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Work extensification in the times of COVID-19: middle managers safeguarding employee well-being and performance through controlling, caring, and social sensing

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Extended abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 triggered the transition from onsite to remote work turning onsite supervision to distance management and shifting the defined business hours into flexible work schedules (Kniffin et al., 2021). Distance work and separation of organizational members became more pronounced over the recent decades along with the widespread adoption of digital technologies in organizations connecting the workforce with the organization, and external collaborators (Kolb et al., 2020; Leonardi & Treem, 2020). On the one hand, remote work and distance management provide autonomy, on the other hand, the constant connection to digital technology and increasing work demands have led to the extensification in managerial work (Hassard & Morris, 2021). While managers voluntarily choose to complete tasks outside the office, they are driven by increased responsibilities and greater variety in tasks (Hassard & Morris, 2021). Hassard and Morris (2021) suggest that COVID-19 has extended work for middle managers even more, thus affecting their well-being negatively. Consequently, our study aims to explore work extensification encountered by middle managers during the outbreak of COVID-19. Specifically, we zoom in on seven middle managers who transitioned into distance managing and explore how exactly their work has become extensified during the pandemic.

Managerial oversight

The lockdowns that came with the COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations to transition to more mobile and flexible work with employees at distance, affecting trust and increasing managerial oversight (de Vaujany et al., 2021; Hafermalz, 2021). Before the pandemic, organizations were reluctant to adopt distance work due to the fear that managers would lose control over their employees (Hafermalz, 2021; Hassard & Morris, 2021) and experience the inability to monitor the work activities of employees working from home (Groen et al., 2018). As distance affects the presence and visibility of employees and managers (Leonardi et al., 2010), having the workers out of the office and thus ‘out of sight’ removes the opportunity to observe individuals face-to-face

(Sewell & Taskin, 2015). The managers have become unsure whether employees engage in work or private matters, thus calling attention to new outlets of managerial oversight. Managerial oversight occurs through informal and formal actions that managers apply to influence and move employees in a desirable direction aligned with the objectives of an organization (de Vaujany et al., 2021; Flamholtz, 1996).

However, as connectivity via digital technologies mediates communication and collaboration, it still empowers observing the behaviors of others from a distance, especially through traces in data (Leonardi & Treem, 2020). Previous research suggests that managers tend to place a higher emphasis on output control in distance work e.g. targets, performance indicators, and outcomes to achieve a similar control level as in collocated settings (Groen et al., 2018). In a collocated setting, managers also tend to gather cues on employees by directly observing their behaviors in the office during a workday. In distance work, such observation is more challenging, thus when individuals are out of the office, there is a tendency to increase communication with them to minimize distance (Leonardi et al., 2010).

Along with increased monitoring, studies have also observed that during crises, managers tend to adopt caring attitudes as they attend to employee well-being and development (Levay & Andersson Bäck, 2021). Adopting and displaying caring attitudes means that the managers reach out to their employees for contact in both collocated and remote work settings. Moreover, managers present themselves as available and approachable for their reports through attentive listening, supporting, coaching, and paying personalized attention to each employee. Research shows that such caring attitudes make people feel seen and appreciated by their manager (Levay & Andersson Bäck, 2021; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015).

In this study, we follow a process approach to unpack extensification of managerial work, where we observe managerial oversight and the related approaches middle managers apply to safeguard employee well-being and performance over time (Abdallah et al., 2019; Langley et al., 2013). Consequently, we draw on forty-nine semi-structured interviews with seven middle managers from a large Danish pharmaceutical company from May 2020 to May 2021. We interviewed the middle managers every four to six weeks zooming in on their experiences while managing from distance. To make sense of our data, we employ a temporal bracketing strategy (Langley, 1999). Furthermore, we perform first-order and second-order analyses that further form into aggregate categories for a systematic representation of our data (Gioia et al., 2013).

Caring, controlling, and social sensing

Our findings indicate that during the pandemic, the middle managers experienced extensification in their work. An eight-hour workday stretched out into ten or more hours spent working. During the official work hours, the middle managers interacted with their reports through online meetings, whereas before or after work, they approached their concentration-intensive tasks.

Throughout the transition, we observed how the middle managers attended an active role to their employees working remotely by mimicking the onsite environment and purposefully increasing communication and visibility through scheduling frequent connection points to bring people together through online interactions. We observed that the middle managers used the connection

points to control work e.g. setting quick meetings at the start of the day to ensure that people are starting their workday, encouraging ‘roundtable discussions’ to extract what employees are working on, checking workflows, following up on targets and general progress. Additionally, the connection points allowed observing employees and sense their emotional states. At these meetings, the middle managers gathered cues by screening employees’ behaviors and their activity in the collaborative space. In addition to taking note of non-verbal cues, the managers also engaged empathic listening by focusing on the spoken and unspoken messages in communication while inquiring employees on how they were coping with the situation at hand.

On the one hand, the middle managers cared for their employees' well-being and believed the methods that they used demonstrated caring. The way the middle managers showed they cared was through exuding presence, being available, showing consideration, and demonstrating interest in both employees' professional as well as private lives. On the other hand, they perceived it necessary to monitor that work gets accomplished, thus fulfilling the performance goals and aspirations of the organization i.e. controlling for results. Thus, we observed that over time the middle managers tended to adjust controlling and caring through what they *sensed* i.e. extracting the available cues through the connection points informed them on further actions. However, detecting and extracting cues from social interactions is time and resource-demanding (Frauendorfer et al., 2014). On top of increasing control and caring, our analysis shows that the middle managers had to refine their ability to sense to extract social cues to how their reports were coping with the situation as well as monitor their performance while working from distance.

The middle managers engaged in controlling, caring via sensing throughout the alternating ‘new normal’ at the company due to changing COVID-19 regulations. The enforced distance work and the ongoing changes confused and drained energy from managers. However, the interplay of controlling, caring, and sensing allowed the managers to oversee the situation and tailor the necessary approach to each employee. The dedicated attention through these approaches and the struggle in applying them manifested in further work extensification for middle managers.

This study contributes to the understanding of the extensification in managerial work performed remotely through showing the interplay of controlling, caring, and sensing as a means to safeguard employee well-being and performance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: work extensification, managerial oversight, middle managers, distance management, COVID-19

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