"Overwork, boundaryless work and the autonomy paradox"

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

In the context of increasingly digital, flexible and self-managed knowledge work we aim to improve our understanding of the (global) drivers of overwork and work intensification dynamics by studying the case of Japan. We focus on exploring the specific role of the so-called "autonomy paradox", where autonomy (and/or its perception) becomes a driver of overwork. Based on 10 formal interviews (and many other informal conversations) held with key stakeholders (companies, unions, managers, workers and scholars) we found that 1) Japanese stakeholders are still focused on limiting working time and not enough on the regulation of the workloads and work intensity to prevent the harming effects of overwork; 2) autonomy (and/or its perception) seems to be an increasingly relevant double-edge sword: it might act as a resource to protect/promote health but it also seems involved in the internalization of job demands that might end up in workaholism and overwork. Looking to improve our strategies to prevent overwork, we discuss this "autonomy paradox" and some of the involved mechanisms, connecting our findings in Japan with international research.

Keywords:

1. Introduction and theoretical background

At first sight, one could certainly argue that the Japanese and Spanish economic and cultural contexts couldn't be more different: the Japanese economy still linked with innovative technological manufacturing while the Spanish one so dependent of service intensive industries like tourism; Japan with, virtually, full employment and Spain (structurally) surrounded by severe figures of unemployment, particularly among youngsters. The cultural stereotypes couldn't also be more apart, Japan still being associated with the overworked salaryman and Spain with the relaxed, joyful life. And the iceberg of differences could go on and on.

However, commonalities emerge under the tip, or this is what I experienced at both micro and macro levels. Both countries, increasingly influenced by the cultural and economic forces of globalization, seem to be moving away from paternalistic and family oriented societies towards more individualized and diverse/open ones. In the realm of labor, our main interest here, organizations and work are becoming increasingly digital and flexible and both Japanese and Spanish workers seem to be dealing with the same two major (global) dangers: the growing precariousness and overwork/work intensification[1], affecting all type of workers, and putting a distinct pressure on our youngsters, a factor playing a key role in the current socio demographic challenges[2].

What do we mean by *work intensification*? Is it the same that *overwork*? For the last three decades, since the first wave of the official European Working Conditions Surveys [EWCS] in 1991 (Boisard, Cartron, Gollac, Valeyre, & Besançon, 2003), Europe has been tracking not only the duration work, but the so-called work intensity (i.e., the intensity of the efforts, the workloads[3]). Following the globalization and digitalization dynamics, the European surveys have confirmed the overall trend of increasing work intensity, a work intensification (Green & Mostafa, 2012). Work intensity and work intensification are becoming increasingly important objects of research for the many scholars interested in the work realm: organizational theorists, sociologists of work, occupational psychologists and labor economists, among others (e.g., Boxall & Macky, 2014; Burchell, Ladipo, & Wilkinson, 2002; Green, 2006), mainly because of its implications for the performance and health of workers and organizations,

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[1] Overwork tends to be framed in terms of excessive working *time* (particularly in Japan), while work intensification means, literally, a growing work intensity (efforts/workloads per time unit). However, in this report, we frequently use both terms as "umbrella terms" in a more or less interchangeable fashion, to refer to excessive dedication to work in terms of duration, intensity and/or more frequently both.

[2] It seems that the lower fertility rates cannot be rightly understood without referring to the Japanese Labor Market https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/07/japan-mystery-low-birth-rate/534291/. Similar analysis could be done about Spain where precariousness and overworking/work intensification seem to interact to increase vulnerability (Briales Canseco, 2016; Lopez Carrasco, 2018).

[3] Traditionally, it has been operationalized (in the European Working Conditions Surveys) with items that aim to collect the perception of workers about the *pace of work* or *tight deadlines*. But effort is a multidimensional construct that includes physical and mental (cognitive and emotional) components and more recent and comprehensive operationalizations of work intensity in the EWCS include items to measure emotional effort. Needless to say that overwork and work intensification are increasingly driven by increased *mental* efforts, something we have called *knowledge work intensification*.

Although work intensity and work intensification have been a classic object of study for the sociology of work (e.g., Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979; Granter, McCann, & Boyle, 2015), the unprecedented flexibilization and digitalization of work, in the context the social acceleration (Rosa, 2013) and the so-called *boundaryless work* (Allvin, 2011), have put work intensification in the front row. Although the term *boundaryless* has been heavily used in discussing trends in careers (e.g., Arthur & Rousseau, 2001), but here we follow Allvin (ibid) that uses the term *boundaryless work* to highlight some risks of technology and flexibility at work, in particular those linked with the blurring life-work boundaries and limitless nature of digital/knowledge work. An important implication for us is that, in this increasingly boundaryless digital work, accounting for the duration of work is no longer enough (if it ever was) and the urgency to find ways to manage workloads and work intensity to protect health (particularly mental health)[4] and ensure job quality and wellbeing has to become a more generalized priority, as it is already happening in the UK (Felstead, Gallie, Green, & Henseke, 2019).

Quantitative evidence has been accumulating in the last decade, and we can now point to research from different parts of the world, all suggesting that addressing overwork/work intensity (time, but also workloads) is key to prevent work stress and protect worker's health: in Japan, already in 2011, JILPT's research pointed to workloads as the key driver of overtime for almost 64% of Japanese employees (Takami, 2019b). Similarly, in Europe, in 2013, a Pan-European study by the official agency EU-OSHA[5] found that the two leading aspects to tackle work stress were "working hours and workloads", together with "reorganizations and insecurity". Even more significant, the Labour Force Surveys, the most important statistical operation in Europe already confirmed in 2007 and 2013 (ad-hoc specific modules linked to health at work) that "*severe time pressure or overload of work*" is perceived to be the single most important dimension to drive mental wellbeing at work for both European and Spanish workers (particularly for "*managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals*")[6]. In the UK, the governmental agency Health & Safety Executive [HSE] has assumed, also for more than a decade now, that workloads are the main driver of lost working days linked with stress, anxiety, depression (44% of the total)[7]. Sources in the USA seem more fragmented, but workloads has also emerged as the first driver of stress for 39% of North Americans in 2017[8] and recent research is highlighting the key role of overload in the discussion of work, family and health (Kelly & Moen, 2020) and burnout[9].

Going a bit deeper in the Spanish case, EWCS suggest that Spain would have experienced an important work intensification process from 1991 to 2015, virtually doubling the share of workers

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4 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_BRI(2020)642368
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https://osha.europa.eu/en/facts-and-figures/european-opinion-polls-safety-and-health-work/european-opinion-poll-occupational-safety-and-health-2013
6 http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/1978984/6037334/Evaluation_report_LFS_AHM_2013.7z   (p. 74).
7 The predominant cause of work-related stress, depression or anxiety from the Labor Force Surveys (2009/10-2011/12) was workload, in particular "*tight deadlines, too much work or too much pressure or responsibility"*. https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf
8 Workloads (39%), people issues (31%) , juggling work and personal life (19%) and job security (4%). https://www.statista.com/statistics/315848/employee-stress-sources-at-work-in-north-america/
9 https://www.gallup.com/workplace/288539/employee-burnout-biggest-myth.aspx

exposed to high work intensity (measured as "*working to tight deadlines always or almost always*"), reaching 35% of the Spanish workers in 2015, second only to the UK in the EU-28 (Pérez Zapata, 2019). This is confirmed by our own research based on national data (Spanish/National Working Conditions Surveys from 1999-2011): work intensity (in this national case measured by "*pace at work*") would have become the most relevant factor to impact Spanish worker's health since 2006, roughly at the same level that the more traditional ergonomic risks (Pérez Zapata, 2019)[10].

Taken together, all these studies suggest that work intensification might have well become the single most important *global* challenge (together with increasing precariousness) for a more sustainable and healthy digitalization at work. Although initiatives to regulate the excesses of digitalization have emerged in several European countries: the French "Right to Disconnect" (that Spain followed in 2019) or the German "Self-Regulatory Model" (Secunda, 2019), they lack an specific focus on workloads. Some notable exceptions are the Swedish initiative that (already in 2013) passed legislation to regulate workloads[11] and the more recent proposal by the French Agency ANACT (Rousseau, 2017: 74-82) that is pushing to be integrated in collective agreements at big firms like Orange[12].

Meanwhile, the Japanese government has been, for many decades now, fighting with *karoshi* and the long work hours culture so prevalent in Japan (Takami, 2019a). In the last five years, the fight has intensified with some key initiatives like the "Act Promoting Measures to Prevent Death and Injury from Overwork" and the "Stress Check Program" (Kawakami & Tsutsumi, 2015; Takami, 2019c) that have paved the way to the most recent initiative, the so-called "Work Style Reform", put into effect in 2019 for big companies and to follow in 2020 for many others.

In this context, our research in Japan had aims to improve our understanding of the overwork/work intensification dynamics in increasingly digital, flexible and self-managed environments that are becoming more prevalent (globally), with the underlying goal of contributing to design better policies/guidelines to regulate overworking at different levels: *individual* level (i.e., what could workers do better?), *organizational* level (i.e., what could organizations do better?), *structural* level (i.e., what could governments and social dialogue do better?).

1.1. Self-management and the autonomy paradox

Autonomy has been linked with self-determination, freedom, control, choice, etc., all dimensions considered key for human wellbeing, both philosophically (e.g., Sen, 1999) and psychologically (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008). In the work domain, autonomy is also considered an essential component in many seminal motivation theories (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008; Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and in the Occupational Health Psychology domain, autonomy is considered a key resource

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[10] This same research suggested that although overwork and work intensification affect all occupations, there seems to be powerful and distinct effects for the so-called knowledge work professionals, the white collar professionals traditionally shielded from bad working conditions.
[11] Although it is less clear the impact that it has managed to achieve https://www.av.se/globalassets/filer/publikationer/foreskrifter/engelska/organisational-and-social-work-enviro nment-afs2015-4.pdf?hl=organisational%20and%20social%20work%20environment
[12] The former France Telecom, that suffered a public wave of suicides more than a decade ago

in the most popular psychosocial risk models (e.g., Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Siegrist, 1996). However, in the digital and flexible work environments, increasingly self-managed and boundaryless (Allvin, 2011), there seems to be a growing confusion: there is a need to discuss what should/should not be considered/defined as autonomy (or control) and subsequently the role that certain types and/or degrees of autonomy can play to protect worker's health.

More specifically, if we assume that management is, more and more, becoming self-management (Costea, Crump, & Amiridis, 2008; Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2012) and if this movement seems to imply more internalized demands and resources (Pérez-Zapata, Pascual, Álvarez-Hernández, & Collado, 2016) we need to be attentive to the emergence of more sophisticated, internalized health risks. A better understanding of one of those risks, the so-called "autonomy paradox" was the specific focus of our research effort in Japan, something that been already been found to be relevant in USA and Europe (Bredehöft, Dettmers, Hoppe, & Janneck, 2015; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Michel, 2012; Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016; Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2014; Vargas-Llave, Mandl, Weber, & Wilkens, 2020).

Even if, as psychosocial risk models suggest, autonomy has traditionally being considered a key enabler of health and wellbeing at work, the autonomy paradox suggests that, counterintuitively, the perceived autonomy (beyond its potential objectivity) might be a relevant driver of overwork/work intensification and then become a risk for worker's health. This is in line with occupational health research that discusses self-endangering behaviours and the potential dark side of autonomy (Dettmers, Deci, Baeriswyl, Berset, & Krause, 2016; Kubicek, Paškvan, & Bunner, 2017), but this might also be connected with more general societal trends and paradoxes around what some have called choice ideology (Salecl, 2011) and the societal myths of the entrepreneurial self (Pongratz & Voß, 2003; Rose, 1998).

The "autonomy paradox" can also, in terms of a critical management perspective, be connected with a variety of other terms like "practical autonomy" (Peters, Waterman, & Jones, 1982; Willmott, 1993), "responsible autonomy" (Friedman, 1977; Knights & Willmott, 2002), "caged discretion" (Lahera Sánchez, 2010; Muhr et al., 2012) and, more in general, to better understand the risks involved in what might be (at least partly) a delusional perception of control and autonomy that might be thought of as an obligation instead (Gerdenitsch, Kubicek, & Korunka, 2015; Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016; Wynn & Rao, 2019).

In summary, our hypothesis here is that in the increasingly digital and flexible work environments where self-management and empowerment are common, the key components of psychosocial risk models (demands and resources) seem to be becoming more internalized and blurred; and then, that these developments require a rethinking on how to assess and deal with these now (more) internalized psychosocial risks. Although, it could be argued that the effect of this internalization was already anticipated in the so-called *overcommitment* dimension in the "Effort-Reward imbalance" model of psychosocial risks developed by Siegrist (1996), this seems to have become much more relevant today, particularly among youngsters, where growing perfectionism might be

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/world/europe/france-telecom-suicides.html

connected with socio-political and economical trends (Curran & Hill, 2019). Similarly, this developments also seem to match well with the so-called "*performance based self-esteem*" (Hallsten, Josephson, & Torgén, 2005) that in turn has been connected with the surge in young people burnout[13] (Löve, Hagberg, & Dellve, 2011). All in all, it might be the case that precariousness and work intensification are getting internalized, as if they were personality traits, in line with what has been called "*insecure overachievers*" (Lupu & Empson, 2015).

2. Methods

The research originally aimed to be conducted using a mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) in a way that could contribute to generate synergies towards our main objective of advancing our understanding of the overwork/work intensification process in digital, flexible and self-managed working environments. Although we are currently involved in quantitative research using the KEIO Panel Data[14], our focus in this paper is the description of the methods and results of the *qualitative* part of the project.

This qualitative part benefited from easy access to specialized JILPT documentation, from the availability of translation services funded by JILPT and very particularly from the extensive (and very significant) discussions between the two researchers driving the project (one Japanese and one Spanish)[15]. The key primary data sources to prepare this article were the interviews that we held with key stakeholders (companies, workers/managers, unions and scholars) in the Greater Tokyo Area during the summer of 2019. The interviews were conducted by the two former researchers and were supported by a translator (Japanese-English). Although interviews were recorded, we also took detailed handwritten notes that were complemented with field notes right after.

A summary of the objectives of the research together with a short bio of the researchers were typically sent in the request for interviews. Although not many details are to be provided to keep confidentiality from companies and workers/managers, the companies have had previous interactions with JILPT and given its openness to participate in the research might probably be thought as "best in class", or at least more advanced, in terms of managing overworking and health at work. Interviews took place in the companies', union's and/or university premises or at convenient locations like cafes or restaurants and its duration was typically between 90-120 min. Almost all of them were conducted in Japanese (with professional translators).

Although the general objectives were sent in advance and we prepared scripts to structure the discussion, we also aimed to hold open-ended conversations trying to better adapt to the

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[13] This might be a relevant component in the puzzle of young people burnout https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work
[14] We used the KEIO panel data (https://www.pdrc.keio.ac.jp/en/paneldata/). Although that part of the research is an ongoing process, our initial analysis of the managers' health status suggest synergistic results with our assumptions regarding the autonomy paradox. In particular, there seems to be a paradoxical gap between manager's objective health status (using medical analysis and screenings) and their self-informed subjective health status that could be playing a relevant role in the autonomy paradox process.
[15] TAKAMI, Tomohiro and Pérez-Zapata, Oscar.

interviewees' line of reasoning. This was intentional to try to build rapport, limit preconceived ideas and increase our understanding; here we were inspired by the so-called grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), with a particular strength to bring new ideas. Of course, our design choice towards more flexible conversations might bring validity concerns, particularly in our interviews with company representatives, that were, arguably interested in protecting their reputation. Those are part of the assumed limitations of our design, that we tried to counterbalance with other stakeholders views (workers/managers, unions, scholars), frequently with opposing interests.

Given the limited number of interviews, we did not use qualitative software packages to support the interpretations and rather followed common "text analysis" strategies (Bright & O'Connor, 2007) looking for emerging aspects linked with our objectives. The thematic analysis emerged from readings/rereadings, listening/relistenings, handwritten notes taken during the interviews and from our field notes. All the verbatim presented in the results section come from transcripts and/or from the follow up emails (with some interviewees) and were selected based on its representativeness and vividness to illustrate the main discussions/conclusions that emerged from the interviews. Although all our interviews contributed to frame the project results, the focus of this paper on high-end qualified knowledge work and the so-called autonomy paradox advised us to concentrate our analysis on the discussion with the three companies, the two workers/managers and the interview with Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko, that were the interviews more focused on the overworking dynamics of the most qualified/high-end knowledge work[16].

Access to stakeholders was negotiated by Mr. TAKAMI Tomohiro, that managed to mobilize his network at JILPT (and beyond) to secure access. We now briefly give some additional details regarding the methods followed with each stakeholder (companies, workers/managers, unions, scholars). However, to protect the privacy of the companies and the interviewed workers/managers, we have used pseudonyms and only offer limited details.

a) Companies

We conducted interviews with HR representatives of three big companies relevant to characterize trends towards digital, flexible and self-managed knowledge work environments. While their real names have been disguised, all three are successful companies in their respective industries and the fact that they agreed to collaborate suggests that they might well be considered "Early Adopters/Advanced/Best-in-class cases" regarding their approach to deal with managing overwork and health in knowledge work contexts.

The first company is a leader in the insurance business (we will call it INSU) and the other two belong to the ICT industry, one being a systems integrator with a longer established history (we will call it SYSIN) and the other one a younger company with a more start-up approach/culture (we will call it MOBGAMES).

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[16] Hopefully we will be able to come back to our interview material to complement this analysis with the analysis of lower-end knowledge workers where overworking/work intensification is very much embedded in the fabric of precariousness and the so-called Black Companies (Konno 2012).

Before the interviews, a general summary of the research interests was sent in Japanese so that the companies could have a better understanding of the project and readiness could be improved. This summary anticipated our interests regarding three blocks of information: 1) contextual information about the company and general problems linked to work styles; 2) information about the connections between working styles and health in their companies; 3) initiatives linked with overworking and the so-called Work Style Reform area.

Two or three persons representing the companies were typically involved in the interviews. INSU sent two managers from the HR department; SYSIN sent the HR manager and a section manager specifically leading Diversity initiatives; MOBGAMES sent the HR manager, a second person working in the HR team and a (team leader) engineer. The three interviews were quite useful to better understand some recent developments of the Japanese Labor Market and of the Insurance and ICT industries in particular, together with their main priorities regarding the organization of work around self-management and their positioning regarding overwork and its regulation.

b) Workers/Managers

The workers/managers' inputs were collected with a mixture of formal and informal interviews. The interviews typically started with a brief introduction of the researchers and the goals of the research project itself. Some contextual questions regarding the background, education and professional career followed and then we typically engaged in a conversation regarding their organizational experiences around overworking. In particular, we were very fortunate to enjoy a very enriching interview and follow up emails with the creative director of a successful advertising company that represented the prototype of successful digital, flexible and self-managed work. And we also benefited of a more informal dinner with a Railway manager that helped us to understand the influence of the organizational culture and some of the particularities of young workers today in a more relaxed environment. Both interviews (two men in their forties) were organized through the personal networks of Mr. TAKAMI Tomohiro. We also had eight more informal conversations/dinners with a number of knowledge workers in Tokyo (four Europeans and four Japanese; five of them men and three women in their thirties-forties; working in Education, Tourism, Translation Services and ICT industries) that were certainly helpful to advance our understanding (although, their inputs were not formally included in the analysis that follows).

c) Unions

We conducted two meetings/interviews with unions, one with the "The Federation of Information and Communication Technology Service Workers of Japan" (ICTJ) and one with "NPO Posse" (an union with a particular focus on young workers). Apart from the interviews, both unions provided additional documentation that was particularly relevant to better understand the (challenging) situation of ICT workers working at the bottom of the pyramid (the less profitable part of the value chain). The meeting with ICTJ was an insightful exchange about the ICT sector in Japan and Spain/Europe, their current challenges and then a more specific discussion about overworking and health issues, including the relevancy of managing workloads. The meeting with NPO Posse concentrated in the more "under the radar" situation of the young generations, where not only overworking but an important precariousness seem to be driving many mental health issues.

Finally, we were privileged to hold two very important interviews with two expert scholars whose research is focus is the the ICT Industry from a sociology of work perspective (Prof. MIKAMOTO Satomi from Rikkyo University and Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko from Polytechnic University of Japan). Our conversation with Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko was later followed up with additional insightful exchanges through email. The discussion with the sociology of work scholars generally started with a discussion of our research interests, findings and research concerns going forward, always around the topic of overworking in IT companies and its drivers; its potential impacts and the role that resources/autonomy is playing/could play and about ways that employees and companies are trying to cope/regulate overworking.

We also held a formal interview with Mr. SHIMOMURA Hideo, a JILPT researcher, regarding the possibilities of career counseling to raise awareness and we also benefited from many informal conversations with a good number of JILPT members (for details, see acknowledgement section at the beginning of the article). Finally, we had two meetings with Prof. KURODA Sachiko and Prof. YAMAMOTO Isamu, two well known Labor Economists and experts in the study of overwork and health in Japan. Kuroda-san and Yamamoto-san were kind enough to discuss the general approach of the project and to offer many insightful comments to our initial findings of the quantitative part of the project (not included here).

3. Results

The results are organized in two sections by referring to the insights we got from 1) the conversations with the three companies ("Organizational Context" section) and 2) the fieldwork conducted with workers, unions and scholars ("Working Conditions" section).

3.1. Organizational Context

The results of the organizational context are further broken down into four subsections, corresponding with four major topics that emerged in our interviews: 1) the increasing relevance of self-management in the organization of work in Japanese companies; 2) their approach to manage overwork and workloads in the context of the "Work Style Reform"; 3) the influence of digital, flexible and self-managed contexts in overworking and specifically in the presence of workaholics; and finally 4) the (largely missing) framework and metrics to connect business, overwork and health.

3.1.1.   Increasing relevance of *self-management* in Japanese companies

A first significant dimension for our research objectives was mapping the companies' attitudes towards *self-management* as a core management feature. Specifically, the first company, anonymized as INSU, is a big corporation that operates in the more traditional industry of Insurance (the company is more than a century old) and its movement towards self-management seems a more

recent development, as part of the ongoing adaption to changing regulations in the Insurance industry. The other two companies, anonymized as SYSIN (founded in the seventies and focused on providing IT services) and MOBGAMES (a younger, more *start-up* like, internet company), both seem to have been empowering employees and promoting self-management for much longer. SYSIN seems to balance self-management with more structured processes (maybe growing with age and size), while at MOBGAMES self-management seems a more integrated feature of the organizational culture.

From our interviews with INSU, SYSIN and MOBGAMES, they all seem to recognize the need for their respective organizations to change and adapt to what nowadays is increasingly known as VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) environments, which require changes in the way work gets organized. In different degrees, the three companies seem to be moving towards more Westernized management styles with an increased focus in promoting the active participation of each individual worker in the organization of work. This could be summarized with "umbrella" words such as empowerment and self-management or with somewhat more specific words that emerged in our conversations such as "*workers thinking by themselves*", "*more active participation*", "*more awareness*" and "*flexibility*".

Even the century old company, INSU, highlights the increasing relevance of self-management and individual responsibility for their immediate future. In INSU's words, they want employees "*to be active*" and "*think for themselves*" and in the digital environments like teleworking, "*manage the way they work, on their own*", something that they recognize also requires changes in manager's management styles.

> "Our basic policy, in dealing with HR, is that we want our employees to *think for themselves* about what they want to do and what they have to do. We want them *not to be passive but more active* in trying to send out whatever messages they want to send out... to think for themselves" [...] "We are now facing the challenge of how to make our employees more active than passive and second how we could improve the performance of each individual employee without prolonging working hours" (INSU)

> "In the past, employees were managed by managers... but when working from home, then they have to do time management and *manage the way they work, on their own* [...]; the problem is with managers not having the confidence that employees are working [...]" (INSU)

Similar messages emerge at SYSIN ("*thinking for themselves*", "*changing manager's styles*") but in this case with maybe a more thorough reflection on the cultural challenges that imply changing employees mindsets, something we will come back to.

> "Sending out the message that *employees themselves have to think on themselves* how to maximize performance... and providing learning opportunities to facilitate. Saying it is necessary to *think* about this." (SYSIN)

"Need to change management styles... many (managers) still want to do things (by themselves), instead of managing... Managing people is about delegating authority and many managers don't know how to do that. Need to change mindsets of managers themselves [...], but that is the direction" (SYSIN)

At MOBGAMES, the youngest of the three companies, they see themselves as distinct from traditional Japanese companies and much closer to what we would expect to find in other global internet companies. This is a company where technical expertise and creativity play a particularly important role, something that fits well with self-management being a core part of the organizational culture. The scarcity of technical talent also seems to give workers a competitive edge that enables them to choose the most rewarding conditions: a mixture of challenging work, benefits, autonomy, flexibility and development where the word *freedom* is highlighted.

"We are different from traditional Japanese companies [...] they believe that people cannot be trusted [...], but no creative work can be done if you follow the traditional style. [...] self-management is about understanding and awareness in managers and employees" (MOBGAMES)

"These (workers) are experts... Acquiring this type of talent is competitive... particularly in internet services... Employees are always looking for the best opportunity for them, they know how to grasp the best for them... the environment they want, challenging work, good benefits, autonomy, flexible working style... at the same time that they develop their own talent and abilities. [...] They look for more *freedom*, space, time, appearance... They want to be in a very free environment... with, of course, certain rules... like meeting customers, etc." (MOBGAMES)

3.1.2. Managing overwork and workloads in the context of the "Work Style Reform"

Moving one step further into our research interests, when asked specifically about their strategies to manage overwork and workloads, none of the three companies had specific plans about managing workloads or the volume of work per-se. With some differences that are mentioned below, they mostly seen to be adapting to the working time legal framework of the Work Style Reform.

Their initiatives to manage overwork are framed as part of more *general* business initiatives towards working better, in a more efficient way that includes individual responsibility and self-management. This seems to be the case of the "Work Stocktaking" process at INSU (a top-down initiative to reassess what each employee should be working on) or the "Management by Objectives" process at SYSIN, that, however, don't seem agile enough to deal with the changing nature of the ICT Industry (unexpected travel, changing specifications...).

"If I have to review my own work, I make my own judgment, then I report that to my manager, then my manager reports if that is feasible and then the manager provides support or it is reviewed in small groups. The process started two years ago as a top-down initiative to do this in all the sections" (INSU)

"Every 6 months, we will reach an agreement on objectives with employees [...] In this process, it can be identified what can be/cannot be done. This way we manage the volume of work [...] But looking at the IT industry, we also encounter unexpected travel or changed specifications... and then, individual overwork concentrates on certain individuals, [...] that is the nature of IT industry." (SYSIN)

At SYSIN, when further probing whether it is possible to control those "natural" features of the IT Industry that might drive overwork and workloads, the Work Style Reform is perceived as having an important impact across the ICT industry, something that it is considered to also play a role in negotiating work with customers. The references to volume of work only emerge when we specifically use an specific (and leading) question, which suggests that more awareness is probably needed.

"Several factors... trends of society, work-life balance emergence, policy government to reduce working hours, more strict view of long working hours (by the society), increased diversity (they all have played a role) [...] In the interaction with peers from the industry, the vision of the long hours started to be stern" (SYSIN)

"We are negotiating with customers to adjust the work volume. That happens. On top of that, it is the responsibility of line managers to control the stress conditions and physical conditions [...]; we educate our managers and employees so that they are aware." (SYSIN)

"The Work Style Reform is also promoted by our customers..., together with partners, little by little, changes are felt... customers also promote and look for collaboration...; changes are in the society." (SYSIN)

The case of SYSIN is particularly interesting since they have created a special initiative/team, the "Work Style Reform Promotion Office", that aims to integrate the reduction of long work hours into a comprehensive strategy for increasing diversity, inclusion and engagement. For them, this is essential to attract and keep valued employees and that seems to be having a measurable impact already.

"[...] Very soon, it is going to be very important to fight the labor shortage of employees [...] First, to maximize capability of current employees... fatigue or *burnout*, resulting in disease or sickness should be avoided; second, values of new employees have started to change [...], it is not only about reducing long working hours, but about increasing fulfillment and achieving smoother recruiting activities." (SYSIN)

"Employees now (after the set initiatives linked with the Work Style Reform) find easier to take days off, the number of days have increased, the paid holidays have increased and the reasons to take them are starting to be more varied [...]" (SYSIN)

3.1.3. Managing *workaholics* in a digital and self-managed context, an ongoing challenge

Only MOBGAMES, the internet company, seems ready to recognize some of the more emergent challenges/risks linked to combining overwork and self-management in increasingly digital and flexible environments, so this section is mostly based on MOBGAMES inputs. As they blatantly recognized, the new environment does bring challenges ("*we have a lot of workaholics*"), something that stays as a challenge to be addressed.

> "[...] yes, we have a lot of *workaholics* [...]. In 2017, we told them that we were going to control how many hours they worked, but many resented because they wanted to work more [...]. The idea is that each person understands the importance in self-management, but it is not that easy; there is a need for experience and education. What we are doing is starting with top management, so that they can influence their subordinates." (MOBGAMES)

When we specifically asked about the relevance of workloads and intensity (and not only the working hours), they acknowledge the importance of managing workloads and intensity, but their approach merges with dealing with long hours. For them, a better management of overwork related issues needs awareness and organization of the tasks by managers, self-management abilities of employees together and to take into account the potential conflict of interests of managers vs. employees (i.e., the short term benefits of intensity in terms of results that are critical for managers/departments).

> "We acknowledge the issue. What we have done in the company is, in order to avoid imposing too much intensity, is to have the management understand how many hours are necessary to deliver a type of service... (e.g., the amount of hours necessary to create an internet service), in order to do that, the CTO will seat in a meeting to make a decision regarding work hours or workload. If management does not know, we will end up having people to work with more intensity..." (MOBGAMES)

> "[but there is also the case] of employees bad at self-management, that love the work, have a high degree responsibility and become workaholic, delivering results and good performance and because managers like the results, they leave them alone..." (MOBGAMES)

Delving into this dynamic, they recognize the risks that the potential *freedom* that comes with self-management might mean "*losing control*" and also highlighting how the underlying dynamics of a long hours culture might become problematic to attract the right talent.

> "Because they are free, they can become workaholic... they can *lose control* but naturally they love their work, that is true... Up to 2017, the work hours tended to be longer and longer, but because of the acquisition of such talent has become more and more difficult, then we as a company need to think how to improve work hours, how to improve the work environment [...]. We had some incident at the PR agency DENTSU and Japanese society became aware of work related issues... so, in our company, starting in 2017, we started to engage fully as a company to try to reduce working hours." (MOBGAMES)

There was also a particularly interesting reflection regarding the need to educate the workforce in enforcing (structural) limits/rules, starting with the chairman vision:

> "[One of the stories that I would like to share with you was what our chairman said...] "Yes, I understand that many people want to have the freedom to work as much as they want, but look at F1 racing, the race to determine the fastest has also the most strict regulation. That means that even with that regulation you can still be the fastest in the world. Same here, under this constraint, regulation or internal rules... we can still achieve our mission and the highest business goals. This was a very high impactful story from the chairman." (MOBGAMES).

3.1.4. Missing frameworks and metrics to link business, overworking and health

A final result that became obvious after our interviews with the three companies is that they all seem to be lacking a more explicit framework about how business, overworking and health might be connecting. Companies seemed reluctant to provide many details or specific data about their relationship between overworking and health, but most of the initiatives seemed to concentrate on complying with current regulations (e.g., "Stress Management Check") and/or with more shallow Corporate Wellness Programs, that deviate from a root cause approach.

Although some of the companies seem more ready to recognize the challenges dealing with self-management in the increasingly "boundaryless" digital environments (particularly, in the case of MOBGAMES), companies did not seem ready to go to the next level and measure the potential interconnection between business, overworking and health. There seems to be a failure to collect and integrate business and health metrics that look as a necessary step to support more proactive strategies and to build potential business cases (cost/benefit analysis) that could be used to regulate overwork and work intensity, among others.

> "We have lots of KPIs..., satisfaction levels, we visualize employees and managers... and these metrics compared with productivity as well [...] Also, we have HR business partners that will be dispatched to different departments as liaisons" (MOBGAMES)

> "About health KPIs [...] so far, we don't have, but we follow the satisfaction level... and from experience, the lower satisfaction can come from lower health; we also track working hours and that is used to send alerts to occupational doctors." (MOBGAMES)

Even if they keep collecting relevant information on a periodic basis, they seem to miss a comprehensive framework that could help to connect things further down.

> "There are two things we do..., (from time to time) HR surveys to identify risks, then the manager is also in a position to understand. We also conduct leadership workshops to be more aware of the behaviour of subordinates [...] what are the symptoms, what the issues... a list of symptoms that need to be aware of...; if something like that is seen... report to the doctor. We try to provide specific rules/cases for them to follow." (MOBGAMES)

"[...] (with the surveys), certain questions can reveal the type of work pattern and try to focus on those items and if concern arises, they can see an occupational doctor...; before doctors, there are also counselors [...]" (MOBGAMES)

Although workers are supported by a number of occupational experts (counselors, occupational doctors) and "Corporate Wellness" programs, the whole approach seems to be more driven to "alleviate" the harm than to manage the potential root causes. A good illustration was when we asked whether they try to link sleep initiatives and stress.

"There are four things (we look at): physical exercise, eating, sleeping and mental aspects... we try to improve those four aspects of health. We have workshops on how to improve sleep, find the best pillow, etc... a "sleeping skill" seminar... about high quality sleeping... sleeping is an art [...]. We have in-house clinical psychologists... with advice regarding exercise, eating, sleeping..." (MOBGAMES)

"We don't link sleep and stress... [...] On the other side, bad quality of sleeping (or food), this can impact productivity..." (MOBGAMES)

3.2. Working conditions

In this second section we focus on the interviews and conversations that we had with workers/managers and four additional insightful meetings: two with two "sociology of work" scholars (Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko from Polytechnic University of Japan and Prof. MIKAMOTO Satomi from Rikkyo University) and two more with unions, one focused on the ICT Industry (The Federation of Information and Communication Technology Service Workers of Japan) and the other one on young workers in particular (NPO Posse).

In the presentation of results that follows, we focus on the three topics more strongly aligned with our research objectives[17]: 1) the overwork/work intensification drivers of digital/knowledge work and the discussion about its global and/or Japanese origin; 2) the ambiguities that surround overwork/work intensification and its impacts in health/wellbeing, concentrating on the role that motivation and control/autonomy can play to moderate/mediate health impacts; 3) the role of culture and awareness in preventing overwork/work intensification.

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[17] From the interviews, it became very clear that there is a need to dive in the increasing precariousness and overwork/work intensification at the lower-end of the Labour Market both in the ICT Industry and in the economy as a whole (linked to the so-called "Black Companies"). According to our interviews this seems to be particularly prevalent at the lower level of the ICT value chain and among young workers. The impact on young workers seems to be playing a critical role in the Japanese fertility crisis, something aligned with Spanish developments. This deserves a more specific and comprehensive research effort than the one we are able to provide in this paper; around these issues, we do hope to have the opportunity (in future analysis) to expand on the insights we got from our meetings with Prof. Mikamoto and the two unions.

3.2.1. Overwork/work intensification in digital/knowledge work, a complex process with global and Japanese drivers

The findings in this subsection are very influenced by the meeting/interview we had with Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko and her vision of the key drivers of overwork in a knowledge work context. We find Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko's insights particularly valuable because she is a scholar very actively involved in researching overwork in knowledge work environments, but also because of her former working experience at an American multinational in the Japanese ICT industry.

According to Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko, the current overwork/work intensification of knowledge work in Japan should be understood in the context of three major *global* trends (globalization, technological innovation and deregulation) and one more local/Japanese development, the so-called discretionary labor system[18]. Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko also highlighted five specific factors that would have played a prominent role in the expansion of overwork in knowledge work in Japan: 1) the *nature of knowledge work*, where outcomes/results can always be improved, something that enables perfectionism and overworking; 2) the *expansion of discretionary labor styles*; 3) the *increased density/intensity of work that technology* enables; 4) the *strong corporate cultures* of many companies and 5) finally, what she called the *common senses*, the deeply-rooted cultural mechanisms ingrained in the Japanese culture that emerge as common senses, mainly expectations and assumptions that frame worker's choices, conditioning what seems natural and reasonable.

This last factor was the main focus of our conversations, mainly because we understood that it might be understudied and because a study of the cultural commonalities and differences of overworking in Japan and the West might be helpful to better understand the nature of overworking as a whole. In terms of the Japanese cultural *common senses* that might affect overworking, she stressed the role that *harmony* in the relationships and a *strong responsibility towards the group* seem to play.

> "I think that overwork in the knowledge industry consists of two problems. The first problem is the increased probability of overwork due to globalization, technological innovation and deregulation including expanding the application of discretionary labor system. The second problem is that knowledge workers undertake their overwork as a *voluntary choice* which is "natural" and "reasonable" for them." (Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko)

> "This framework may be the same in Europe. But I think that the *common sense* that allows workers to undertake their overwork as a voluntary choice is different in Europe and Japan. In Europe, *elitist aspiration* and "*strong*" organizational culture of Western companies may support overwork as a voluntary choice. On the other hand, in Japan, a unique "*responsibility/equality sense*" supports overwork as a voluntary choice. [Additionally], the *image* characteristic of the creative professions may support overwork as a voluntary choice in both, Europe and Japan." (Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko)

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[18] Something that is consistent with other commentators suggesting that the discretionary work system is responsible for increasing overwork and producing long working hours without overtime pay. https://www.forbes.com/sites/adelsteinjake/2018/03/01/what-you-need-to-know-about-japans-controversial-proposed-labor-reform-laws/#3bfa350e9dd0

This strong sense of responsibility towards the group that is known to be an essential feature in Japanese management (Davies & Ikeno, 2011; Ouchi, 1981) seems still valid across companies and sectors, at least in the comparison with Western management approaches. In all our formal and informal interviews with workers/managers, it was highlighted as a key factor in pushing everyone beyond their (*healthy*) limits. These deep-rooted Japanese cultural assumptions seem to have made the possibility of saying "no" or just questioning expectations as something sort of *inconceivable* (as was mentioned in several conversations).

3.2.2. Overwork, self-management, motivation, control/autonomy and health

In this section we want to argue more extensively about what really was our main focus: advancing our understanding of the potential role of the so-called autonomy paradox. Towards that aim, we concentrate on three interviews that were particularly relevant (the creative director, the railway manager and Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko).

A useful way to present the results is by referring to two distinct "ideal-type" scenarios that correspond with two major alternative interpretations (connecting overwork and health) and that we have termed the "*engagement*" and the "*internalized control*" ideal types: 1) The first one, the *engagement* type, would suggest that when overwork is driven by intrinsic motivation, workers would be protected from fatigue and illness; 2) the second one, the *internalized control* type, would rather argue that intrinsic motivation might alternatively make workers forget (or even fool them) about the impact that work might have in their bodies and specifically in fatigue and illness.

This discussion cannot really be separated from a larger conversation regarding what can be/cannot be considered intrinsic motivation, control/autonomy and the associated discussions regarding the degree of control/autonomy and self-determination that workers seem to experience. Let's illustrate these two scenarios in detail using some transcripts from our interviews.

a. Engagement type: intrinsic motivation, control and meaning/purpose protect from fatigue and illness

The *engagement* ideal type is the position particularly well defended by our creative director. The main assumptions here are that meaningful work would set the knowledge worker (or more accurately, the creative worker in this particular context) in some kind of flow state, where he/she loses track of time. According to the creative director, this type environment, conditioned by intrinsic motivation, would protect from fatigue in peaks of intense work that are expected to be followed by a resting period.

Interestingly, in the meaningful context that the creative director describes, what might be commonly considered as drivers of health risks (i.e., job demands) are reframed as useful tools (i.e., job resources). Let's refer to three particularly salient reinterpretations/reframings of the creative director: *tight deadlines*, *the inability to disconnect* and *limiting work hours*.

First, for the creative director, "***tight deadlines***" (a common metric of work intensity in European Working Conditions Surveys and generally considered a work stressor that puts health at risk), are a functional mechanism in the creative labor process. Specifically, our interviewee explains *how*

deadlines would work as a limit for the intensity of efforts themselves, so in this way, deadlines are reframed from being a source of intensity to a resource to protect from intensity (from *source to resource*). However, in a closer examination, this interpretation seems to depend on a fragile equilibrium, since it seems that (frequent) events such as a *non expected extension in deadlines* or a *redefinition of the goals* by the customer could break the initially considered virtuous cycle and provoke fatigue.

> "When I have meaningful work but quite *tight deadlines* to accomplish the project, actually, that's when I can do a good job. That the deadline is imminent means that I know how far I should go. For example, if I do my best for three more days, my job will go out into the world, so I can get the job done with a high level of motivation and concentration [...] Certainly there is fatigue, but it is a type of fatigue that can be controlled, because I know I can rest soon. However, if the work that I thought would end at a specific point needs to be continued, or if "something" was broken due to a big correction by a client, I lost control and got tired all at once." (Creative director)

Second, "***the inability to disconnect***" (something that has been the target of recent regulation in European countries such as France or Spain, also looking to protect workers) or thinking about work outside work is also not necessarily problematic for our creative director. According to him, thinking about work when not at work is a *by-product* of the work devotion and engagement that a worker might enjoy and an important source of ideas for creative work. So, here again, it seems that something that seems a *source* of intensity and/or a side effect ("not being able to disconnect") becomes a relevant *resource* for creativity, productivity and engagement, at least for someone as devoted to his work as our creative director.

> "I don't think there are many problems (with thinking about work when not in work). I'm *never tired* of thinking too much about my work even in private (time). If anything, I naturally became like that, *not good or bad*. I think that various people will experience that if you keep thinking at the desk in search of a better idea, the idea will come to mind even when you are taking a shower or running. I think it's stronger than people [...] However, this may be a stressful life for some people [...] Even with the same task, some people do not come up with a good idea, and that task becomes a source of stress. For some other people/jobs, the spirit of challenge can be stimulated, leading to a fun time where ideas can be the output [...] I think our job is such a special job " (Creative Director)

Third, "***limiting hours***" (another traditional target of policies to regulate overwork, commonly considered as a health promoting policy) is also perceived to be counterproductive in a creative context. The creative director defends that a strict limit on the work hours without further consideration can mean a *hard stop* that breaks flow and productivity. His reasoning is that once the worker is able to start working again, he/she might need comparatively more effort to regain the necessary flow and productivity level and get the job done. If the previous two cases (tight deadlines and inability to disconnect) could be thought as a reframing exercise "from a source to a resource", this could be framed as the other way around, "from a resource to a source", where something designed to be a resource (a hard limit on long hours) ends up becoming a source of deferred intensity.

A related discussion is the unpacking of the experience of stress depending on the specific circumstances and particularly whether stress emerges as a side effect of necessary processes (e.g., collaboration) or badly designed processes (e.g., endless meetings). Also, the appraisal of whether work stress is either "good" or "bad" gets complicated since, as we just saw, subjective individual perception seems to play a critical role. Subjective appraisals depend on a variety of factors (like the availability of skills) that make the worker perceive the situation in opposite ways that seem to influence health and wellbeing: for example as an *opportunity* to improve/learn or as another *routine* job that requires attention.

> "Is stress good? I think the answer is both yes and no. It depends on the quality of the stress. The stress of collaborating with various staff members and clients for a long time to pursue good creative work is absolutely necessary [...] However, the stress of not being able to feel productivity is bad. For example, when there are endless meetings without the right agenda, or when the quality of the creative work suffers due to circumstances." (Creative director)

> "[...] it is difficult to determine the boundary between good and bad stress. For example, when there is a modification request from clients. That's certainly stressful, but some people think of it as an opportunity to turn a weak point that they didn't realize into a strong point, so that they can improve their creative skills. Those who have skills can be said to be those who can get along well with such stress [...] However, on the other hand, there are people who think that it is a simple task that must be followed, and then work with great stress." (Creative director)

When more specifically probed about which aspects workers should be able to control to avoid "bad stress", the creative director expands his answers to include "*right tasks/jobs*", "*reasonable bosses*", "*making their own decisions*" and the relevance to achieve and find "*respect*".

> "The first thing that I think it's important to control is how you can work without *unreasonable bosses*. If they are given the *right job* by their boss and can act with their *own thoughts*, they will be able to get a sense of control from an early stage in their career, even in a position like theirs. In this industry, working people belong to people rather than companies." (Creative Director)

> "The next thing is how to make a career collecting achievements and *respect*. For sales, they should collect achievements such as sales from clients, and for production, they should collect achievements related to awards and major measures." (Creative Director)

Having the right relationships and atmosphere to protect from overwork/work intensification were also particularly highlighted in our meeting with the manager at a Railway company, a much less creative work environment.

> "I think that with the *right* relationships and atmosphere, working hours and workloads should not be that problematic. However the meaning of *right* relationships is very difficult. Every worker has different set of values. One worker feels good, but another worker feels

bad in the same work environment. The right relationships and atmosphere means thinking of members of the organization." (Railway Manager)

Lastly, as a final comment before delving into the second ideal type scenario, it is important to highlight that our creative director recognizes that the engagement scenarios referred in this section would be *far from common*. Specifically, he suggested that 90% of the projects could be considered as futile -with no meaning- readily lacking the necessary control. According to him, lack of control is particularly common in less "value adding" production positions, that would be more like *sweatshops* (in his own words).

b. Internalized control type: intrinsic motivation can fool your mind, disregard your body and become a risk factor in fatigue/illness

To characterize this second section, the *internalized control* ideal type, it is interesting to get back to some of the comments made by Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko that would add to our understanding of the many other knowledge work contexts with maybe less creative/artistic specifications, and where getting a meaningful enough work might be even more complicated. In fact, in this case, the words used to frame and label the situation are not words like engagement or meaningfulness, but seem closer to work intensification dynamics: "under pressure", "excessive work" or "burnout"*,* together with the particular Japanese "sense of responsibility" (Davies & Ikeno, 2011) and the commonly shared expectation of overworking in certain industries like design/IT engineering.

> "They are constantly *under pressure* of overwork because they are not "*artists*" but "*commercial designers/engineers*" employed by business enterprises. And they say that they did not come up with an option to refuse *excessive work* during the ongoing process of *burnout* (because of their "*sense of responsibility*"). They also say that they thought hard work was essential to design/IT engineering work because of the characteristic image of the creative professions." (Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko)

Beyond the former point raised by the creative director about the spread of the engagement type, we are interested in adding another layer of complexity: our railway manager offers the reflection that we might *lack awareness* and that it might be possible to be developing harmful effects (i.e., for your health) that you don't notice. In our conversation, he would go on to suggest that mind and body might not go together and that while the mind might be fine because of potentially interesting job features like motivation, sense of responsibility, challenge... the physical health might be suffering at the same time. In a follow up email, he would explicitly stated:

> "[...] but I think that physical anomalies will appear in the body even if you don't feel (emotionally) overworked, if you are forced to work hard." (Railway manager)

When questioned why this might be the case (a worker potentially not realizing about the potential harm), he suggested that even if one might suffer some symptoms like headaches, we tend to come to terms about illness only when there is a physical examination/medical diagnosis. This can be linked to our core research interests, the so-called *autonomy paradox* and the role that choice,

autonomy or perceived autonomy/choice might play in the process and also how this perception might change after serious health issues emerge. According to the research of Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko with designers and IT engineers, this choice would be linked with cultural *common senses*:

> "Designers/IT engineers who experienced *burnout* look back on the past and say, "There was no autonomy". But at the same time, they say that they *couldn't feel so* during the ongoing process of burnout." (Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko)

> "Their overwork was a voluntary choice that is felt "natural" and "reasonable" for them. It can be said that *common sense* which is "natural" and "reasonable" for Japanese designers/IT engineers (the unique "sense of responsibility" and the image characteristic of the creative professions) is the device which transform worker's voluntary choice to overwork." (Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko)

Needless to say that even if the autonomy paradox might play an important role in certain contexts, this does not necessarily question the well established assumption that a lack of autonomy (as argued in the introduction, a key human need) is generally expected to be harmful for health. This is in line with the statements of our creative director when referring to a publicly well known case of a young Japanese woman suicide at the global advertising agency DENTSU[19], that became very notorious in Japanese society. From his views, the suicide cannot be understood without consideration of a range of factors that include the position (sales), the age (young), the gender (woman), the culture (traditional) and the context of digital work (not well known in terms of job demands...).

> "She was in *sales* (a position commonly referred as a "sandwich", in the middle of many pressures with not much control), she was *young* and a *woman* in a more transactional type of job with traditional advertisers... in a context of *digital* work where the work volume or the end was not easy to visualize... partly because of the lack of expertise (particularly from managers themselves) in the digital environment..." (Creative director).

3.2.3. Awareness and the role of culture in preventing overwork/work intensification

Finally and more briefly, we were also interested in the discussion of how to potentially regulate overwork/work intensification in the digital, flexible and self-management contexts where the so-called autonomy paradox might emerge with a higher probability.

Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko suggested that apart from working on reducing the *external sources* of overwork/work intensification, there is a need to deal with the deep-rooted cultural aspects (what she refers to as "relativize common sense").

> "The first approach is to reduce the probability of overwork as much as possible in terms of work volume and work density. Easy deregulation is definitely dangerous, especially in the

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[19]

https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/10/19/business/suicide-overworked-woman-24-prompts-ad-giant-dentsu-trim-overtime-hours/#.XhHTdxtryUk

absence of the second approach. The second approach is to *relativize common sense* [...]" (Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko)

"I believe that *relativizing the common sense* specific to Japanese workplaces through the following two initiatives is a fundamental measure to prevent overwork in the Japanese knowledge industry: *1. Investigate various cases, clarify and publicize the details of each case*; *2. Reveal the "strangeness" of common sense in terms of international comparison.*" (Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko)

Linked to these aspects, it is relevant to refer to the discussion that we had with Mr. SHIMOMURA Hideo from JILPT about the possibilities of using counseling as a potential source of self-awareness that might eventually become important to question the deep-rooted cultural assumptions (or to relativize common sense, if we want to use Prof. MIYAJI's terminology).

From that conversation, it just did not seem that companies, managers and/or employees are ready to play the awareness game to their last consequences. Out of that conversation, counseling seems to have been, for the most part, co-opted by the business objectives so it would be difficult to use it as a tool to become more aware of the dangers linked to overworking, at least before companies themselves see the benefit of becoming more aware themselves.

4. Discussion

Now, we want to get back to our main results and discuss them in the context of our original objectives and related research, trying to highlight some relevant implications for both researchers and practitioners. First of all, just to clarify, our intention in this paper was never have to address a comprehensive discussion of overwork in Japan (for recent reviews, see: Ono, 2018; Takami, 2019a; Takami, 2019b; Takami, 2019c) nor on the *global* drivers of overwork/work intensification (for an introduction: Burchell et al., 2002; Green, 2006; Pérez Zapata, 2019).

What we aim was to advance our understanding of the (global) overwork/work intensification dynamics by looking for common challenges around overwork in the increasingly digital, flexible and self-managed environments (what we might summarize as boundaryless). In particular, we aimed to 1) better understand the perception of different actors regarding workloads vs. working time as overwork drivers; 2) whether the risks linked to the so-called autonomy paradox found in other international research might also be relevant to Japan; and overall 3) to draw some implications regarding the prevention of overwork in the increasingly digital, flexible and self-managed environments.

This is what we intend to do next, a discussion of our main results focused on three major implications for the regulation of overwork in boundaryless work: 1) the need to put more attention to managing workloads/work intensity; 2) the need to rethink autonomy as a double-edged sword; and 3) the need to increase our awareness, individually and culturally.

4.1. Need to put more attention on managing workloads/work intensity

A first result from our fieldwork in Japan was that the different governmental policies, and particularly the most recent "Work Style Reform" seem to be having a real impact, at least in the (probably progressive) Japanese companies that we interviewed. Even when the companies did show some criticism to the governmental initiatives (e.g., regarding the lack of flexibility of the "Work Style Reform" or the potential lack of fit of the questionnaire used in the "Stress Check Program"), we found good sensitiveness and alignment to the "Work Style Reform" and to the underlying intent to change the Japanese long working hours culture. Interestingly, the interviewed companies did not look to implement the "Work Style Reform" in isolation, but to integrate it in bigger business initiatives to improve performance/efficiency (e.g., INSU) or to create more diverse/inclusive/attractive cultures (e.g., SYSIN).

From the interviews, it seems that Japanese workplaces are experiencing the same global trends towards increased individualization, flexibilization and self-management in the organization of work. Although our fieldwork was certainly limited in scope, this was found not only in leading companies in the ICT Industry, but in significant companies belonging to more traditional industries like the insurance business. This would match previous research discussing the *westernization* of human resource policies in Japan (Blahová, Haghirian, & Pálka, 2015; Morris, Hassard, Delbridge, & Endo, 2019). In the foreseeable future, as more Japanese companies potentially move towards more global management styles centered around individualization, flexibility and self-management, more attention we should be about the changing nature of the occupational health risks and overwork in particular.

More specifically, linked with the increasing relevance of workloads as a key driver of overwork/work intensity and work stress (discussion of work intensification in the introduction), a first outcome from our interviews with the companies (INSU, SYSIN, MOBGAMES) and the unions (ICTJ and NPO Posse) is that current policies, including the recent "Work Style Reform" seem to be too focused on the duration of the work and not enough on the effort/workloads during that duration.

This, however, could be argued that it is, in general, no different in Japan than globally. Some early initiatives targeting the regulation of the workloads have been emerging in Europe (see introduction the Swedish and French cases) but they seem to be getting only limited traction, although more through research is needed. As we also argued in our introduction, the regulation of the workloads/work intensity is increasingly important to manage the harmful effects of overworking in the digital, flexible and self-managed knowledge work contexts where many regulations have dissipated (i.e., the boundaryless work arena). In addition, apart from workloads being increasingly unregulated, they seem to be (in many cases) increasingly internalized, something linked to our discussion of the autonomy paradox in the following section.

4.2. Need to rethink autonomy as a double-edged sword

International research is suggesting the increasing relevance of the so-called "autonomy paradox" to drive overwork and work intensification dynamics (Bredehöft et al., 2015; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Michel, 2012; Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016; Putnam et al., 2014; Vargas-Llave et al., 2020) and this was in fact our main specific research interest in Japan: trying to understand the potential relevance of the autonomy paradox and to advance our understanding of this (seemingly) global dynamic in increasingly digital, flexible and self-managed environments.

Beyond the complexities surrounding the assessment of autonomy, our research in Japan also suggests that just because something *seems* autonomous/your choice (and then automatically becomes your responsibility) doesn't mean it is. Although, it could be argued that this is not exactly new, the increased flexibility and the callings to self-management and to "become yourself" (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Salecl, 2011) in the digital new world of work seem to make this risk higher than ever before. Our assumption that the global ICT Industry had been anticipating these challenges (for longer) explains why our fieldwork in Japan was more focused in this industry.

One of the companies we interviewed, MOBGAMES, the younger internet company, blatantly summarized the conundrum "*we have a lot of workaholics*" and "*because they are free, they can become workaholic... they can lose control, but naturally they love their work, that is true [...]*", already suggesting that the dynamics linked with the "autonomy paradox", seem to emerge in Japan as well. Our insightful interviews with the creative director and with Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko, enable us to discuss deeper using the two ideal type scenarios that we presented in our results: what we called the "engagement" and the "internalized control" ideal types.

The *engagement* ideal type represented the promises of autonomy and self-management, the favorable scenario for health and productivity; this is the win-win situation. Here, as defended by the creative director, the assumption is that given the right circumstances (i.e., intrinsic motivation, meaning, autonomy and other favorable working conditions), workers could be protected from fatigue and illness. This is aligned with the work engagement literature that has been capitalized by the JD-R model of psychosocial risks (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and with classic literature connecting creativity and intrinsic motivation (Amabile, 1985). On the other side, from the interview, we could imply that this engagement situation might well be "exception to the rule", maybe feasible for only a few employees (less than 10%, according to our creative director). Even with that, and from a critical perspective, it could question whether work engagement can be sustained, protecting health and productivity, or if it might eventually drive future burnout (Maricuțoiu, Sulea, & Iancu, 2017; Rahmouni Elidrissi & Courpasson, 2019).

Independently of that discussion, the description of the engagement type by the creative director is helpful to advance the conversation about how demands and resources, using the common terminology of JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), might blur in the experience of overwork. Our interview with the creative director offered us some specific examples of how demands and resources might exchange roles: 1) *tight deadlines*, a common measure of work intensity, could be, for the creative director, a necessary evil to achieve productivity and goals "[*That the deadline is imminent means that I know how far I should go*]", or in other words a traditional job demand (a

source of intensity) is perceived as a welcome limit, a resource; 2) in the case of the *inability to disconnect,* regularly perceived as a negative side effect (and/or as an additional source of intensity), gets interpreted as playing an important role in the generation of creative ideas (reframed as a resource) "[*I'm never tired of thinking too much about my work even in private (time). If anything, I naturally became like that, not good or bad*]"; 3) finally, a hard limit on working hours (that could be thought as a resource) could break the creative process (flow) and become a deferred source of intensity.

This findings can be connected with the discussion around *eustress* and *distress* (good and bad stress coined by Selye) and more specifically to the literature about challenge-hindrance approach to stress (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000) that basically suggest the relevance of *subjective* appraisals to have positive or negative outcomes, particularly in terms of health. However, independently of the influence of the stressor (subjective) appraisal, recent research seems to suggest that certain stressors (and in particular our work intensity), would have a negative impact on health either in a curvilinear and/or linear fashion (Gerich, 2017; Gerich & Weber, 2020). And this connects well with our autonomy paradox thesis where the so-called challenge stressors, even when positively appraised might bring harm for health.

On the other side, what we called the *internalized* ideal type represents the risks of autonomy and self-management, an unfavorable scenario; this is the win-lose situation. Here, we mainly used our discussion with Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko suggesting that it is difficult to discern in what situations a worker/manager can be considered to be engaged and intrinsically motivated in a way that health gets protected and productivity advanced; and in what situations the involved process should rather be thought of more like workaholism and/or lose of control (as the company MOBGAMES suggested). According to Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko's explanations based on her previous research, it is not *engagement* but other words that were better equipped to interpret the situation: such as "under pressure", "excessive work" or *burnout,* similar to our discussion of fieldwork in another American subsidiary (Pérez-Zapata, Álvarez-Hernández, & Castaño Collado, 2017), together with the particular "sense of responsibility" (Davies & Ikeno, 2011), and the common expectation of overwork in industries connected with design/IT engineering. As it was also suggested in our meeting with the railway manager, we might harm ourselves, in an unconscious fashion: "[*I think that physical anomalies will appear in the body even if you don't feel overwork, if you are forced to work hard*]". Another relevant aspect here is that according to him we tend to come to terms about illness when there is a physical examination/medical diagnosis, in line with previous research (López Carrasco, 2018).

This is further illustrated by Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko [*Designers/IT engineers who experienced burnout look back on the past and say, "There was no autonomy". But at the same time, they say that they couldn't feel so during the ongoing process of burnout.*]" that in the end calls into question how much of the perceived autonomy is autonomy in the first place and/or more generally how much of what we perceive as our voluntary choice should be considered to be our choice. Or using Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko explanations: "[*Their overwork was a voluntary choice that is "natural" and "reasonable" for them. It can be said that common sense which is "natural" and "reasonable" for Japanese designers/IT engineers*]". This finding might have good synergies with the quantitative

research conducted by Kuroda and Yamamoto (2019) highlighting that certain beliefs (connected with unconscious bias...) might drive overwork and its harming effects in Japan.

So, here we get to the core of the "autonomy paradox" discussion. There seems to be ground to suggest that similarly to what has been found in other international research (Bredehöft et al., 2015; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Michel, 2012; Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016; Putnam et al., 2014; Vargas-Llave et al., 2020), Japanese knowledge workers seem exposed to unconscious, deep-rooted cultural assumptions that are able to produce an illusion of voluntary choice; and specifically aligned with our own findings in an American subsidiary in Spain (Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016) where we tried to explain it by referring to dynamics linked with the subjectification of individuals, at the end of the day, the socio-cultural process that socialize us into subjects.

The fact what we are finding common mechanisms around the "autonomy paradox" suggests that we would do well in going beyond the cultural differences between Japan and the West. Our results seem to suggest that there are enough commonalities around the formation of the self that traverse cultural differences, something in line with personality theories that put autonomy and volition at the center (Koole, Schlinkert, Maldei, & Baumann, 2019) and/or that, beyond the many cross-cultural differences between Japan and the west, there are still essential shared cultural mechanisms in the socialization processes. Let's discuss it with a little more detail.

4.3. Need to increase awareness, individually and culturally

Independently of the specifics of a particular culture, it could be argued that we all end up internalizing the external expectations as part of our socialization process (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). If the so-called "autonomy paradox" is a reflection or side effect of internalized cultural expectations around overwork, then an effective prevention would need to target the deeper "cultural level". If that is the case, we might then wonder if and what type of cultural change might be needed (what to keep, what to change, how to get there, and what roles should different stakeholders play in the process). We seem to need to increase our awareness either individually in (probably) not very efficient fashion and/or through (probably) more efficient cultural and collective processes. Shaping or engineering a cultural change is certainly a complex mission, but it could be argued that this is what the Japanese government has being trying to do (for some time) with the overwork culture.

This is also in line with our conversations with Prof. MIYAJI Hiroko. She argued how useful interventions to manage overwork need to get involved in modifying what she called *common senses*, mainly the deep-rooted cultural assumptions (enacted in our identities) and terribly hard to question; but this is a part of what seems to play a key role in maintaining the overworking dynamic. Specifically, some cultural conditioning around the Japanese "sense of responsibility" and "harmony" in social contexts (Davies & Ikeno, 2011) in interaction with excessive demands (more prevalent in the increasingly digital and flexible knowledge work environments) that get internalized, seem essential to understand how employees would go beyond their limits harming their health and personal relations instead of questioning and/or demand more structural remedies.

Recognizing the Japanese cultural peculiarities, there seems to be, nevertheless, an interesting cultural parallelism here with the Western drivers to overwork. If, as our results suggest, certain Japanese workers might similarly feel that overwork is their voluntary choice and if deeply ingrained cultural assumptions and expectations (*common senses*) are involved in both Japan and in the West, this might suggest that we might need to be less attentive to the specific cultural differences (i.e., the specific values that stereotypical tend to be very different in Japan -sense of responsibility, harmony...- and the West -individual achievement, responsibility...-). If, overwork and the autonomy paradox are relevant in two very different cultural setups, it might be argued that this is because overwork has been made a central value in both cultures, but we might also wonder whether the problem would rather be one of a strong culture that might need more promotion of questioning (something that seems to be possible to a certain degree, but that eventually might prove to be contradictory)[20].

Finally, it could be argued that one very important strategy to (hopefully) increase our cultural awareness would be through a more comprehensive focus in developing frameworks that could eventually connect the business and health metrics. In an increasingly data-driven world, organizations can, and should be able to, drive analysis that could feed specific business cases and eventually bring us more awareness of the limits of overwork for health and productivity.

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[20] Or maybe whether would it be possible just reshaping the culture to be one more health vigilant, without heavily affecting other aspects as the recent Japanese movie "Nanatsu no kaigi (2019)" seems to suggest.

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