other scholars too. In this study, the ideological dilemma of the simultaneous ideals of structure and flexibility are unchallenged by the interviewees, which confirms Billig's (2001) statement that even contradictory ideological claims can appear as "natural" or even unquestionable through common sense expressions.

In addition, as our empirical material derives from two different organizations in two different countries with interviews across hierarchal levels, we discern how this construct does not depend on hierarchical positions, private/public sector, or country/culture. However, an insight relating to time is of relevance: the organization in Sweden is more mature in terms of work digitalization, whereas the organization in the UK is at the beginning of its digitalization journey. The analysis shows that the use of dual, conflicting discourses is present right from the beginning of an organization's digitalization journey and that it persists as the organization becomes more digitally mature; simultaneously the dual construction of two equally good and equally bad positions is something the employee must figure out (handle, think, feel) and manage on her own.

Empirically this study contributes to the literature on ideological dilemmas (e.g. Billig *et al.*, 1988) showing that the dilemmas across national and organizational boundaries persist throughout digitalization processes. Theoretically this study contributes to the ideological dilemma literature in that sense we found that time (digitalization stage of the organization) and place (country and sector) *do not affect* the nature of the individual's thinking at a macro level as Billig (1991) has suggested they might do at the micro level. Discourses of being structured or being flexible can thus be used at different times and places by an employee (micro level). However, the same discourses, we found, persist across sectors, national/cultural boundaries (place) and digitalization stages (time). We consider those as the macro contextual level. Hence the findings of this study are significantly related to the digitalization of work that can potentially apply to other contexts and need further research at both the micro (Billig, 1991) and the macro level.

Managerial implications

Since the nature of ideological dilemmas is that they cannot be resolved, it is worth being aware of the opposing ideals digitalization poses. Previous research on organizational change processes has highlighted how ideological dilemmas in mixed messages increase stress, frustrations, and work–life conflicts (Kelan, 2009; Kirby, 2000; Myers *et al.*, 2013; Edley, 2001). The ideological dilemmas lens has helped highlight that the nature of the problem with digitalization exists at a linguistic level and hence managers need to be aware of organizational opposing demands on employees through the construction of policies and rules. Since ideological dilemmas are not resolvable it is worth supporting managers and non-managerial staff in new ways of working and providing self-organizing and self-management training when embarking upon a digitalization journey. Finally, it is an organizational and managerial responsibility to strike a fine balance between allowing for employees to choose how to structure their work and guiding them through new regulations, policies, and rules in how to navigate their digital work.

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About the authors

Eva Lindell (PhD) is a senior lecturer at the department of Organization and Management at Mälardalen University School of Business, Society and Engineering (EST). She is interested in digitalization in relation to changes in working life and labor market relations. Her empirical material derives from various public and private organizations as well as freelance and creative workers. She takes an interest in different forms of qualitative methods with a special focus on discursive psychology frameworks. Eva Lindell is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: eva.lindell@mdu.se

Irina Popova (PhD) is a lecturer in Entrepreneurship and Strategy. Previously she did a Postdoc in Digitalisation of Management and a PhD in Social Enterprise and Incubation. She is interested in research related to the digitally transformed workplaces, social incubation and entrepreneurship, liminality and transitional processes. She has experience in ethnographic methods of data collection and qualitative data analysis.

Anna Uhlin is a PhD candidate at the department of Organization and Management at Mälardalen University School of Business, Society and Engineering (EST). Her research interest lies in the processes and practices of organizing work in a digitalized work life, with her thesis being a qualitative study about the performance and the performativity of virtual and hybrid work meetings.

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