

Life and work: One and the same?

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Flexible workplaces may seem attractive when considering work-life balance but new research being published shows it's not unusual for firms to cash-in, profiting from our "free" time and non-professional aptitudes, experts warn.

Peter Fleming, Professor of Business and Society at Cass Business School, City University, London, UK, weighs the evidence for this shift in [work](#) culture in "When 'life itself' goes to work: Reviewing shifts in organisational life through the lens of biopower" in the current issue of the journal *Human Relations*, published by SAGE. Last century, it was very clear where work stopped and play started – managers at offices and factories encouraged a formal environment. Personal lives were left at the door as employees clocked in. Today, jobs increasingly allow us to work flexible hours, yet we are expected to be responsive around the clock. Dubbed Liberation Management, the latest trend encourages us all to 'be ourselves' at work, dropping the formal, professional attitudes of the past. And workers looking for ideas or opinions free of charge can crowdsource them from the Internet.

Businesses are getting something for nothing, experts say.

Examining the dark side to today's apparent freedom and autonomy for workers, Fleming uses a concept known as biopower developed by French scholar, historian, and social theorist Michel Foucault, an expert in the workings of discipline and control.

The 'bio' in 'biopower' stands for bios or 'life itself.' Foucault said that

there is actually more control in modern, neo-liberal societies than in old-fashioned hierarchies. Not just ruled by the traditional power structures of bureaucracy, the state and technology, the other parts of our lives – private interests, social skills and personal abilities – are also up for grabs. Foucault spoke about biopower in a series of 1970s lectures at the College de France, which have only recently been translated into English.

As long as a project deadline is met, firms don't care when, how and where the work is done – be it in your underwear in the middle of the night or in a cafe on Monday morning, Fleming says. A key element of biopower is that it operates on and harnesses all elements of our lives, regulating, monitoring and monetizing everything we are and do – and we are seldom aware of it.

Today, as 'biocracy' takes the place of bureaucracy, managers often rely on aspects of life that were previously inappropriate at work. Differences and individuality are welcomed. This is a 'lifestyle approach' to management, where companies hope to get a better performance from employees by encouraging their everyday selves on the job. Largely seen in Western economies, this trend is linked to a decline in jobs focused on concrete or industrial tasks. Life skills, communication and organization skills, and emotional intelligence are now key.

If the onset of flu is coupled with relief that you can finally take a day for yourself, and you feel that your work is your life, blame biocracy. The widely reported death of banking intern Moritz Erhardt following three days of non-stop work is perhaps an extreme example of what biocracy can do to us: When work and life become blended to such an extent, even rest and sleep are considered a 'waste of time'.

"The Birth of Biopolitics lectures are astoundingly prescient in the way they concentrate on the then nascent neoliberal project as a sign of

things to come," says Fleming. "Our jobs are no longer defined as something we do among other things, but what we are... Ominously, we are now permanently poised for work."

More information: "When 'life itself' goes to work: Reviewing shifts in organisational life through the lens of biopower" by Peter Fleming, published November XX, 2013, in *Human Relations*.

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