Knowledge work intensification and self-management:
the autonomy paradox

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ABSTRACT
In the analysis of the sustainability of knowledge work environments, the
intensification of work has emerged as probably the single most important
contradiction. We argue that the process of knowledge work intensification
is increasingly self-driven and influenced by subjectification processes in
the context of trends of individualisation and self-management. We use a
qualitative case study of a leading multinational company in the information
and communications technology sector (considered to be ‘best-in-class’) to
discuss this intensification and its linkage with self-disciplining mechanisms. The
workers studied seem to enjoy a number of resources that current psychosocial
risk models identify as health promoting (e.g. autonomy, learning, career
development and other material and symbolic rewards). We discuss the validity
of these models to assess the increasingly boundaryless and self-managed
knowledge work contexts characterised by internalisation of demands and
resources and paradoxical feelings of autonomy. Knowledge work intensification
increases health and social vulnerabilities directly and through two-way
interactions with, first, the autonomy paradox and new modes of subjection at
the workplace; second, atomisation and lack of social support; third, permanent
accountability and insecurity; and finally, newer difficulties in setting boundaries.