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"During a busy day I don't get much done"
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Abstract

"During a busy day I don't get much done" In this quote from a client consultant condenses the dilemma discussed in this paper: what officially counts as creditable, "real work" rarely corresponds to the daily lived praxis in the office. The case study is based on my ethnographic research in a professional services firm and shows how the organisational understanding of what is recognised as work focuses on ascertainable deliverables such as presentations or spreadsheet reports. The lived praxis at the offices, however, is coined by relational and affective work (Hardt 1999) – paradoxically even more in situations of pressing delivery deadlines. The paper discusses these two conflictive perceptions of work/non-work in the (claiming to be) post-Fordist field of "immaterial" labour (Lazzarato 1996) and questions the proclaimed change towards an immaterial quality of labour of the "informational economy" (Hardt and Negri 2000).

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Busy but not "real work": approaching the paradox

"During a busy day I don't get much done." This quote from a client consultant at Advice Company[1] a multinational professional services firm in Mumbai, India, condenses the dilemma discussed in this paper: what officially counts as "real work" – work that produces a quantifiable output – rarely corresponds to the daily lived praxis in the office. The so called "real" or "counting work" is associated with the production of deliverables such as presentation slide decks or other documents and classified by the employees in the organisation as categorically distinct from work such as emails or phone calls which does not directly redound to or even hampers the production of ascertainable work products. This distinction is insofar of upmost relevance for the employees at Advice Company, as the organisation benchmarks their performance in terms of artefactual-like results. The employees themselves, however, must spend a significant portion of the work day with tasks that do not lead to such results. This is insofar remarkable, as professional service firms, also referred to as knowledge intensive firms or knowledge-based organisations, rely on a professionalised workforce with specialised expertise and skills in order to produce immaterial products (Nordenflycht 2010; Alvesson 1995), and hence have arguably made the shift towards a postmodern "informational economy" together with a "change in the quality and nature of labor (sic)" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 289). The understanding of work at Advice Company, however, yields the evaluation of labour in material terms that is considered characteristic of 20th century "industrial" labour, but that is here found at the core of a 21st century organisation: a multinational corporation in the services industry that supposedly draws on "immaterial" labour.[2] Thus, neo-Marxist theorists such as Hardt and Negri (2000: 292f) or Lazzarato (1996) have argued that contemporary capitalist production is characterised by the hegemony of "immaterial labour", a form of labour producing "immaterial goods" such as a services, knowledge or communication.

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1   The name of the company is fictive.
2   Thanks to Andrea Muehlebach for inspiring me to develop my argument in this direction.

In this article, I will critically engage with the thesis of Hardt and Negri by drawing on ethnographic work in Advice Company.[3] I will argue that material products and the corresponding value attributions that they consider characteristic for the "industrial labour" of mid-20th century Fordism still remain important for the 21st century services industry. My argument stands in line with and enhances the critique voiced by Sylvia Yanagisako (2012) on Hardt's and Negri's proposition. Her work is complementary to my critique, as she argues from a historical perspective on the silk industry in northern Italy that "immaterial" labour "has always been crucial to industrial production" (ibid.: 16).[4]

After a brief exploration of the concept of immaterial labour and "affective work" (Hardt 1999) in the following chapter, I will then illustrate the ambiguities and paradoxes of what my interlocutors at Advice Company categorise and value as "real work" in contrast to what is classified as non-work activity. Here it becomes apparent that deliverables of a material-like quality in the form of documents, reports or presentations slides stand in the focus of attention and most employees in the organisation are measured on them. Their correct, accurate and timely submission represents a seemingly quantifiable basis determining career advancements of the individual – or, in case of underachievement, an impending threat of the loss of organisational membership denoting the loss of the job and salaried work.

After that I will then illustrate how this output stands in contrast to the *Alltagswelt* in the office which is characterised by highly frequent, non-formalised interactions (face-to-face, phone, chat, email). To provide an impression of the employees' notion of "busy-ness" from the opening quote of this paper I follow a consultant closely through one hour of highly intensive work activity. The employees experience a dissonance between their "non-counting" working praxis and the organisation's requirement to produce artefacts in several ways. This leads to the paradoxical situation that "being busy" is perceived as contradictory to "getting things done", and the need to develop handling strategies to mitigate the area of conflict. I will conclude with a discussion on the materiality of immaterial labour.

Immaterial labour, affective work and value

Advice Company is a western-origin multinational corporation operating in the services industry sector. With its business model to provide consulting and advice to clients on their strategic business decisions the organisation

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3 The ethnographic data presented here are based on 11 months of fieldwork carried out for my PhD project in 2013/14 at the offices of a multinational consulting company in Mumbai with approximately 800 employees of various hierarchy levels and designations. The research was funded by a scholarship of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

4 Thanks to Christian Strümpell for the reference.

denotes a classic example for a knowledge-intensive firm (Alvesson 1995) and is part of what is commonly referred to as the "service and knowledge economy" (Gill und Pratt 2008: 2). The knowledge economy has been at the focus of contemporary theories of "immaterial" labour as a major characteristic of the post-industrial economy. Through the shift within capitalism from material production to immaterial knowledge concepts of work have consequently changed towards "immaterial labour" which does not result in a physical or tangible final product (Lazzarato 1996: 133). Or, as Hardt and Negri (2000: 292) write more explicitly:

> *"Most services indeed are based on the continual exchange of information and knowledges. Since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the labor involved in this production as* immaterial *labor – that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication."*

Their argument follows the assumption that digital technologies change the way in which value is produced, away from the production of material commodities towards forms of immaterial production, including information and affect (Wilkie 2011: 50). Furthermore, one of the main propositions of immaterial labour theory is that, in contrast to labour utilised for the production of material commodities, immaterial labour cannot be quantified (Hardt und Negri 2000: 146).

As I will show with the ethnographic cases in the following sections, the latter assumption of a detachment of immaterial labour from mechanisms of quantification is questionable, suggesting a less clear-cut view on immaterial forms of labour. Hardt (1999: 92) assumed an increased "informationalisation" also of production processes, while Springer (1999: 124) speaks of a "re-Taylorization" of production work. Other anthropological studies have provided further food for thought about the limits of the development and the assumption that the direction of development is inevitably running in solely one direction. In her work about two IT organisations, Mayer-Ahuja (2011: 13) provides a powerful example of how IT software development – arguably at the heart of the new service industry – becomes broken down into small work parts, resembling what she calls the "Taylorization" of software work along an imaginary assembly line. Her findings are in accordance with other accounts (Upadhya und Vasavi 2008; Matuschek et al. 2007) and Pettinger (2006) highlights the fundamental role of engagement with material products in the work of retail assistants in fashion clothing stores in contrast to the customer interactions considered a characteristic of service work.

Even though the concept of immaterial labour is frequently connected in current discourse to the contemporary capitalist economy (Gill und Pratt 2008; Wissinger 2007), feminist writers have stressed the fact that women

are and have for a long time been prominently engaged in immaterial labour in the context of social reproduction (Bear et al. 2015: no. 7; Fortunati 2007; Desai et al. 2011; Morini 2007), or more explicitly in the context of affective and relational labour (Friedemann-Sánchez 2012; Muehlebach 2011). Affective labour is framed as a type of immaterial labour (Hardt 1999: 90), as kin work or caring labour and, according to Hardt, highlights the fact that such work produces sociality (ibid.: 89):

> *"The other face of immaterial labor is the affective labor of human contact and interaction [...] This labor is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion." (Hardt 1999: 95-96)*

Connected with affective work, however, is in female work contexts the question of paid or unpaid work: Friedemann-Sánchez' illustrates in her study (2012) on female workers in Colombia's floriculture industry their challenges to manoeuvre between salaried work in the agroindustry sector and unpaid caregiving for dependents. Despite the advertised potential of increased agency for women achieved through employment work, women frequently leave their job again after a few months to provide unpaid care services for their children or elderly kin, as there is no reconciliation between employment and family work.

While Friedemann-Sánchez' study shows the inseparable connection between salaried work and affective work as two separate entities, Hardt argues that with the movement towards the service economy, affective work has established its position at the centre of the capitalist production and the type of jobs he refers to are characterised by the central role knowledge, information, communication and affect plays for them (Hardt 1999: 90–91).

The concepts of immaterial and affective labour as a prioritization of "extracting value from relational and emotional elements" (Morini 2007: 40) suggest an emphasis on such forms of labour in professional servicing firms such as Advice Company. While this assumption will prove applicable in one aspect of consulting work, the following case study reveals a more complex categorization of immaterial labour.

Counting what counts: "real work" and performance at Advice Company

A few weeks into my fieldwork within Advice Company I had the opportunity to attend a new employees' introduction training. This training was a good starting point for gaining insights into the organisational viewpoint on work. The "Discover Advice Company" training, as it is officially called, is held every few months, depending on the number of new joiners. It is organ-

ised by the human resources department whose members also play several active roles in the agenda of the two days. All employees who newly joined the organisation in the weeks since the last training was held are invited from all offices of Advice Company across Mumbai, irrespective of their designation. The final session of the training was held by a senior human resources representative. He pointed out the rules of how to ensure to stay employed in the organisation and explained the "performance measurement scale" along which each employee gets a rating by his or her manager once per year. This ranking is based on objectives, such as completed projects or contribution to project reports which are agreed upon at the beginning of each financial year between the employee and the manager. The rating is then given on a scale from level 1 to 4, level 4 being best. The rating determines not only the amount of the yearly bonus payment, but also enables or disables promotions, which can only be granted with a rating of the best level four. He furthermore stated that:

> *"employees rated only with a level 1 are asked to move out of the system immediately as well as the lower level 2 performers as they are obviously not living up to our values. Only level 3 and 4 performers are to be retained in the organisation, and only with a rating of level 4 you can apply for a different department or for the mobility program[5] once you have been for at least two years in your initial department."*

This grade-based system illustrates the organisation's perception of how to objectively quantify and measure the immaterial work for which they paid their employees. However, the weeks of "annual performance review" brought up several, often bitter discussions about differing perceptions about the right "justified" grading level between a team member and a manager. Although Advice Company is part of the knowledge economy and hence primarily relies – according to Hardt and Negri – on immaterial labour, the claim for a materiality-oriented understanding of labour value was already communicated to the new employees within this very first phase of their entry into the organisation.

Consequently, the employees established a categorical differentiation between "real work" based on intangible digital commodities and "non-counting" immaterial labour. As one consultant explained, "work is all that goes into presentations, spreadsheets or document files. That's real work. Emails, phone calls, discussions and meetings don't really count." This notion was mirrored in a lunch discussion amongst the consulting team I accompanied. The team discussed their relation to the project coordination teams, who had

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5   The mobility program is the opportunity for those who wish to get a placement in one of Advice Company's offices abroad.

the function to manage the client projects as a support for the consulting teams, which was often conflictual:

> *"We [consultants] have the final project report and client presentation. But what do the project coordinators have? They have nothing. That's why their position is so difficult."*

Interesting to note is here that the project coordinators indeed engaged heavily in affective and relational work due to their function to coordinate project work tasks across the various departments in the organisation: they wrote emails and made dozens of phone calls per day to keep all contributing functions informed and sometimes had to persuade a colleague to do an extra hour of work to complete a task without delay.

Although the apparent hierarchisation of functions based on material-quality deliverables falls in line with the organisation's evaluation strategy of work, this devaluation of affective labour is striking for the fact that Advice Company operates exclusively in the services industry sector.

This hierarchisation emphasises the fact that the outputs of work (presentations, documentations etc.) stood in the sole focus of attention, as most of the annual performance measurement items were centred on them. There was the official assumption about how these outputs have been produced, a best-practice-oriented view in how employees structured their work day to progress on their given tasks. Yet what really happened until the presentation or documentation could be delivered – the actual working praxis – was subsumed under a diffuse notion of "being busy" and the differentiation into work items that count and others that don't.

Being busy: working praxis and handling strategies

How "I'm busy" looks like

To get a grip on this seemingly subjective notion of "being busy" I took what I call "activity snapshots" of the interlocutors I accompanied: I tracked the flow of information over the duration of an hour through different communication channels such as email, chat, phone calls (on mobile phones or land-lines), face-to-face conversations and ad-hoc mini meetings of three to five persons at the interlocutor's desk.[6] When possible, I combined the tracking of incidents via "activity snapshots" with a detailed field notes protocol of the events during the hour, including the approximate time and duration of the event and its wider context. The outcome of such a combination of data

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6   Although it is an approach orienting on Wolcott (2003 [1973]: 9), who monitored the actions taken by the school principal he observed in 60 second intervals over the duration of two hours, I have changed this method to fit the requirements of a corporate office.

is provided in figure 1, which illustrates a typical hour during a "being busy" phase of a client consultant.

Ruchika, an experienced senior client consultant, is in her early thirties, has been working for three years at Advice Company and leads a sub-team of three junior consultants. Ruchika and her direct reports are part of a client consulting team of 12 members. I accompanied the wider consulting team for the total of six weeks and Ruchika for four days. The following vignette reproduces an hour of one of Ruchika's workdays during which I accompanied her. Figure 1 illustrates – in five-minute intervals – the activities that occurred during this hour followed by a detailed description of the events in this section. As the figure illustrates, most of the events occurred in dense sequential order, and some even simultaneously.
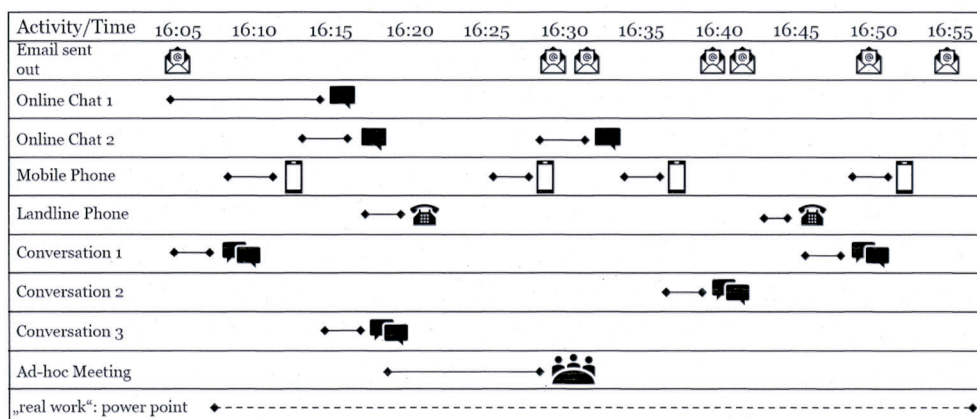

Figure 1: Client consultant Ruchika's communication flow during one hour

Ruchika had intended to work on a presentation she needed to finish that day. The hour started with her writing a short email to her manager, but this was interrupted when Raveena, one of her mentees, leaned over her desk's partition wall to ask Ruchika's advice on replying to a particular client's request. They exchanged a few sentences and Ruchika moved her attention back to her screen. An orange blinking bar appeared at the bottom of her desktop, indicating that she had received an online chat message from a colleague. While she started to respond, her mobile phone rang: a client was calling her to discuss the details of a report Ruchika had sent a few days ago. Ruchika got up from her desk and moved to a corner of the office, where she paced, staring with concentration at the carpeted floor. After a few minutes, Ruchika returned to her desk and opened the chat program to find the name of the colleague she was looking for. She double-clicked his name and sent him a question. While she waited for his reply she finished her still open chat conversation from the beginning of the hour and closed the window. When the reply arrived from the colleague she had reached out to, she wrote back, only to realise that the recipient of her message was already standing at her desk. He pulled a vacant chair from a temporarily unattended desk in the adjacent

bay and, together, he and Ruchika leaned over her computer screen and discussed the report documentation. When they did not seem to come to a conclusion, Ruchika stretched out her arm to the landline phone and dialled the four-digit number of a fellow client consultant colleague in a parallel team she knew by heart, without picking up the handset. After two ringtones the call was answered with a "Hallo?" on the other side. A conversation started amongst the three colleagues when it became clear that the issue could not be clarified in a few sentences, the colleague on the phone announced to come over in a second. Indeed, a few seconds later, a man appeared from somewhere behind the meeting rooms and joined Ruchika and the other colleague. Now, all three leaned over the screen, discussing the content. One scribbled a few lines on a note pad and Ruchika moved text boxes around in the document.

Then Ruchika's mobile phone rang again. She checked the incoming caller's name, which was blinking on her phone, rose from her chair and waved with her free hand, signalling for the two colleagues at her desk and her teammates at the surrounding desks to lower their voices. While picking up the phone call she again walked over to the corner and the third colleague, who had initially stood behind the two, took her seat. During her absence, he and the other colleague continued to change the file on Ruchika's laptop. After she returned, she leaned for another few minutes between the chairs over the two colleagues working at her desk, while they came to a conclusion. Both of the colleagues stood up to return to their desks and Ruchika took her seat again. She worked on the jointly discussed document for a few minutes while exchanging chat messages with one of the two colleagues about the project. Then she wrote an email to her team about the client call she had just received and another to a colleague in the accounting team.

Shortly later, she again stood up from her desk, walked away and called back the client who had led to the previous discussion. Once she was back at her desk, her manager casually walked by and asked her about the status of the presentation she was supposed to finish by the end of the day. He also asked if she knew the status of a different project in a critical status. She showed him the presentation slides and they briefly discussed them. When she was on her own again, she wrote two short emails before calling one of the two recipients to announce that she had sent him an email with high priority and she would like him to take care of it today because "the client is expecting me to revert back A.S.A.P."

The moment she hung up the phone, her mentee Raveena rose from her chair and leaned over with a question about how she should approach a task she had been given. Raveena picked up her laptop and leaned it over the partition panel to illustrate her issue. Ruchika's explanation was interrupted by the ringtone of her mobile phone. This time she checked the incoming caller's name and answered the call with "Ek second, thik hai? [One second, okay?]".

Ruchika lowered the mobile from her ear down to hip level and continued to instruct her mentee for half a minute. Then she attended to the colleague who was waiting on the mobile phone. He was working from home that day and she forwarded him an email while on the phone with him. Towards the end of the tracking hour, Ruchika finally returned to the presentation slides, only to switch back to the email program a few minutes later to write an email she had "almost forgotten". In total, the hour resulted in 14 conversations and 7 written emails, but only a few clicks in the presentation – her "real work", as she explained to me, which she had meant to work on.

When we both sat in the rickshaw that evening (as we were incidentally headed to destinations in the same area that day), Ruchika explained that it had been yet another "of those busy days where you're exhausted in the end and don't really know why, as all the work still remains". She was not aware of the number of communications she had managed in that hour and at a similar scale along the entire day, but she knew she would have to work on the presentation at home that evening.

What becomes apparent from this case is that even at a consulting firm, a prime example for immaterial labour, the affective and relational work that Ruchika is involved in, such as the mentoring and communication activities, are devalued. In repetition of the categorisation proclaimed by the organisation's performance measurement strategy, the material aspects of the immaterial work are recognised as the only "real work", practically erasing the factually existing large portion of affective and relational labour involved in Ruchika's work day.

Out of office: producing "real work"

The employees themselves reproduce the categorical distinction between "real work" and "work that doesn't count", as they know that they are evaluated on the former and engaging too heavily in the latter can potentially threaten their job at Advice Company. But in response to this, they actively seek strategies to mitigate the dissonance between the relational work they are involved in and the requirement for ascertainable deliverables. One of the strategies was to avoid the office, an open-area space without separating walls between desks or departments. The notion of the office as a "great place to coordinate things and meet people, but not to do the real concentration work" was voiced by colleagues from different functions and hierarchy levels. Sujata from the Human Resources Department, with a completely different function and work profile from Ruchika, stated:

> *"To do routine things and coordination I need to be in [the] office, but for creative and concentrated work I want to be at home, have my bed and my things around me, get up and think, continue to work. I need to create that one presentation from scratch*

for next week; I can't do that in the office. Right now it is quiet, but this is because all of them [she gestures with her arm to the empty desks around her] are in meetings, and our team head is not here. But when he is here you will see that there are people coming to talk to him, they have louder conversations, people on the call…"

The strategy to simply not be present at the office for concentrated work tasks was practised in various ways. I met Sneha, a member of the accounting team, regularly when I came to the office on Saturdays. She remarked that she preferred to come in on the weekend for a few hours to quietly work on tasks requiring concentration over a longer period, as she was not able to "properly take care of them in the hectic of the week". Raghunandan, a top-level manager, explained to me that he did his "brainwork" from home in the early morning until 9.00am, and then came to the main office to do "all the chatting with the junior people to give them attention, but also to get a feeling for the potential goof-up of a project before it makes its way through all of the hierarchy".

The examples illustrate that the office, the "official" place of work, is primarily associated with affective work and social reproduction and that the employees employ strategies such as moving to other locations or work times to engage in what is categorised as "real work". In correspondence to Ruchika's work hour the other employees perceived the office as a space marked by high communication density and interactions, hence immaterial labour – not surprising for the office of a professional servicing firm. Equally consistent across the employees' reflections on work is the perceived contrast between the predominantly performed immaterial labour and the dominating notions of materialised "real work" at Advice Company.

Discussion: re-thinking materiality

The dissonance between the relational and affective work performed in the context of communication and coordination at the office and the pressure to deliver ascertainable outputs is rarely expressed as a serious area of concern. But the smouldering struggle in the background to balance the two emerges from the following quote of a client consultant:

"When issues [in the client project] come up I am all busy-busy in here [the office], checking with everybody. And then my time to create the presentation gets cut down at least by 50%, which results in these long working hours. And this is why we people do die early…"

The wording he chose is admittedly dramatic, especially for a person around thirty with hardly sufficient professional experience to draw from for such a

claim on the mortality rates in the industry sector. Yet illustrates this quote succinctly the perceived pressure to deliver "real work" results while factually taking care the entire day of tasks associated with non-work. The consultant experienced the pressure as so salient that he apprehended physical consequences for him/herself.

While the digital outputs the client consultants produced in the form of presentations, spreadsheet reports and documents files are intangible, the employees' notion of these outputs have to be understood in terms of their material quality. The organisational management emphasises that notion through the practice of performance measurement, which is based on exactly these outputs. The delivery of these digital products determines the future career opportunities of each employee. I would argue that their immateriality solidifies in employees' notions to a concrete product with material qualities in contrast to other work tasks performed.

The daily practised labour at Advice Company is immaterial in a wider sense, as the consultants engage in even less tangible work, in affective work for a large part of their work day, and hence are not able to produce the "real work", artefact-like documents required. I have illustrated how the employees struggle with the constant challenge to match the organisationally disavowed, yet factually closely connected spheres of social relations and capitalist production. Even more, the consultants at Advice Company perceive the pressure of connecting the material and immaterial spheres of their knowledge work as physical pressure.

The incompatibility of "being busy" and "getting things done" is a symptom of the fact that labour in the professional services industry is framed by the organisational leaders still in continuity of the tradition of the 20th century industrial labour with an emphasis on the production of material-quality goods as definition of work. Immaterial labour, especially affective work and social reproduction, is instead devalued.

I have shown in my paper that the lived working praxis at Advice Company indeed corresponds to the ideas of affective labour framed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Yet the organisational understanding of work remains coined by the production of material-quality-like digital artefacts – in an explicitly material quality of immaterial labour. Here the conceptualisation of immaterial labour is falling short of the lived working praxis, leading to the incompatibility of "being busy" to "getting things done".

The ethnographic cases illustrate that that economic and social relations are enchained to one another and that the former cannot be detached from the latter.

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