Organization Science

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://pubsonline.informs.org

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To cite this article:
Ioana Lupu, Joonas Rokka (2022) "Feeling in Control": Optimal Busyness and the Temporality of Organizational Controls. Organization Science 33(4):1396-1422. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1486

http://pubsonline.informs.org/journal/orsc

ORGANIZATION SCIENCE
Vol. 33, No. 4, July–August 2022, pp. 1396–1422
ISSN 1047-7039 (print), ISSN 1526-5455 (online)

"Feeling in Control": Optimal Busyness and the Temporality of Organizational Controls

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Received: July 11, 2018
Revised: July 13, 2019; June 1, 2020; January 21, 2021
Accepted: April 5, 2021
Published Online in Articles in Advance: September 13, 2021

https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1486

Abstract. This study extends prior research seeking to understand the reproduction and persistence of excessive busyness in professional settings by addressing the relationship between organizational controls and temporal experiences. Drawing on 146 interviews and more than 300 weekly diaries in two professional service firms, we develop a framework centered on the emerging concept of optimal busyness, an attractive, short-lived temporal experience that people try to reproduce/prolong because it makes them feel energized and productive as well as in control of their time. Our findings show that individuals continuously navigate between different temporal experiences separated by a fine line, quiet time, optimal busyness, and excessive busyness, and that optimal busyness that they strive for is a fragile and fleeting state difficult to achieve and maintain. We show that these temporal experiences are the effect of the *temporality of controls*—that is, the ability of controls to shape professionals' temporal experience through structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing temporality. Moreover, we find that professionals who regularly face high temporal pressures seek to cope with these by attempting to construct/prolong optimal busyness through manipulating the pace, focus, and length of their temporal experiences, a process we call *control of temporality*. Our study contributes to a better understanding of the reproduction of busyness by explaining why professionals in their attempts to feel in control of their time routinely end up overworking.

Funding: I. Lupu acknowledges the support of the Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship [Grant IdPSF FP7-PEOPLE-2013-IEF], during which data for this paper were collected.
Supplemental Material: The online appendix is available at https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1486.

Keywords: professionals • organizational controls • busyness • overwork • work-life balance • temporal experience • practice theory • knowledge work

> When I'm not that busy, I get frustrated. It becomes that you think, "Oh, I wish I had more to do to keep me going." You become a little bit bored I think, when you work so intensively for a period and then you have a bit of downtime, it's, "Oh, where's the next thing going to come from?" You become a little bit of a junkie for a deadline and for work. It's quite hard to switch off. —Nicola, partner, Firm A

Introduction

Ever since the first organizational attempts to control employees' work and productivity—the Taylor (1911) "time and motion studies" and Ford's assembly line—controls have been specifically geared toward the control of workers' time use and tempo. This approach has encroached into professional service firms whose business model is built on revenue maximization based on billable hours and where work-related time demands have escalated (Barley 1997, Hassan and Purser 2007, Rosa 2013), explaining the persistence of excessive working hours in professional settings (Perlow 1998, 1999; Michel 2011; Mazmanian et al. 2013; Lupu and Empson 2015; Blagoev and Schreyögg 2019). Thus, the number of hours worked and how employees divide and prioritize their time between work and home represent a main target of organizational control.

Previous literature has noted how firms extract workers' commitment to long hours by using intricate systems of visible and invisible controls (Kunda 1992, Barker 1993, Alvesson and Willmott 2002, Robertson and Swan 2003, Michel 2011, Mazmanian et al. 2013), which are imposed on or internalized by the professionals. These studies implicitly suggest that controls can foster "time famine," a temporal experience of having too much to do and not enough time to do it (Perlow 1999). They can also alter professionals' perception of temporality by, for instance, creating experiences of absorption and excitement, which cause people to indefinitely postpone taking action to address the negative consequences of overwork on their private lives (Hochschild 1997, Karreman and Alvesson 2009, Michel 2011). This has led to widespread

overwork and heightened levels of work-life conflict (Schor 1991, Hochschild 1997, Perlow 1998, Bunting 2005, Bailyn 2006, Schieman et al. 2006, Kreiner et al. 2009, Wajcman 2015), which have been shown to have high mental and physical health costs (Meyerson 1994, Schieman et al. 2006).

Yet, even though employee's time use and performance are main targets of organizational controls, the way controls shape workers' temporal experiences has remained underanalyzed and underconceptualized. For instance, most of the prior research links controls to excessive hours, overwork, and busyness without distinguishing that they can produce different kinds of temporal experiences, some of which may, as described by Nicola in the opening quote, be highly attractive. More insight into the temporal effects of controls will shed light on professionals' irresistible compliance (Karreman and Alvesson 2009) with the long work hours noted by previous studies of professional firms.

Drawing on 146 in-depth interviews with 81 professionals from two global knowledge firms, more than 300 weekly diaries, and on-site observations, we ask the following questions: *how do organizational controls shape professionals' temporal experiences of busyness, and how do professionals respond to these experiences?*

Based on our findings, we develop a framework centered on the concept of optimal busyness and the interplay between the temporality of controls and control of temporality. The *temporality of controls* is the ability of organizational controls to shape professionals' temporal experiences through structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing temporality—that produces *excessive busyness* when control is experienced as overused (strong structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing), *quiet time* when control is experienced as underused (weak structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing), and *optimal busyness* when control is perceived as balanced (moderate structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing). Individuals also shape their temporal experiences in order to produce optimal busyness and to cope with suboptimal temporal experiences (excessive busyness, quiet time) by manipulating the pace, focus, and length of their temporal experiences, a process we call *control of temporality*. Our findings highlight a novel explanation—the attractive temporal experience of optimal busyness—of why individuals who routinely work long hours are drawn to prefer busy periods over quieter ones, a puzzle emerging from our research. Optimal busyness energizes professionals' bodies, produces elation, and increases perceived productivity while, if prolonged, potentially exacerbating work-life conflict. Employees' fleeting experience of optimal busyness gets them seduced into believing they can control the temporal aspect of their work, and so, they inevitably end up working more in the search to hit the optimal zone again.

We contribute to previous research by advancing theorizing on organizational controls and their temporal effects and furthering our understanding of the reproduction of overwork in professional settings. In addition, we contribute to literature on workers' temporal experiences by demonstrating how earlier focus on time use and allocation, temporal strategies, and work-life balance—which overly rely on either objective or individualistic notions of time—may be limited in their ability to capture the complexity of the production and attractiveness of temporal experiences (e.g., Orlikowski and Yates 2002, Gerstel and Clawson 2018, Feldman et al. 2019), such as optimal busyness.

Control and Temporality

The literature on organizational control has a long history of exploring the devices or systems that management uses to motivate individuals to act in their organization's interest. Control ensures that employees' behaviors and decisions are consistent with the organization's objectives and strategies (Ouchi 1977, 1979; Eisenhardt 1985; Merchant 1985). Controls thus manage professionals' performance (productivity, energy, engagement) but also, their compliance with temporal norms.

In professional service firms where time management is central to a business model built on revenue maximization based on billable hours, the number of hours worked, as well as how employees divide and prioritize their time between work and home represents a main target of organizational control (Perlow 1998, 1999; Michel 2011). However, we still do not understand the link between organizational control and time, how the same controls can produce different temporal experiences, and particularly, how this contributes to the (re-)production of extreme busyness in organizations.

Numerous studies have explored the various mechanisms of bureaucratic, normative, peer, or technological controls (Kunda 1992, Barker 1993, Alvesson 1995, Robertson and Swan 2003, Robertson et al. 2003, Anderson-Gough et al. 2005), which organizations use to extract more hours from their highly skilled workforce. For example, bureaucratic practices control behavior through standardized rules and work processes (Mintzberg 1983, Adler and Borys 1996), whereas normative control operates by influencing the underlying beliefs and values of organizational members (Martin 1992, Robertson and Swan 2003). This literature points that management is not the only source of control but that organizational culture and organizational identification serve also as powerful control mechanisms (Kunda 1992, Anteby 2008, Reid 2015). For instance, a study on consultants showed how the organization, through control mechanisms such as the

haphazard and intensive structure of work and performance evaluations that rewarded those who seemed to conform and penalized those who did not, pressured people to adopt expected identities centered around long working hours and availability (Reid 2015). Peer control shows how the concerted actions of coworkers reinforce the system of value-based normative rules (Barker 1993). Technology, such as mobile email devices used to manage work, was shown to intensify collective expectations of availability and escalate professional engagement (Mazmanian et al. 2013).

Prior work shows how controls can influence professionals' use of time, promoting extreme work hours to the detriment of their personal time. For instance, a study of two professional firms found that the firms' norms and culture led professionals to work long hours over extended periods of time to meet project deadlines (Robertson et al. 2003). Similarly, Perlow (1999) points to how software engineers' use of time and a reward system based on individual heroics perpetuated "time famine," a temporal experience of having too much to do and not enough time to do it. A study of junior accountants shows how during socialization, trainees internalize both strict time management regimes where they must account for their time in six-minute intervals as well as temporal visioning: the development of particular forms of thought regarding the temporal boundaries between private time and firm time (Anderson-Gough et al. 2001).

Centrally, this literature highlights the lack of effective resistance or even more, the counterresistance to the influence of controls (Karreman and Alvesson 2009, Perlow 2012). Thus, individuals often act in ways compliant with controls, thus restricting their autonomy by reducing control over their working hours and blurring the boundary between personal and work time (Perlow 1999, Mazmanian et al. 2013). We argue that by exploring the temporal effects of controls, we can provide a novel explanation for this compliance and the reproduction of extreme busyness. Indeed, some studies implicitly suggest that controls have the potential to alter professionals' experience of temporality by, for instance, creating temporal experiences of absorption and excitement, which cause them to indefinitely postpone evaluating their circumstances or actively addressing the negative consequences of overwork on their private lives. For example, a director in one study on overworked investment bankers noted that controls drive people to enter "survival mode" (Michel 2011, p. 337), and they do not have the time to reflect on or understand what is happening to them. Another study noted that consultants seemed to forget their discontent about the lack of work-life balance as they let themselves be carried away by the enthusiasm of work (Karreman and Alvesson 2009). The study of Hochschild (1997) on Amerco, a large American company, traces the increase in employees' hours to the attractiveness of its work environment, which was carefully engineered by the management of the company through programs such as "Total Quality." However, in spite of the evident temporal orientation of controls, we still do not know much about their temporal effects such as their tendency to create diverse temporal experiences, some of which may be attractive and desirable. Without more insight into the temporality of controls, we cannot understand how they can shape individuals' experience of time or how, by producing compelling and desirable temporalities, they can explain the lack of effective resistance workers have exhibited in previous studies of professional firms.

Workers' Temporal Experiences

The way workers use and experience time in work settings has a broad range of organizational and nonorganizational outcomes (Gerstel and Clawson 2018, Feldman et al. 2019), such as identity regulation, overwork, and heightened levels of work-life conflict (Schor 1991, Hochschild 1997, Perlow 1998, Bunting 2005, Bailyn 2006, Schieman et al. 2006, Kreiner et al. 2009, Wajcman 2015), which have been shown to have high mental and physical health costs (Meyerson 1994, Schieman et al. 2006). Previous work that directly or peripherally examines time in the workplace has focused mostly on the work-life balance (van den Scott 2014), showing how many workers nowadays experience significant stress in their struggle to balance the often incompatible corporate and family temporal regimes (Perlow 1998, Orlikowski and Yates 2002, Bailyn 2006, Schieman et al. 2006, Kreiner et al. 2009). In addition, research has explained how workers' engagement with time is shaped by various social processes and meanings (Gerstel and Clawson 2018, Feldman et al. 2019).

Previous research has, especially in the case of white collar workers, focused on how workers actively manage the boundaries between work and nonwork (Asforth et al. 2000, Kreiner et al. 2009, Kossek and Lautsch 2012, Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2013) in order to achieve a satisfactory balance. Researchers using this lens have advanced our knowledge of how individuals use boundary work tactics to create their ideal level and style of work-home segmentation (i.e., keeping separate) or integration (i.e., merging together) (Kreiner et al. 2009, Trefalt 2013). In a study of Episcopal priests, Kreiner et al. (2009) show how priests managed work-family boundaries through temporal tactics such as controlling work-time (e.g., manipulations of one's regular or sporadic plans by deciding when to do various aspects of work) and finding

respite (e.g., removing oneself from work-home demands for a significant amount of time) to ultimately strike a balance. This research has done a great deal to advance our understanding of how individuals or managers can improve work-home balance and ameliorate stress in organizations. However, through its unique focus on the individual and her capacity to control and manipulate boundaries, these studies have played down contextual constraints on individuals' actions (Lewis et al. 2007, Williams et al. 2016). Relatedly, research has shown that individuals may seek to resist or counterbalance organizational temporal pressures during their free time by, for instance, engaging in time-intensive (Jalas 2006, Woermann and Rokka 2015) or slowed-down recreational activities (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019). These studies have the advantage of showing how engagement in specific practices outside work can evoke momentary temporal experiences that potentially help assuage overwhelming busyness caused by work, yet they do not examine temporality in the work context.

Since the publication of *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* by Juliette Schor (1991), sociologically oriented research turned its attention to the dramatic increase in working hours, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to how work time is experienced by workers—an important gap in literature (van den Scott 2014). In contrast, when the social meanings underpinning workers' understanding, engagement, and allocation of time in relation to work have been the focus—as shown in the recent review by Feldman et al. (2019)—time use is explained primarily by workers' signaling of dedication, performance, and power toward their immediate social environments (e.g., peers, colleagues, superiors, friends, etc.). From this view, one could explain that the service professionals we studied are willing to work excessively long hours in order to show they are dedicated, well-performing, and authoritative workers. In this light, extreme busyness at work represents an important status badge (see also Gershuny 2005). Although revelatory for important wider discourses and systems of meaning that structure how individuals and collectives understand and approach time use, we argue that such an analytical focus nevertheless does not explore how workers relate to and navigate between different temporal experiences—for example, varying in intensity, pace, and length—some of which are likely to be more desirable than others.

A few exceptions, such as the ethnographic study of Roy (1959) on how factory workers manage their experience of monotonous work, are worth noting. Roy worked on a factory floor alongside others engaged in tedious and repetitive work. He found that individual efforts to keep workers from "going nuts" can only go so far and that much of the worker's experience of time is tied up in the informal interactions of the group. Another exception is the study of Perlow (1999) of engineers' experience of "time famine," a temporal experience of having too much to do and not enough time to do it. Altering the engineers' work practices by instituting a few hours of "quiet time" during their day to focus on work without interruptions from colleagues and bosses, she found that workers became much more efficient.

Much of the organizational research studying time and temporality focuses on time as either an objective or a subjective phenomenon (Orlikowski and Yates 2002, Shipp and Cole 2015). According to the objective view, time as clock time is absolute, linear, invariant, and independent of human experience (Zerubavel 1981, Clark 1990, Adam 1991). Clock time has been associated with Taylorism and work discipline and manifested, for instance, in the use of deadlines, time sheets, and the fiscal year to schedule and pace activities (Ezzamel and Robson 1995, Ancona et al. 2001, Anderson-Gough et al. 2001). These time-calibrated devices enable entrained organizational behaviors (Gersick 1994, Ancona and Chong 1996). However, objective views of time are limited because they neglect the active role people play in creating and shaping the temporal conditions of their lives (Orlikowski and Yates 2002), as well as shared social meanings signaled by time use (Feldman et al. 2019).

The subjective (or psychological) view of time, on the other hand, considers how time is perceived, judged, and experienced differently by individuals. This time is cognitively cyclical in the sense that thoughts may move between past, present, and future in any direction, as well as heterogeneously; some moments are perceived to pass at a different speed depending on whether experiences are pleasant or not, the degree of urgency, and the sense of busyness (see Shipp and Fried 2014 for a detailed overview; Orlikowski and Yates 2002, Cunliffe et al. 2004). A subjective perspective implies that the passage of time does not exist unless we experience it. Some examples of research adopting a subjective perspective on time are research on temporal focus (the extent to which people characteristically devote their attention to perceptions of the past, present, and future as well as time personality) (Ancona et al. 2001, Bluedorn 2002, Shipp et al. 2009), pacing style (an individual's allocation of time relative to a deadline) (Gevers et al. 2006), and time urgency (for example, hurried versus less hurried individuals) (Conte et al. 1995, Jansen and Kristof-Brown 2005). In addition, the Csikszentmihalyi (1990) influential psychological notion of flow has been used to describe "optimal" experiences of total concentration, awareness, and creativity in which workers report performing their best (Quinn 2005). More precisely, instances of flow have been

characterized primarily as immersive moments of "timelessness," in which time seems to disappear altogether for the individual. However, what this psychological perspective cannot easily explain is the way in which temporalities and people's actions are also socially created and established and thus, shaped by structural conditions outside individuals' immediate control (Orlikowski and Yates 2002, Gerstel and Clawson 2018). Moreover, the corporeal dimension of such engagement is mostly absent, and flow is treated as an individual-level variable, not a social construction (Michel 2011).

Unlike the objective and subjective approaches, we follow Orlikowski and Yates (2002) in viewing time as a process of temporal structuring. This perspective takes the view that time unfolds and is (re-)produced in professionals' experiences of the practices they engage in and enact in their everyday activities (e.g., working long hours), which are themselves consequential in producing temporal structures for those same activities (e.g., by creating of social rules, norms, and expectations for working long hours). Temporal structures are manifested, for example, in project deadlines, logs, schedules, and other time-calibrated devices to enable entrained organizational behaviors (Gersick 1994). These structures punctuate individuals' temporal rhythms when integrated and performed in and through practices. The practice-based perspective, therefore, recognizes both the objective and subjective character of temporality. Time may appear to be objective or external (e.g., a deadline) because people treat it as such in their ongoing action, objectifying and reifying the temporal structures they enact in their practices by treating schedules and deadlines as absolute and given structures that cannot be changed by the individual. Similarly, our perspective recognizes that time may appear to be subjective because people subjectively experience (e.g., flow-like feeling), knowledgeably produce, and occasionally change the temporal structures they enact in their practices, treating schedules and deadlines as provisional, relative, and alterable (Orlikowski and Yates 2002). The temporal experiences thus become codetermined and established in the routinized reproduction and enactment of these practices. However, empirical scholarship has not yet fully articulated and explored the diverse experiences of time in relation to work and organizational control nor how individuals respond to particular temporal experiences.

Method

Research Setting and Participants

The first author conducted 146 in-depth, semistructured interviews with 81 professionals during 2015 and 2016. These interviews aimed to explore work-life conflict by understanding professionals' daily work practices. Participants were drawn from two knowledge-intensive firms Firm A and Firm L (pseudonyms): a leading global auditing firm and a law firm, respectively.

Our choice of this extreme setting was informed by knowledge that excessive working hours and work-related compulsive behaviors are widespread phenomena amongst knowledge workers (Perlow 1998, 2012; Michel 2011; Mazmanian et al. 2013; Lupu and Empson 2015). Moreover, in these fast-paced, deadline-driven environments, time and time management are central, as the business model of these firms is built on revenue maximization based on billable hours. Individuals in these firms are responsible for the daily recording of their work hours and inputting them into different client projects in which they are currently engaged. As a result of intensive work rhythms, routine overtime, and a deadline-driven culture, professionals in these firms tend to experience high levels of work-life conflict (Perlow 1998, Wharton and Blair-Loy 2002, Anderson-Gough et al. 2005, Sturges 2012).

Participants were first identified by the human resources (HR) departments of the two firms. The aim was to have a diverse sample, allowing us to develop and refine our emerging theoretical categories (Charmaz 2006), rather than to create statistically representative groupings. A similar process was followed in both firms to recruit participants. First, an HR manager sent an email to all professionals based in London describing the study and specifying the participation criteria (have at least three years of professional experience and at least one dependent child). The email assured individuals that their participation would be voluntary and confidential. As a much higher number of male than female parents volunteered for the study, we used snowballing in order to recruit more women. Subsequently, in order to have a more diverse sample and to enable comparisons, we also interviewed individuals who did not have children. Twenty-five individuals were interviewed at Firm L, and 57 individuals were interviewed at Firm A. The initial focus on working parents meant that the majority were experienced professionals in either middle or senior management roles. Most of the participants (96%) had at least one dependent child, and the majority of our participants (90%) were between 30 and 50 years old and held the position of manager (or senior associate) or higher, with all of them having at least five years of professional experience. Such experienced professionals were more likely to have a high degree of autonomy as being appointed to the position of manager is deemed to give the individual "space" to manage his or her own time (Kornberger et al. 2010). See Tables 1 and 2 below for more details on participants' demographics.

Table 1. Participant's Demographics

Hierarchical position	Female	Male	Total
Firm L	11	13	24
Associate	1	1	2
Senior Associate	4	2	6
Senior Professional Sup	2	0	2
Legal Director	2	1	3
Partner	2	9	11
Firm A	28	26	54
Assistant Manager	1	1	2
Manager	5	1	6
Senior Manager	7	10	17
(Associate) Director	11	10	21
Partner	4	4	8
Total participants	39	39	78

Among those interviewed, there were two couples where both spouses worked for Firm A at the time of the interview. Moreover, we interviewed the wives of three male professionals who had previously worked at Firm A (where they met their partners) but who had left the firm in the preceding couple of years, mainly because of work-family balance issues. In addition and to obtain a fuller understanding of the professionals' lives, we conducted formal and informal interviews with three HR members in Firm A and one in Firm L.

Data Sources

Interviews and Diaries. Eighty-one lawyers and accountants in London (24 individuals at Firm L and 57 at Firm A) composed of a roughly equal number of males and females participated in two rounds of semi-structured interviews (totaling more than 200 hours of interviews). Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, although most took about 70 minutes. The majority took place on the firms' premises. Following interviews, the first author wrote field notes, including observations on clothing, office décor, interruptions permitted by the participants (e.g., telephone calls), and what was observed in the firms' public spaces. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The total number of transcribed pages amounted to more than 3,000 double-spaced pages.

An initial interview asked professionals to give an overview of their careers and family life and narrate high, low, and turning points, as well as narrate episodes of challenges and regrets in their lives as working parents. As interesting themes emerged in one interview, we incorporated these into our conversations in subsequent interviews. At this point, the temporal experiences of participants were not the main focus of the study. We also gathered professionals' weekly diaries (an average of four of eight solicited per participant) in which they detailed their temporal experiences and made sense of their struggles to balance work and family life in the previous week. These diaries allowed us to better understand the daily, routine aspects of managing work and family life.

Table 2. Parenting Status

No. of children	Participants
No children	4%
One child	37%
Two children	44%
Three or more	15%
Total	100%

Between three and seven months later, the first author conducted a second round of more focused interviews with 65 of the professionals interviewed in the first round. During the first part of this interview, weekly diaries were discussed, and participants were asked to provide an update on the evolution of their work-life balance and the most significant moments in their lives. We then asked them about their feelings and experiences during busy versus quiet periods of time as well as what factors increased or decreased stress and work pressures following the theme of working long hours and professionals' ambiguous feelings toward this practice that had emerged in the first round of interviews. We also asked participants to recount in detail their experience with working long hours and their perceived ability and willingness to "switch off" as to keep work stress from affecting their private lives. Please refer to the appendix for the detailed interview and diary guidelines.

For many participants, the interviews were privileged instances when they could take the time to piece together the puzzle of their lives and think about important influences. Although some may have remained reticent (especially in the first interview), the research team was often surprised by the raw nature of people's disclosures (e.g., planning to divorce, drinking problems, taking antidepressants, experiencing miscarriages), and it was seldom necessary to prompt them to talk further about their lives. A number of participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be interviewed on this topic, and more than one referred to the process as "cathartic." Many individuals recognized that they do not normally have the time, given their busy lives, to reflect with such depth on these issues. The following quote is representative of the interviewees' experiences in our research project: "[A]ll of the things I'm telling you, I haven't rehearsed it. It's just on the spot. I'm telling you what I feel, and I think that's great for me because I hadn't realized what I was actually really doing … and the impact of that" (female, ex-director).

Observation. The first author spent a considerable amount of time on the premises of Firms A and L and

was engaged in other forms of on-site fieldwork, including making pre- and postmeeting observations and frequenting the open spaces where the professionals worked, the internal cafes, and restaurants, a form of research sometimes termed "hanging around and listening in" (Strauss 1987). All professionals at Firm A worked in open spaces, and the first author was given a free pass to these spaces that spanned the 14 floors of a purpose-built building in one of the business neighborhoods of London. Observation notes, which added depth to the data and enabled firsthand observation of professionals' work and socialization behaviors, were written up immediately after. These observations allowed for a better understanding of the interactions between participants as well as of the setting of these interactions.

Archival Data. We also accessed internal HR documents, including requirements for the different grades, evaluation practices, turnover statistics, and newspaper articles about Firms A and L. These data helped us to better understand our firms and their position in the industry as well as the range of HR policies in place.

Data Analysis

Using the techniques of grounded theory building (Charmaz 2006), we conducted an iterative textual analysis of the interview transcripts in an attempt to understand the relationship between everyday work experiences and participants' experienced temporality. Initially, our research interest was in exploring work-life conflict and how professionals navigate this conflict. However, busyness gradually emerged as a *leitmotif* in the lives of professionals, and we became interested in why professionals experienced a high from being busy and why they perceived busyness as desirable and positive.

We began data analysis by developing preliminary codes (in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 10) based on our research questions and theoretical concerns, which we used in conjunction with inductive coding techniques to analyze our data (Charmaz 2006). The analysis consisted of multiple readings of the interview transcripts and diaries, and interpretation followed a nonlinear path, moving back and forth between theory and data. The initial phase of coding was more descriptive, focusing on in vivo codes describing episodes of overwork, busy and quiet periods, and temporal experiences such as fast and slow. We discussed emerging themes and produced memos about the associated dynamics and tensions that we saw in the data. Coding progressed from writing memos based on salient quotes from interview transcripts and diaries to articulating and refining our analytic categories. These memos allowed us to identify key analytic categories, such as controls. Our focus on temporality led us to focus on how organizational controls shaped professionals' temporal experiences through structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing, a process we call the "temporality of controls." We then reviewed and refined the codes within categories, gathering the relevant data across the interviews and diaries and comparing insights. Observing contradictions in how people talked about experiencing high levels of work-life conflict and how they still preferred busy periods at work over quieter ones led us to look more closely at how people explained their motivation and desire toward busy periods and how they also searched for a sense of busyness during quieter periods. This led us to identify three main temporal experiences, quiet time, optimal busyness, and excessive busyness, and to explore their consequences on the success/failure of temporal compliance and temporal performance. Building on the concept of temporal structuring (Orlikowski and Yates 2002) and highlighting how people construct and reconstruct the temporal conditions that shape their lives, we examined the agentic capacities of individuals to transition between states of optimal and suboptimal busyness, which we capture through the notion of "control of temporality."

To increase the reliability of our overall interpretation, we routinely discussed provisional interpretations with some informants during the second rounds of interviews. We present the findings that emerged in the next section.

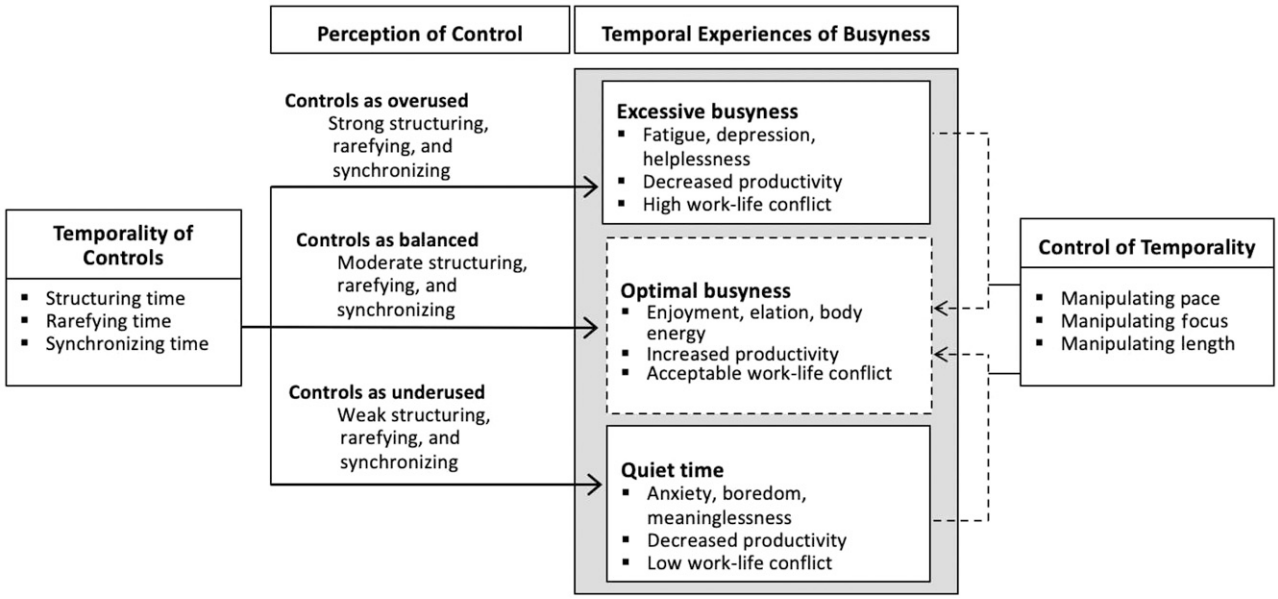
Findings

In the first section of our findings, we describe how organizations employ *temporality of controls*—that is, the ability of controls to shape temporal experiences in order to align employees' behavior with organizational objectives of temporal performance and compliance. The next section explains how these controls are connected with different temporal experiences of busyness—optimal busyness, excessive busyness, and quiet time—and also how individuals navigate and transition between them. The final section details *the control of temporality*: that is, how individuals can also control temporality to some degree by manipulating the pace, focus, and length of their temporal experiences. Our overall framework is presented in Figure 1.

Temporality of Controls

The first dimension in Figure 1 presents how organizational controls manage professionals' temporal experiences by a process we call *temporality of controls*: the ability of organizational controls to shape professionals' temporal experiences by structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing time. We present each of these here.

Figure 1. Temporal Experiences of Busyness



Structuring Time

One of the most important temporal properties of organizational controls is time structuring: that is, the organization and ordering of professionals' time by not only punctuating it with project deadlines but also, by creating visibility for forms of time that matter, such as billable time, and a particular temporal consciousness inciting people to increase the share of this time in total time worked. In order to demonstrate this property, we focus on how two widespread organizational controls, deadlines and time sheets, structure professionals' time.

Deadlines as Temporal Markers. Deadlines are important means for temporal structuring in organizations. They give structure to work time and entrain a fast-paced work tempo, which increases as deadlines approach. Deadlines put people under significant pressure to complete projects on time, as if keeping these deadlines was a "matter of life or death" or "saving lives," even if, at close scrutiny, these deadlines appear as completely artificial or as John, a director in audit, put it: "We're in this crazy world where we have so many meaningless deadlines." Similarly, Terry (director, Firm A) notes their arbitrariness when managers negotiate deadlines with clients without consulting their teams: "The most frustrating for me is when a deadline is imposed upon me and or others impose it and then I don't have control because that's a personal invasion of my space and an abuse of how I want to allocate my time." This practice points to the fact that managers sometimes manipulate deadlines in order to extract more work from their employees. Thus, controls reify deadlines by invoking the clients and the inevitability of losing them if "you do not give the client what it needs when it needs it."

Although lower-level employees can feel that managers impose deadlines upon them, partners like Mike in Firm A can also feel helpless: "[U]ltimately your clients control your agenda and your time."

The week or so leading up to important deadlines was described as stressful by professionals who often recounted working overtime in order to meet the due dates.

> The deadlines were just so tight and I couldn't, even just to get home I couldn't do it … it was just the cycle that I got into because of the deadlines and the volume of what needed to get done. —Mayra, director, Firm A

Thus, the effect of deadlines as temporal markers was manifest in that any time could become work time. Moreover, deadlines could increase people's temporal performance by focusing their attention on matters that became urgent as deadlines approached. Because of this overscheduling of daily "back-to-back" activities, people were often pushed to operate at the limit with no buffers or downtime, so there was no slack in the following days for things that had not been done before. In this case, the only possible recourse was that of compliance.

> You are conscious about all the extra work you still need to do and bearing in mind your diary is full every day, you've really had to get it done that night, because there may not be a slot the next day to get it done …, so it's about being really, really organized

> and just having to accept this is just the way it is. —Stella, director, Firm A

Paradoxically, although many people could experience deadlines as impinging on their autonomy and capacity to control time, these same people noted how deadlines helped them to focus and be productive. As Nicola, the Firm A partner quoted in the beginning, asserts: "You become a little bit of a junkie for a deadline and for work. It's quite hard to switch off." Similarly, Karen notes: "I find it a lot easier to be focused and get on with stuff when you've got a lot on your list and deadlines, because again you've got that sort of, you've got that sense of urgency and motivation" (Karen, Firm A).

Recording Time. In the firms we studied, time management was enacted through a complex system of time keeping and the charging of time to specific budget categories. Professionals recorded daily their billable hours on time sheets, a control device shaping people's allocation of time. This routine allowed professionals to account for their time (in terms of objective clock time) and then allocate these hours to specific projects or clients. In the firms studied, professionals had to account for each half an hour of their time.

Time sheets were used by the firms to evaluate individuals' performance through "utilization rates"—that is, the extent to which individuals' time had been allocated and billed for a client. The unwritten requirement in Firm A was for a junior member of staff to have utilization rates higher than 100%, which induces the pressure, often overtly communicated by managers, that people have to work overtime in order to attain their performance targets.

> Well, I think there is too much pressure to work and I think there are too many people who overtly say, "you must work longer hours." So, I've seen emails from people saying, everyone's got to be greater than 100% utilized … we have to fill in time sheets and it records how much time you spend on client work which is what the utilization is. So, it doesn't record stuff when you did admin or business development or other things that are part of your job … [which] is to basically tell them they've got to work longer hours than their statutory hours. —Jeremy, director, Firm A

Similarly, Evelyn, a director in Firm A, notes that "there's sort of an expectation that we work more hours than the normal hours and that we are available all the time."

Yet, different hierarchical levels have different utilization rates, with juniors having the highest utilization rates (normally between 75% and 100% but often more than that, especially during the busy audit season) and partners having the lowest required utilization rates as they are involved in more commercial, less delivery-related work.

Time sheets are used to structure time as billable and not billable and thus, clearly show each employee's worth and contribution to the firm. Achieving high utilization rates distinguishes good professionals from bad professionals, and billable (valuable) time is rendered visible and distinguished from nonbillable and thus, nonvaluable time.

> I felt engaged [when having a high utilization rate]. I think the worst thing for a lawyer where you are dependent on your utilization and the rest of it, is if you are not utilized, if you are not busy, that's what makes you feel like a failure. [Laughter] I think all lawyers have that mentality, so even though if you are not busy, in principle it's great, because you can go home at five o'clock every day and pick up your child, that's not how it makes you feel. It makes you feel terrible in this environment, where all people care about is your figures, everyone around you is working 'till, you know, and it's seen as a reflection of your ability, you know, "you are not getting work, 'cause you are not good enough." —Hannah, Firm L

Professionals are thus pressured into increasing the number of hours worked and billed in order to appear as performant, committed workers. Karen, a director at Firm A, relates the structure of her workday: "I know I arrived at half past eight and I left at six and that's so many hours and I didn't take any lunch, but how could I have possibly spent all that time—what have I actually achieved?"

Other than setting performance targets in terms of utilization rates and measuring employees against them, time recording also has the role of ensuring compliance by minimizing the time people spend on nonbillable activities (and squeezing nonproductive time such as lunch) as well as creating an anxiety that pushes them to continue working if they have not recorded enough hours. This is the case with this mother who worries because she has not recorded enough hours but needs to go home to her family.

> You worry because you want to be busy when you're in the office but sometimes that's not within your control, and therefore, then you think, I haven't recorded enough hours, so I'm not going to [go home] … it looks bad because it looks like … I have to leave at a certain time. So … you have that anxiety whereas [in] a lot of other jobs you don't have that because you don't record time. —Lina, Firm A

Although for some people, time sheets are a control device recording their inability to raise up to the "ideal worker" standard, other professionals see time

sheets as a trophy, an element of pride confirming and comforting them with regard to their position in the firm as compared with their peers.

> Every year I'd get my counselling and they'd always pull out the spreadsheets that was showing how many hours everyone had worked. And it's nothing I had to worry about because it was across the whole of financial service audit. I was pretty much always number one or two in hours worked and it never bothered me. —Dan, partner, Firm A

The structuring function of control seems to be experienced differently by different people or even by the same person at different moments in time. Thus, controls appear as being sometimes strongly structuring (for instance, because of the existence of many pressing deadlines, which professionals may perceive as overwhelming, as well as because of pressures to record long hours, such as in the busy season), whereas other times, they are experienced as moderately or weakly structuring (such as, for instance, when deadlines are experienced as less numerous or pressing and when individuals do not experience direct pressures to increase billed hours).

Rarefying Time

We also found that organizational controls shape professionals' temporal experiences by rarefying time: that is, rendering it scarce and producing a constant feeling of urgency and time famine. Time rarefication took place through two complementary processes: constructing urgency and short termism and temporal intensification.

Constructing Urgency and Short Termism. Our findings show that organizational controls are often geared toward creating a focus on the now and the immediate. The unpredictability of work with short-term deadlines creates a constant feeling of urgency and lack of control.

> I am less in control of my own destiny because so much of what I have to deal with, I don't know I am going to have to deal with it until it arrives, so the ability to plan is much harder … I've nearly always got things that are urgent and they're not important, but they're urgent because I've slipped them time and time again because other urgent things, important things have come in that are urgent and so there is always this nagging thing that says, well, actually, I could sit down now and I could work solidly for 48 hours with nothing new coming in and still I wouldn't actually clear the backlog. —Ian, partner, Firm A

Moreover, as noted in the previous quote, people become caught in a vicious circle when even nonimportant things become urgent because of a lack of time to deal with them punctually.

Both firms in our study officially assessed performance along multiple dimensions, including relational and analytic skills, but professionals stressed the importance of availability and achieving high utilization rates. In spite of attempts to move toward more long-term, qualitative forms of performance measurement, which were aimed at moving away from ranking people, at the time of the interviews the model of both firms was geared toward short-term performance with evaluations after each project. These were based on forced distribution and ranked professionals from one to four, with one being outstanding and four being poor. Dan, a partner at Firm A, explains how, by capturing individuals' performance in a single number, the control system fosters short termism.

> That's putting … short-term pressures on people, and looking at "Well, what have you done?" And [it creates] a constant need to justify yourself. Performance ratings thus engender ambiguity, as in the short-term, no one "has any understanding whatsoever of what you've done or whether you've done it well or done it badly."

The consequence of focusing on short-term performance as well as emphasizing frequent evaluations is to neglect long-term value creation, such as developing staff and achieving a better work-life balance. This form of evaluation has the effect of keeping people continuously on their toes as they are only as good as their previous job. Also, although committed, compliant individuals receive immediate gratification, professionals can also be penalized for a bad performance on a particular project or year. As Dan adds, "Again, every six months, I'm going to sit there and I'm going to look over my shoulder, and I'm going to see where I am and I'm getting told my pay's being's cut."

By submitting people to frequent evaluations, organizations are able to spur employees' efforts to work harder and longer. Although increasing stress (the need to "constantly look over one's shoulder," as expressed), if successful, evaluations may result in a psychological "high" that inherently reinforces and further encourages busyness. Busyness' attraction partly stems from the fact that professionals feel rewarded and valued when they are busy: "[When you work hard] you feel that you contribute to the firm, you feel … valued and that you've earned your place there, you've earnt the respect of your colleagues" (Robert, director, Firm A).

Temporal Intensification. Management controls contribute to rendering time a scarce resource through practices of temporal intensification; the experience of having to work faster and to fit in more and more

tasks is internalized during socialization through the requirement for professionals to account for each half an hour of their time.

> So if you need to account for every half an hour of your day … there is not the time to really sit down and learn things properly; *it is always a feeling of very frenetic and always needing to be somewhere that you're not*. [our emphasis] At least I felt that here. I'm not sure if that is the religion part of it, I think it is. At [Firm A] they use the term "the [Firm A] way." —Evelyn, director, Firm A

As emphasized by this quote, the constant use of time sheets, by making the time that professionals work visible, creates a time consciousness that spurs temporal intensification. This temporal consciousness also makes professionals aware of the time scarcity and generates a feeling of not having enough time and having to accelerate their work pace. Thus, similarly to Steve (a partner in Firm A), most of our participants noted an intensification of work in the previous years because of understaffing and increased requests of availability.

> [M]y impression about the firm is that *it's pretty unforgiving if you don't run pretty fast* … there is, at the moment, certainly in the bit of the firm that I work in, there is so much work for the number of people around that there is a general expectation that everyone is working very long hours, not necessarily in the office, but because we can all log in remotely these days, then there's not a lot of tolerance to you not doing a ton of work. So the work context is probably more extreme at the moment than it's been for some time.

Although most professionals assert usually enjoying the intense, pressured work environment ("I love the intensity of it, usually" (Eric, Firm A)), this is hard to deal with when professionals feel that they do not have the capacity to control this rhythm.

> [I]f I have absolutely no control over like my work volume and the teams are pretty understaffed and there's no chance for me to push back on work when I'm stretched that to me would be the breaking point. —John, associate, Firm L

Through rarefying time, organizational controls, on the one side, manage professionals' performance by influencing and motivating them to focus their efforts on intensifying work and increasing short-term productivity. On the other side, they manage employees' compliance by making it difficult for people to plan for the future. Thus, they abolish the future in return for an extended present (Nowotny 1994) where people are so busy dealing with incessant work demands that they no longer have the time to plan for the future.

The rarefying function of control seems to be experienced differently by different people or even by the same person at different moments in time. Controls appear as being sometimes strongly rarefying, for instance, because of urgency, short termism, and time intensification, which professionals experience as producing time famine. Other times, they are experienced as moderately or weakly rarefying, for instance, when time is perceived as being more abundant and professionals have more visibility over their time and do not feel compelled to run all the time.

Synchronizing Time

The temporality of controls also manifests through their capacity to synchronize organizational and individual temporalities through attuning and time collectivization.

Attuning. One of the ways through which organizational controls achieve temporal synchronization is by attuning: that is, making professionals receptive and accustoming them to the work rhythm. All of our professionals had, for example, received smartphones and laptops from their firms as standard work equipment to enable constant connectivity and availability. These devices have the capacity to forcefully evoke and immerse individuals into the fast pace of work via their connectivity. In doing so, they have the ability to recreate a "work zone," attuning professionals to the fast rhythm of work anywhere they may be: "I find that if you have your BlackBerry with you and you're constantly checking emails, you never let work go" (Tom, partner, Firm L).

Similarly, Andrew notes that technology's capacity to connect individuals with the rhythm of work is engrossing, and although it connects professionals with colleagues and clients, it excludes family members.

> Screen time is a very excluding thing because you are … you're on your screen, you're blocking out everything that's around you and you can't concentrate on anything else but that screen … [My wife] very often says to me, you know, you're never here. —Kevin, partner, Firm L

As long as people do not switch off, they are attuned to the temporality of work and often unable to focus on anything else, as Tom's and Kevin's quotes illustrate.

Connectivity with work through mobile devices immerses professionals into a hectic temporality, which is difficult to escape as it occupies professionals' thoughts, even in their sleep. Eric, a director in Firm A, recounts his wife's habit of checking her emails during the night: "My wife is terrible. If she wakes up to go to the toilet in the middle of the night, she checks her emails, even at 3 a.m."

Most of the professionals interviewed struggled to extract themselves from the intense rhythm of work during weekends and holidays. Such a temporality can even become compulsive, leaving professionals

struggling to disconnect from it or trying to hide their excessive usage from their families. Although one professional recounted "hiding in the bathroom on the phone" to call a client on Christmas day (Matthew, partner, Firm L), another was hiding from her husband to check her messages while on holiday (Sylvia, Firm L, diary June 17, 2015).

Time Collectivization. Time management in professional firms is often a matter of negotiation within teams. Because of strong peer control in firms, individual time is generally seen as a collective resource to be allocated to projects. Thus, the sacrifice of private time appears easier to bear individually when it is collectively shared. This creates a general sense of camaraderie and a positive team dynamic oriented toward a collective goal.

> If you're working collectively as a team … it can also be an incredibly bonding experience because you see that whilst you're going through a stressful situation there's a recognition that one: there's a purpose, a higher purpose to what you're doing. So, it's not totally without any purpose. Two: you're collectively sharing it and you're supporting each other … because you went through a stress[ful] situation where each one sacrificed a little bit of themselves and *collectively you felt that sacrifice*. —Robert, director, Firm A

The collectively shared sacrifice of personal time transcends the individual through the creation of a common higher purpose. Individual sacrifice reinforces bonding between team members as each is aware that the others have also sacrificed "a little bit of themselves." This normalizes the sacrifice of personal time and creates a collective temporal experience of that sacrifice, which at the same time, constructs time as a collective rather than an individual resource.

Generally, junior professionals have little control over their time as they are used as resources allocated to different projects, and they have little say in this allocation. Senior professionals consider themselves more in control of their schedules; however, their own time is closely tied with the team's time.

> I was in the office working late … it wasn't effective for the work for me to be at home, I had to be with the team. What was even more difficult with that was that … during working hours, I was doing a lot with the team … and then what would happen was all my work would then backlog, so then I need to clear my own backlog, which would then inevitably create more work for the team. —Mayra, Firm A

There is a common agreement between our interviewees that if some people work fewer hours and "do not pull their weight," the rest of the team will have to pick up the slack. Dan, a partner in Firm A, recognizes that this puts pressure on him to work longer hours.

> There's an element of—and I feel this myself, I always have—that, you know, at the end of the day if I go home at 5 o'clock every night, well, great for me, but someone else is going to pick the slack up and someone else is going to have to do the work and it's going to impact on their life. So, a lot of us have this sense of well, it is part of being a team and it's not just a question of well, I can choose to work less hours and get paid less, I'm going to impact other people.

He goes on to say that as a team leader, he has experienced a certain pressure "to be seen to lead from the front": that is, to be perceived as working longer hours than the other team members.

> I certainly always have felt that as in a leadership role there's this need to kind of be seen to lead from the front, you know, that's not just about telling people what to do but if everyone has got to work until midnight, I'd personally feel quite guilty about walking out at 5 o'clock.

Time is thus perceived as a "zero-sum game" where if one works less, others will have to work more. This has the effect of pushing people to work long hours or at least put on a show of busyness. The quote also shows that although management is arguably the initial source of control, managers are equally caught in the web of control they contributed to weave in the first place.

Temporal Experiences of Busyness: Optimal, Excessive, and Quiet Time

We next examine how different individual perceptions of organizational controls (balanced, overused, underused) shape professionals' temporal experiences of busyness (optimal busyness, excessive busyness, and quiet time) and also, the way individuals navigate and transition between these temporal experiences. Individual perceptions of the intensity of controls are highlighted by the three horizontal arrows in Figure 1. We first outline that "balanced" organizational controls—when controls appear as moderately structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing—have a tendency to orient professionals toward a temporal experience of *optimal busyness* (characterized by enjoyment, elation, body energy, increased productivity, and acceptable work-life conflict). Second, when controls are perceived as "overused" and thus, strongly structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing, individuals experienced *excessive busyness* (the outcome of which was perceived as fatigue, depression, decreased productivity, and high work-life conflict). Third, we highlight how the perception of an "underuse" of organizational controls (weak structuring, rarefication, and synchronization) leads to temporal experiences of *quiet time* (anxiety, boredom, decreased productivity, and low work-life conflict). Table 3 below presents supplementary data.

Table 3. Supporting Evidence for Temporal Experiences

	Optimal busyness	Excessive busyness	Quiet time
Feelings & bodily perceptions: statements about how the temporal experience impacts the individuals emotionally, mentally, and physically	*Enjoyment, elation, body energy* "It's a bit of a double-edge sword really because normally when we're really busy it's because we're doing something quite exciting. So it's quite exciting kind of investigating frauds and, you know, and covering different things that have happened or trying to get your head around really complex things. So I think with that you kind of get the adrenaline and that kind of really helps you."—Sarah, Firm L "The times when my workload does shoot up, so around particular client year ends, it tends to be a finite period, but you know it's only going to be two to three weeks and you can see the end in sight fairly easily at that point. I'm somebody who is very task-oriented, and as long as I can see an end to the ..., the path to a goal, then I'm fairly comfortable with it." —Steve, Firm A "I quite enjoy it [busy periods] you know, even though it's pressured and the hours are long, I think, you know, there's a, you get a sort of certain buzz and motivation." —Karen, Firm A	*Fatigue, depression, helplessness* "So, I look at my diaries … early on in the day, and I'm just like, [..] 'oh my god – how am I going to do this?' [. . .] So, it's kind of a … trying to get all that to work is the endless juggling, it's quite wearing! I find that quite … you just get on … it just becomes part of your life but there are times when you just think every week is the same. It's like a mad panic to try and make everything work." —Sarah, Firm L "It got to a point before Christmas where I was dreading going to work. If I picked this thing [phone] up to look at emails, I felt physically sick and it, you know, it was just not . . . I was, you know, bursting into tears at every opportunity." —Karen, Firm A	*Anxiety, boredom, meaninglessness* "If I'm quiet I get really bored, really easily, and then I start getting depressed that I don't have enough to do." —Sarah, Firm L "I am now on maternity leave, expecting our second son any day. The first few days of going out for leisurely brunches, catching up with all the washing, and taking advantage of the sky movies subscription were quite fun and relaxing, but now (on day 5) I am starting to get a bit bored of washing and tidying, and more than that, pretty lonely. The lack of adult conversation/ pressure to get things done by deadlines and brain exercise has already started to kick in." —Sarah, Firm L, diary 17/07 "I feel more relaxed and more comfortable, but I also start to get quite perturbed because I'm not doing enough, so the expectation of partners in the organization is pretty high these days, so you can't have one too many periods where you're feeling comfortable and in control. That doesn't seem quite right." —Steve, Firm A
Productivity: statements about how the temporal experience impacts individuals' perceived productivity	*Increased productivity* "When it's really busy, professionally I love it because it's like adrenaline and it's exciting . . . Um, my brain is working really fast and I'm talking to lots of people. And the days get faster. And for example, this job I've done for the last 6 months, you know, it's ... Everyone in the firm knows about it. It was a really brilliant job. It's been in the press. It's been really exciting." —Amy, Firm L "I feel fresh, I feel ready to be back at work and this week, it's Friday afternoon, there's a lot going on but I don't feel, I'm not like, I'm back, feeling overwhelmed, I'm just sort of rolling with it, feeling quite positive, certainly a lot of work, it's not like it was before.	*Decreased productivity* "The way I felt was completely out of control and I don't like that feeling and really like, everything was loaded on me and I had nowhere to turn … You sort of get to that stage where it's just, you're almost out of your mind. Sometimes you just get so full that your mind just almost doesn't quite work." —Mayra, Firm A "It's also quite risky trying to do things so quickly. You're under such pressure, you're working such long hours. People are tired. That's when you make mistakes." —Karen, Firm A	*Decreased productivity* "I think if I was constantly just coasting, you just take your time about doing stuff, you're not as efficient. Yes, it gets a bit dull then doesn't it?" —Julie, Firm A "I think I like it when there is a bit of fresh-air actually, time pressure at least. Because that gives me a drive to achieve things but when there is less time pressure actually I get bored quickly and actually … things are taking a bit longer than what they should." —Fred, Firm A "When things are quiet sometimes it's a bit more difficult to actually motivate yourself to do it because it's less and okay, I've got this, got this stuff to do but none of it's particularly urgent and you

Table 3. (Continued)

	Optimal busyness	Excessive busyness	Quiet time
	… Feel a bit more in control, yeah." —Mayra, Firm A "I find that I do need a bit of stress to get me doing stuff. I'm not the sort of person that if everything was very routine, every day and never changed, I'd get nothing done, so having a bit of pressure and a bit of focus to get something sorted out is actually good, because it makes me do stuff. So, I don't want to get bored but it's just a bit more balance I suppose … a bit more balance, a bit more of downtime and a bit less of the intensity to make it a bit more smooth, would be nice." —Mayra, Firm A		know, what shall I do and then you've got your, you know, there's the distraction of people sending in random emails the whole time about this, that and then, and, I need to make, in those periods I need to make more of an effort to sort of focus on one thing at once and just deal with it."—Karen, Firm A
Work–life conflict: statements about how the temporal experience impacts individuals' perceived work–life balance	*Acceptable work–life conflict* "Because I love it selfishly when it's busy here [at work] but I'm definitely not probably as nice [to my kids and husband] or calm or there as much. When I am there I'm like (snapping): "Come on I have to go, I have to go." Boom, boom, boom. And it's all rushed and maybe a bit stressful." —Amy, Firm L "The hours in the last week at work has been 9-5, which is coming after a long period of working very long hours. It feels good be able to perform my duties at work and balance my responsibilities as a mother. I also work from home one day per week and it allows me the flexibility of getting my son from school and working back my hours later in the evening. I love being a working mom and feels good that I can balance both even if it is only for a few months in the year." —Marsha, Firm A, diary, 12/07	*High work–life conflict* "I was really struggling, really struggling not to feel guilty. And I just wanted to be able to accept that this was how it was going to be for the next sort of five or six weeks, and I was struggling with that [laughter]. Whereas as the time went on, it got easier and that just really … having a difficult time of not feeling guilty, like not being … I really felt that I was being … I wasn't doing anything very well." —Mayra, Firm A "I work, I work, work, work and you know, sometimes you have weekends free but you sleep for half of that because you're so tired. No, it's not much of a life so it has … it has been a bit of a momentous few months really." —Karen, Firm A "this is always a really busy and stressful time to get everything finished or handed over to colleagues [before the holiday]. At the moment I have more work than i think i can ever remember having on and it all needs me to be involved for various reasons. Then my son was ill in the night - he had a vomitting bug from 1am until this afternoon. I had to go to work . . . this is one of those rare times that the balance doesnt work and i feel very torn and tired!!" —Amy, Firm L, diary 28/07	*Low work–life conflict* "The home situation is much nicer because I'm home 1 or 2 days a week. You worry then about work because, unfortunately for us if we're quiet … we have to be busy to make money. So, you then start thinking hmm, when is my next job coming? […] In your head sort of is worrying maybe more because you're not occupied with just being busy." —Amy, Firm L "I'll be home on Friday. I took the kids to school Monday and yesterday, which is really rare, because I'm in a quiet period. So because I've lost 6 months of my life [intense work period], I'm really lucky here. I just make sure that I make up for it. I'm probably happier and calmer and more relaxed and nicer to my children and my husband now than I would have been a couple of months ago." —Amy, Firm L, diary 11/11

Navigating Different Temporal Experiences of Busyness

Our findings show that professionals regularly transition between different temporal experiences of busyness. Some of these experiences were considered as optimal and desired, whereas others were characterized by suboptimal busyness, leading professionals toward moments of detachment, drag, or boredom or on the contrary, of extreme tiredness. Such a periodic alternation between the felt temporal experiences depends on their perception of the intensity and excessiveness of work pressures in a given moment and their capacity to control it, as we will see in the section on control of temporality. Before we focus on each of the identified temporal experiences in more detail, explaining their more specific implications for the individual, we first provide an example from our data that highlights the way in which temporal experiences were commonly navigated and described by the professionals: as momentary and fleeting states.

This oscilation between different temporal experiences (excessive busyness, optimal busyness and quiet time) is recurrent, as the following extracts from Mayra's (director in Firm A) weekly diaries show. The first entry from late August shows her dealing with excessive busyness in an intense period before an important deadline.

> Leaving early and getting home late each night this week —inevitable as I am closing a deal—but really feeling like I am missing my daughter and missing out on her day to day. Recognize that it is a tough few week ahead and want to accept there will be a few weeks of not being around much, rather than keep feeling guilty about it. Not easy balance at the moment! —Weekly diary, August 20

In the next entry, from the beginning of September, Mayra recounts how she experiences a few days of quiet time and enjoys more time with her family. However, coming back to work, she has to deal with immediate problems that appeared during her absence, and she anticipates having to work very long hours for the rest of the week to fix the issues.

> Over the bank holiday weekend, I was expecting I had to work but the deadline shifted to later in September. I had a choice to work or not work over the weekend given this. I decided to not work and enjoy the break away with my family. Lots of things went wrong for the day (Tuesday) that I was out of the office—meaning that now I will be stuck in the office late after work every night this week. —Weekly diary, September 2

In October, Mayra finally notes that she had completed the large project and as a consequence, had the chance to take some quiet time with her daughter to "compensate."

> I finally finished a very large piece of work that had kept me in the office and away from home during Sept much more than I had wanted to be. I had Monday off work and spent time with my daughter. We had a great day. It made me realize that I need to keep the work peaks to be infrequent (but necessary from time to time) and then make up some time afterwards at home to compensate. —Weekly diary, October 9

In our second interview with Mayra, we reviewed what she wrote in the weekly diaries. Recounting her experience working on that "very large piece of work" in September, she likened the alternation of optimal and excessive busyness to waves that come and go. Moments of optimal temporal experiences—which she describes as being "in the zone"—full of excitement and meaningfulness were regularly interspersed with periods of less optimal busyness characterized by excessive tiredness and feelings of meaninglessness.

> [I]t was quite a sustained period, so it was five … probably six weeks of really long hours. Sort of, you know, minimal 12 hour, but usually longer days, six days a week, sometimes seven, so sometimes not even with a break—it was very long. Some of that, I went through waves, so at some points … you're really like, you're on it, you're in the zone, elated, can see the end game, it's all making sense, but then there's a lot of those periods when you start getting really tired … and you think this is just not worth it. —Mayra, director, Firm A

She also explained that, from her point of view, peaks at work are needed because one is very productive and focused during those moments, but this comes often at the expense of one's family life.

In each account, we find that the optimal moments were relatively short and that the transition between the different experiences was seamless. However, as Mayra noted in our interview, busy moments were enjoyable, particularly as they were perceived as being short, so one felt in control of them and could perform optimally.

> I think the reason why it became so good is because everyone knew that it was time banded, they knew what the deadline was, the deadline wasn't moving and then they could all have a break.

Controls as Balanced: Optimal Busyness

A systematic analysis of the mentioned temporal experiences reveals that when organizational controls were perceived as balanced (moderately structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing), participants could experience optimal busyness: a short, fast-paced, and focused temporal experience, in which they felt in control of their time. Most of our participants expressed their liking for this particular kind of temporal experience characterized by outcomes such as enjoyment, elation, bodily energy, increased productivity, and potentially

increased but acceptable level of work-life conflict. Although controls were present to structure the temporal experiences and exert a degree of pressure on professionals by, for instance, setting deadlines or raising time consciousness through time sheets, they were not perceived as strong or invasive. On the contrary, the structuring effect of temporal controls appeared as balanced, increasing motivation and generating optimal productivity.

> Well, actually, in a way the more intensive periods are, you know, better and more enjoyable because it's a lot, I find it a lot easier to be focused and get on with stuff when you've got a lot on your list and deadlines, because again you've got that sort of, you've got that sense of urgency and motivation. —Karen, director, Firm A

Generally, our participants explained optimal busyness as a moment in which they felt capable of managing optimally the different requests on their time and felt in control of the work demands, which they found stimulating but not overwhelming.

> It's the intellectual challenge of working I think and juggling everything and sometimes you do feel like you can do it all actually; I can be a great mother and a really good lawyer and a good wife and some of the times that sense of achievement is fantastic. —Maria, senior associate, Firm L

Such temporal experiences of optimal busyness were often described as "the buzz" or "the zone": a hectic and energizing feeling and an absorptive temporal quality that participants experience when engaged in short, intense periods of work. Similarly, Nicole, an ex-director in Firm A, asserts that she prefers being very busy and deadline driven because that gives her an adrenaline rush.

> I don't like being quiet and I think working in our sort of industry, you run on adrenaline so much of the time and unless you get that adrenaline rush because you are working so hard, you get bored very quickly and the day just drags. So, I think we're very deadline driven constantly.

This optimal temporal experience can captivate professionals, making them "go all day without eating and not even notice" (Eric, director, Firm A): skipping meals, rest, or forgetting about their personal lives and families. This experience signals immersion, an instance of synchronization with the temporality of work. The temporal intensification (a form of time rarefication) produced by controls appears as moderate as, despite the rhythm being fast, people still enjoy it because it is perceived as being short-term.

> I quite enjoy it, being short, intensive bursts, it's quite nice to be part of all that! —Ben, senior manager, Firm A

Both Eric's and Ben's quotes emphasize that in order for busyness to remain optimal, the intensive moments have to be short; otherwise, they are likely to be experienced as excessive, and tiredness, frustration, and depression could also set in. This highlights that optimal busyness is often difficult to achieve and sustain because of its inherently fleeting and fragile nature. It is all about finding the right pace, focus, and length and can easily be disturbed and broken down by controls becoming too oppressive (overused) or on the contrary, not present enough (underused). In fact, the temporal experience of optimal busyness is linked with an experience of controls as balanced because people feel themselves to be in control of time.

> I'll always prefer the smooth because then things are nice and, you know, you're on top of things. I like to feel in control of what's going on. So, I like to think that mostly things work smoothly because I'm well managed and I've organized it all … *If things do go off a* little *bit … it does break things up …* [but] that little bit of adrenaline and kind of living life on the edge situation can be quite fun, you know, in a sense. —Rihana, senior manager, Firm A

As explained by Rihana, when immersed in optimal busyness and despite time pressures, she feels "on top of things" and "in control," pointing to how controls are perceived as moderately rarefying. The experienced temporality appears as smooth, being neither one of time famine nor one of time dragging. It is more similar to an experience of timelessness when "the workday flies by" (Tim, Firm A). Similarly, for Cristina, these periods are not devoid of organizational pressures; however, she feels in control of them, and thus, this temporality is enjoyable.

> I haven't really enjoyed work much at all recently. I can almost remember I had like a moment a couple of weeks ago where I thought this isn't bad and I think I had one like earlier on this week. Then yesterday afternoon I thought, oh, this is okay, and I'm not being blasé, it's literally those three moments in the past month or so that I've actually enjoyed … I enjoyed those [periods] because work was still as stressful and as busy as it ever is but I felt like I was riding it well and finishing on time and going home to see my family. So when that happens, that's when I have fun. —Cristina, Firm A

Our participants commonly experienced optimal busyness as living "on the edge": a delicate balance between control and autonomy where one feels in control of the work demands. This experience is highly attractive because it offers hope that one can do more work without getting bored or falling into exhaustion. Optimal busyness evokes in participants a particularly intense, embodied, and absorptive temporal experience. Such moments of absorption point to

an experience of important temporal synchronization when people's bodies become synchronized and operate according to the rhythms of work to the extent that they can lose track of time and become desynchronized with nonwork rhythms. It was not uncommon for our participants to cite such instances but also, situations where optimal busyness by, for instance, becoming too long "tips over," crossing the threshold beyond where busyness is no longer considered "healthy" to where it touches the body's limits.

In addition, even though most of our participants expressed a liking for busy periods, they were nevertheless aware of the negative effects these periods could have on their lives—such as an increase in work-life conflict—if they become too long. For instance, Talia, a support lawyer in Firm L, described the effects on her children.

> So when it's an intensive period at work, I actually quite enjoy the work; I like it but it does have a knock-on effect on the kids. So they … then become very clingy and quite difficult, especially now they understand and I explain to them why I have to be late or I can't put them to bed, but when that happens more than … two days, it starts becoming a problem for me at home because they want me.

The temporal experience of optimal busyness is highly fragile and short lived because it can easily become misaligned if people start experiencing controls as overused (e.g., heightened levels of pressure in terms of new work assignments or deadlines, pushing it toward excessive) or if they, on the contrary, experience controls as weak or underused. As this optimal temporal experience appears difficult to maintain, professionals often experience what can be called *suboptimal busyness* and which we explore in the following sections. These are moments of quiet time, often described as detachment, drag, or boredom, or of excessive busyness when fatigue and helplessness take over and the body cannot keep up with the rhythm of work.

Controls as Overused: Excessive Busyness

In situations when organizational controls took over (*controls as overused*) and individuals experienced a general lack of control over their time, an excessive busyness temporality was triggered. Excessive busyness is a hectic, sped-up temporal experience in which individuals experience fatigue, helplessness, decreased productivity, and high work-life conflict in the face of heightened and sustained pressure to juggle a large amount of activities. In these instances, organizational controls were experienced as strongly structuring through the presence of, for example, too many deadliness and a general experience of a lack of control over one's time. Controls pushed individuals toward a rushed temporal experience or time famine (strong rarefication) and enforced professionals' synchronization to work rhythms, intensifying work, increasing the number of hours spent working and thinking about work, and producing desynchronization with nonwork rhythms that result in increased work-family conflict.

We find that in periods of excessive busyness, the enjoyment and enthusiasm present in optimal busyness tend to fade away because of bodily and mental exhaustion caused by overwork: "So you get four and a half hours of sleep and you have to go and do it all again—that's when it becomes really horrid at times" (Stella, director, Firm A).

When intense periods of work become overextended, our participants were prone to experiencing fatigue and meaninglessness (see the example of Mayra). The experience of excessive busyness resulted from a perception of controls as constraining and oppressive, thus structuring people's time beyond their control.

> Longer term, you know, there's obviously an underlying sense of frustration there around these things that does keep recurring and that you know full well that, like I said, even though I cut my hours last year, I'm not even remotely surprised that they bounce back. The risk of it is always there and that inability to kind of really … control it. —Dan, partner, Firm A

The lack of control over their time experienced by people during excessive busyness is also because of a pervasive perception that all the things they deal with have become extremely urgent (strong rarefication): "[I]f you are busy, then there is no balancing, it's just fighting fires and putting out the one that is the most serious" (Ilan, associate, Firm L).

When controls lead to forms of strong synchronization with the work rhythm, professionals display compulsive engagement with their smartphones and emails, such as recognized by Kevin, a law firm partner.

> My wife … lost it completely with me because of my addiction to my emails. She was like, "just look at yourself, you're not having any holiday, this isn't a holiday … You're on this thing [smartphone] 365 days a year and you're always thinking about working."

In these instances, professionals become completely desynchronized from their family rhythms, which can create conflict. This experience also underlines the fine line existing between the different experiences of busyness and how optimal busyness is a highly fragile temporal mode, which can easily slide toward becoming excessive in the case of prolonged synchronization with work rhythms.

Excessive busyness can have serious negative consequences for professionals' health and could lead to

episodes of fatigue, depression, burnout, and stress-induced sickness as well as being linked to decreased productivity. This was the case for Eric who went through two episodes of burnout, which forced him to stop working and take medication.

> I just got into quite a dark place where I wasn't eating properly and then I wasn't sleeping properly and then, you just sort of get into a downwards spiral really, in terms of the clarity of your thoughts, just disappears and then you become less effective and then you sleep even less and … I got pretty bad, I ended up on medication for a while. —Eric, director, Firm A

This excessive experience points to a temporal mode during which individuals experience controls as constraining because of strong structuring: that is, too many work requests and deadlines ("the stress has got too much really, just too much pressure, too much to do, just sort of stop being able to see clearly") and rarefication of time expressed as time famine as well as synchronization with work rhythms to an extent it leads to desynchronization with bodily and family rhythms.

> I have worked on jobs in the past where the hours have been very long but it seems to have gone on for six weeks and that's quite … that gets very wearing, it's very tiring, it's tiring, you just don't get enough sleep, you don't exercise enough, let alone see anybody else or do anything else, so I find it more difficult to recover. —Sarah, partner, Firm A

Controls as Underused: Quiet Time

In instances when organizational controls are experienced as underused or weak because of low structuring, rarefying, and synchronization, individuals experienced what we call quiet time. Quiet time is a slowed-down temporal experience in which time appears as decelerated by a period of fewer hectic and action-packed events. In such instances, professionals do not have imminent deadlines nor time pressures and thus time seems abundant. They feel in control of their time rather than being constrained by an organizational rhythm. In these situations, professionals often described experiencing boredom, meaninglessness, and decreased productivity. Moreover, professionals generally experienced a high degree of control over their work time as they could choose when they started and finished their day without experiencing stress, pressures, or the need to compensate (for instance, by working in the evenings). However, if these periods became too long, individuals became anxious and started looking for ways to get busy again. This is partly because, as we showed previously, individuals' worth in professional settings was linked to their ability to be or appear busy and show a high utilization rate.

Quiet times, whether that be time off, vacations, or periods of troughs of activity, are often the object of professionals' fantasies during busy periods. When professionals enter a quieter period, they may take time to "catch up" with their family (John, associate, Firm L) or arrive later at work. The pressures to temporally synchronize with work are weak as work is more predictable than in busier periods, and they also experience time as more abundant (weak rarefication): "[W]hen it's quiet […] and I'm going home, then it's quite a nice routine, you know. I get home, I see the kids, I'll put them to bed and I feel like it's a lot more relaxing" (Talia, senior support lawyer, Firm L).

However, many professionals also used quieter periods to do work-related activities that they did not normally have the time for during busier periods (such as networking): "[I] arranged a few networking events with the bankers and investment banks because our … client business development things, those aren't things I normally have time to do" (John, Firm L).

Compared with busier periods, quiet times do not have the capacity to make professionals feel positive and enthusiastic about their work and themselves.

> The months of June and July have been quiet and it's been great because I've been doing other things, but it hasn't felt hugely rewarding. I haven't felt massively positive about work. I've come in. I've done my work and there's been occasions when I've literally had nothing in my inbox and that's just "Wow" … very unusual. —Henry, director, Firm A

Although most participants agreed that fast, pressured work periods ought to be punctuated by quiet time to allow for a "recharging of batteries" or to provide a sense of rest, we also find that when a quiet period is extended, professionals generally became anxious and worried.

> When you go through a quiet period at work you sometimes almost feel guilty that you're not doing enough, like ooh should I be doing something else, should I be out there, should I be doing this, should I be doing that and you do go through periods of feeling guilty, which is ridiculous, but you do. —Robert, director, Firm A

This shows that even if individuals experience organizational controls as less present during quieter periods, such controls operate unobtrusively to regulate professionals' temporal performance and compliance during these periods.

Moreover, without more pronounced time structuring introduced by deadlines, professionals could

experience boredom and decreased productivity during quiet times: "[I] get bored [and become] … much less productive" (Eric, director, Firm A). Similarly, another participant asserts: "If I'm quiet I get really bored, really easily, and then I start getting depressed that I don't have enough to do" (Sylvia, senior associate, Firm L).

During quiet times, controls operate with weak time rarefication, and thus, time is perceived as dragging: that is, it passes too slowly, or too few events seem to be happening over the course of a period of time. As explained by Tim, a manager at Firm A, "the slow days kind of drag on a little more … I have to put forth a lot more conscious effort to enjoy the slow days."

As organizational controls can produce synchronization with a fast pace of work and desynchronization from nonwork rhythms, many people note some difficulty in resynchronizing with these rhythms during quiet times. Our participants commonly expressed uneasiness, anxiety, or even dislike toward "switching off." Kathryn's description of her feelings at the start of her maternity leave is illustrative of such experiences and is shared by many other professionals as they experience quiet time.

> I was terribly excited about having the time off … and then the moment that it came and I stopped work … I was like, "I can't do this, I can't not work—it's just the weirdest thing ever," and I really surprised myself at my reaction to stopping work … I thought I would have really enjoyed my freedom, enjoyed putting my feet up for four weeks and I didn't at all. I hated it. —Kathryn, partner, Firm L

As with our participants, our findings consistently showed how many participants could not stop themselves from being busy or producing more busyness even during quieter periods by, for instance, prolonging their workdays.

During quiet times following intense work periods, some professionals could experience withdrawal symptoms similar to those reported in work-related compulsions (Mazmanian et al. 2013, Robinson 2014). They not only manifested psychologically through feelings of anxiety, meaninglessness, or discontent, but they also had physical and bodily manifestations. Thus, Sarah described how at the end of a busy period, her body, liberated from the flow of adrenaline that kept it working, became frail and got sick.

> I've now [at the end of a busy work period] come down sick because my body, the adrenaline has stopped and I kind of go, oh I can breathe, and then you get sick. —Sarah, partner, Firm A

This shows that even if individuals experience organizational controls as less present and powerful during quieter periods, such controls are internalized and unobtrusively regulate professionals' experiences of time.

Control of Temporality: Recreating or Prolonging Optimal Busyness

The previous section linked different perceptions of organizational control (balanced, overused, and underused) to corresponding temporal experiences (optimal busyness, excessive busyness, quiet time) and characterized their main outcomes for the individual (body/emotion, productivity, and impact on worklife). Depending on the perceived intensity of controls, as we showed, professionals often find themselves in suboptimal temporal experiences of either excessive busyness or quiet time. Yet, our findings equally show that people can control temporality to some extent by either prolonging or (re-)creating optimal busyness when controls become occasionally too constraining (or alternatively are perceived as weak). This is accomplished by manipulating the *pace* (energizing bodies/creating excitement), *focus* (narrowing focus on the present), and *length* (fantasizing about busyness being short term) of their temporal experiences. This process, which we call *the control of temporality*, is represented in Figure 1 by the two vertical arrows between excessive and optimal busyness on the one side and quiet time and optimal busyness on the other.

Manipulating Pace: Energizing Bodies and Creating Excitement

As we noted previously, optimal busyness experiences are characterized by enjoyment, elation, and body energy, which help the individual to go through and feel in control of work demands. Thus, our participants reported that they regularly use different substances in order to further boost and energize their bodies and to prolong an experience of excitement during optimal busyness or to recreate it when facing fatigue and frustration because of excessive busyness as well as anxiety and boredom during quiet time. By being able to manipulate pace (for instance, by doing their work faster) and thus, do more work in a given time, they attempted to stay on top of high workloads and regain temporal control, at least in their own perceptions. Most of them cited using different energizing substances such as coffee or energy drinks but also, alcohol or medication such as antidepressants, with effect on the pace of their temporal experiences. Booster substances can reenergize the body when dulled by fatigue, for instance, by sustaining and enhancing the "adrenaline rush" stemming from optimal busyness experiences. Alternatively, our participants cited the use of substances, such as antidepressants, which "calm" work stress, allowing people to gain control and to navigate serenely the intense work periods.

> Normally I would have been very stressed and quite emotional about things, but I went to the doctor … I knew there was no way I was going to get through it

> by myself—so I actually went to the doctor and she put me on anti-depressants and that, that basically sort of got me through, you know. *I felt myself being quite calm about, you know, while other people were getting excited and I was [really calm], it was quite nice* [our emphasis]. —Karen, director, Firm A

We also noticed that professionals sometimes used substances such as alcohol in order to put themselves in the "right mood" to do work that "needs to be done": "I just knew that I had to get through the work. I didn't have any choice. I probably drank way too much wine at home at my kitchen table in the evening, working just getting it done" (Nicole, director, Firm A). Work that seems boring and dull or just feels like too much can be made more exciting and appealing by creating excitement through the use of alcohol or/and a cozy environment: "[I prefer to] send emails later in the evening when I'm sat at home with a glass of wine which is a lot more pleasant than still sat in the office" (Jeremy, director, Firm A).

In time, some individuals may not need external stimulation anymore, as they will have internalized that complying with organizational controls will make them feel satisfied and great about themselves, which gives them the mental strength to endure overwork.

> That helps mentally. There's a knowledge, having done it for several years … that there's a great feeling having met the deadline and done it and walked out the door having done it. There's the knowledge of what the feeling is like at the end of it all … You feel massively rewarded when you've done it. —Henry, director, Firm A

Running on adrenaline, a "buzz" helps the participants to transcend their physical limits, directing them into a temporal experience of optimal busyness in which the body itself becomes synchronized with a fast-paced work rhythm. In some instances, however, the pace can be experienced as too fast and overwhelming, causing individuals to lose control: "Sometimes, if I'm in a situation like that, I'll go all day without eating and not even notice, things like that, you're just buzzing—that's healthy stress but it has tipped over the edge on occasion" (Eric, Firm A).

As shown, a fine line exists between moments of optimal and excessive busyness. This is what Eric refers to when mentioning the "tipping over" of stress, crossing the threshold of "healthy" busyness into excessive busyness where the body reaches its limits and forces a slowdown in the work pace through sickness and burnout. Moreover, bursts of adrenaline can disrupt the normal bodily cycles and upset sleep routines, desynchronizing people from normal bodily rhythms: "I definitely feel, when I'm going through these intense busy times, my sleep is really impacted. I'll wake up at 3:00, 4:00 in the morning, and then I'm awake" (Elena, manager, Firm A).

By reenergizing their bodies and recreating excitement for work, professionals construct moments of optimal busyness. However, such practices can also be considered a form of body instrumentalization that, in the long term, may engender severe negative effects on workers' physical and mental health. Rather than occurring consciously, techniques to energize and/or appease bodies tend to appear in the professionals' routine adaptation to pressurized work rhythms. The recreation of the adrenaline rush felt during exciting work experiences makes individuals more focused on work but also, potentially more oblivious to their bodily and other personal needs.

Manipulating Temporal Focus: Narrowing Focus on the Present

As we noted previously, optimal busyness experiences are characterized by increased productivity. We found that achieving this optimal productivity was linked to producing moments either of narrow focus on the present or of absorption.

Focusing narrowly on the present and not allowing oneself to "worry" about the future seems to be a compelling and effective way on the one side, to cope with situations of excessive busyness and on the other, to remain productive while attempting to regain control over time. The temporal focus on present ("the here and now") allows professionals to construct moments of optimal busyness when they can focus on work and nothing else. As an exemplification, Cristina gave up doing client-focused work, so her work is not so time pressured anymore. She recognizes missing those moments of optimal time experience of focus and increased productivity when she enjoyed working long hours.

> I remember being really, really focused about particularly long hours±I never found it a problem, and working on Saturday as well because you know it's for a short period of time … A large volume of work to do, just working through it and it's quite a pleasure to be that focused and driven. In a way, I kind of miss that now in that you can't get that focused [now] … that kind of just staying and working and working and working. —Cristina, manager, Firm A

This focus on the present allows them to invest all of their mental and physical energies in the present but also, brings about a desynchronization with nonwork routines: "[I]t's almost like everything else gets missed … you just completely, purely focus on work and just try to make sure that you get just enough sleep to get through" (Nicole, ex-director, Firm A). By attempting to stay in control of their temporal demands, people, such as Nicole, end up overworking.

This deep focus, even if perceived as an optimal state because it allows them to be productive and get the work done, has some negative consequences for professionals, as pointed out by many participants. Notably, it has a tendency to make them forget about everything else or push it into the background. This does not just apply to eating and sleeping, but also, to their private and family lives, manifesting in ways such as forgetting to call home during a one-week assignment abroad: "[A]s a parent I should want to speak to … [my son] at least once a day … so the idea that I could get so caught up in work … and then I don't have time to phone him made me feel bad … I should have, not could have, definitely should have made time to make the phone call, at least tried" (Cat, senior manager, Firm A). As shown by this quote, a narrow focus on the present and forgetting the future can have negative consequences for individuals' private lives and intensify work-family conflict. This is the case with Tiffany, a director in Firm A, who expressed regret about neglecting to get involved in her son's schooling as a result of being absorbed in her work: "I was only in the here and now and you can never only be in the here and now as a working parent." Similarly, while preparing to quit the firm, Kate realized in hindsight that she had gotten into a vicious cycle of "draining" herself: "I've really drained myself doing what I'm doing now, but I think the difficulty is that when you are in that zone, it's very difficult to maintain perspective and think about possibilities outside of what you're doing" (Kate, senior associate, Firm L). Focusing narrowly on the present in order to deal with high pressures and workload not only makes people forget about themselves and their family lives but also, shows how individuals are collectively able to lose perspective and not see time passing.

> I came back and I saw our Head of Audit … and he said, "Oh I haven't seen you around for a while." I said, "I've been on maternity leave for nine months." He hadn't even noticed I'd gone. I mean, because we just get so caught up in our day-to-day; before you know it, another three months have gone by. You notice it because you're out. —Sarah, partner, Firm A

This quote shows that unlike in optimal busyness when times flies by, the passage of time appears as slowed down during quiet periods of time.

Manipulating Length: Fantasizing About Busyness Being Short Term

As our findings showed, in order for busyness experiences to be optimal they had to be perceived as short; otherwise, they led to suboptimal temporal experiences.

During periods of excessive busyness, professionals generally attempted to gain some control over temporality and thus, create/prolong optimal busyness by imagining that the busy periods will be short: "I guess what gets me through it is knowing that I'm not going to do this for the rest of my life. This is going to be a short-term" (Kathryn, partner, Firm L). Similarly, Shaun, a director in Firm A, recognized that it helps him mentally to think that busy periods are followed by quieter periods: "No matter how hard you have to work, you know that there will come a time when you can just relax."

The thought that the current intense work period is short and also, sometimes the thought of the pleasant respite following it help professionals to enjoy the work intensity more. However, this is often just a fantasy, which makes them forget that, as many of them recognize, the respite may never come.

> If I'm involved in an intensive piece of work, an injunction application or something like that, I know that I've got until, you know, a week tomorrow … and it will be done and dusted. So you sort of break it down into bite size chunks and things that you can mentally rationalize and you forget that of course a week tomorrow the next one [piece of work] might hit or there might be something else. —Kevin, director, Firm L

It is not only during periods of excessive busyness that professionals attempt to manipulate temporal length. During quiet times, professionals also feel pressured not to let this period last for too long, so many of them start looking for new things to do.

> If I haven't been busy in a long time … like a month … then I'll be worried and focus more, going round asking for work and staying in the office later helping out or even [do] non-work related projects. —Sylvia, senior associate, Firm L

As we can see in this quote, during quiet time people can recreate optimal busyness by attempting to shorten quiet time by getting busy and by becoming more focused.

Fantasizing about busyness being a short-term condition deflects professionals' attention from their daily struggle and fatigue on the one side, and on the other side, it seemingly allows participants to regain some illusion of personal control over their lives. However, by shifting people's attention toward an imaginary future, where work ends, busyness remains questioned. Thus, busyness can continue as usual, and as such, these strategies end up reinforcing busyness.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although the relationship between strong organizational controls and excessive hours in professional settings has been recognized in previous literature, very few studies have explored and theorized the *specific*

temporal experiences that organizational controls produce and how individuals respond to them. Our study of the temporal experiences of 81 professionals in knowledge-intensive jobs offers a unique and rare empirical account in this regard. Our findings advance theorizing on control and temporality by outlining how seemingly similar controls produce different temporal experiences of optimal busyness, excessive busyness, and quiet time. A key finding emerging from our data is that temporal experiences of busyness are an effect of organizational controls but also, of professionals seeking and desiring to construct and (re-)produce optimal busyness, an attractive temporal experience in which they feel in control of their time demands.

Our conceptual model (Figure 1) suggests that organizations can control employees' temporal performance and compliance through a process we called the *temporality of controls*. We show how the temporality of controls manifests through structuring, rarefying, and synchronizing workers' temporal experiences toward *excessive busyness* when control is perceived as overused, *quiet time* when control is perceived as weak or underused, and *optimal busyness* when control is perceived as balanced. Our core construct is optimal busyness, a short-lived, intense temporal experience, which is characterized by fast pace, deep focus, and short length with the outcomes of bodily energy and enjoyment, increased productivity, and acceptable work-life conflict. Our study highlights that this experience is fleeting and difficult to maintain as it becomes regularly disrupted and alternates between moments of excessive busyness and quiet time. Moreover, our findings also show that individuals also attempt to (re-)produce optimal busyness by manipulating the pace, focus, and length of their temporal experiences, a process we call *control of temporality*.

Contributions to Organizational Control

Our study carries important implications for understanding the relationship between time and control in organizations. Employees' use of time and work intensity have been some of the main targets of organizational controls ever since the first "time and motion studies" (Taylor 1911). This attempt to control employees' pace and time is more visible in knowledge-intensive settings where these time variables are directly related to their firms' revenue and profitability.

Studies on organizational controls (e.g., peer, cultural, and normative) (Kunda 1992, Barker 1993, Alvesson 1995, Robertson and Swan 2003, Robertson et al. 2003, Anderson-Gough et al. 2005) have highlighted the role of controls in producing extreme temporal experiences by increasing the number of hours worked and thus, creating time famine and work intensification (Perlow 1998, 1999; Michel 2011; Lupu and Empson 2015; Reid 2015). In contrast to this research, which mostly highlights extreme temporal experiences, we show that workers exhibit diverse temporal responses (excessive busyness, optimal busyness, and quiet time) to seemingly similar organizational controls, depending on their perception of control as balanced, overused, or underused as well as on their ability to produce/suppress different temporal experiences. This points to the fact that work demands are themselves not stable, and controls do not always drive people toward excessive busyness but are sometimes experienced as oppressive and at other times, as enabling.

Examining control in professional service firms such as law and audit firms contributes to our knowledge of why greedy institutions (Coser 1974) have such a powerful hold of professionals. Factors such as economic uncertainty, financialization, relentless cost cutting, and continuous connectivity contribute to an escalation of time demands in knowledge-intensive jobs (Barley 1997, Hassan and Purser 2007, Mazmanian et al. 2013, Rosa 2013, Blagoev and Schreyögg 2019). These greedy institutions make unlimited claims over professionals' time and energy. Our research has explored how organizational controls structure, rarefy, and synchronize professionals' time in order to create ever greater temporal compliance and increase individuals' performance.

Prior research has shown that organizational controls are compelling and difficult to resist and they also contribute to the creation of attractive workplaces (Hochschild 1997, Kosmala and Herrbach 2006, Karreman and Alvesson 2009, Michel 2011), but this research does not explain their attractiveness. By examining workers' temporal experiences as an effect of organizational controls, our findings propose a novel explanation for the persistence of long hours: *optimal busyness*. This attractive temporal experience is rendered possible by an experience of smooth alignment between control and autonomy where people experience organizational controls as balanced. It appears as a momentary fleeting balance, which provides hope that one can respond to temporal demands in an optimal way: that is, without falling into exhaustion or getting bored. It is a balance where one feels that one is carried by the organizational structures of control rather than being oppressed by them. It is an experience of time where one feels that one is the central agent, rather than the organization, and that one can successfully control one's work time. Optimal busyness is this temporary optimal experience of time where work is not overwhelming and one is not superfluous.

Our findings point to the compelling nature of organizational controls stemming from their ability to construct optimal busyness as linked to positive

individual and organizational outcomes. Moreover, from an organizational perspective, optimal busyness is linked to increased performance and compliance; employees work with enthusiasm, energy, and increased productivity to achieve ever-increasing organizational performance and in the process, comply with organizational demands to work long hours and sacrifice private time. We find that employees continuously search for immersive experiences, such as a "buzz" or "high," which make them feel in control ("riding the wave") despite excessive work and pressure. Our findings show that busyness also originates from the employees themselves and their aspirations for optimal busyness. Participants in our study thereby indirectly participated in the intensification of their own control. Paradoxically, then, we show that even though workers' can exercise agency through time manipulation and body instrumentalization, their agency can still reinforce and perpetuate the control system.

Compared with optimal busyness, excessive busyness and quiet time thus appear as suboptimal temporal experiences. Through promoting temporal compliance through the sacrifice of private time, excessive busyness does not promote temporal performance as fatigued, frustrated professionals have a decreased productivity and potentially increased risk of professional errors. Concerning quiet time, the temporal experience fails to achieve either temporal performance or temporal compliance, as professionals reported experiencing boredom, anxiety linked to their performance, and decreased productivity.

Our findings highlight that organizations and individuals can, at least in the short term, benefit from creating optimal busyness. However, our findings also raise a warning flag about the unintended consequences of organizational controls designed to maximize employees' commitment by producing attractive temporal experiences. Professionals' aspirations toward optimal busyness can produce desirable, but also, compulsive, temporal experiences where people continuously search for immersive experiences of busyness and perform at an optimal level. Moreover, the seductive grip of temporal experiences created by organizational controls has a potentially high cost for individuals and their families as a result of desynchronization with bodily and family rhythms.

Organizations also benefit from the propensity of controls to increase professionals' temporal performance and compliance by constructing optimal busyness, a temporal experience where individuals report increased focus and productivity as well as enjoyment and elation for their work in spite of working long hours. However, our model suggests a continuous cycle of cultivating optimal busyness coming not only directly from organizational controls but also, from professionals' attempts to maintain and create optimal busyness—an attractive temporal experience linked to optimal performance and compliance with temporal norms.

Contributions to the Sociology of Work Time

Our findings complement sociological theorizing on work and time, in which prior focus has been on the study of workers' time use, temporal strategies, and notably, work-life balance (van den Scott 2014, Gerstel and Clawson 2018, Feldman et al. 2019) as well as how these have broader implications for workers' identity construction and not least for increasing levels of overwork and work-life conflict (Schor 1991, Hochschild 1997, Perlow 1998, Bunting 2005, Bailyn 2006, Kreiner et al. 2009, Wajcman 2015).

Similarly to van den Scott (2014), we find the prior literature has neglected the temporal experience of work (i.e., how specific pace and rhythm of work are experienced by the individual) in its overemphasis on exploring the amount of time workers use, allocate, or integrate between work and nonwork (i.e., how much time individuals use and how). In this regard, our research sheds light on how professionals regularly navigate between specific temporal experiences of different pace, intensity, and length and also details the individual consequences of these experiences. We find that optimal busyness—described as a buzz, a fast-paced burst of intensive work—was experienced as energizing, elating, and attractive, whereas excessive busyness could lead to hopelessness and depression, and quiet time could lead to anxiety and boredom. Because of the specific, embodied nature of these temporal experiences, our study showed how the professionals also sought to repeat and recreate the attractive temporality of optimal busyness that helped them to produce a bodily energy that enabled them to "feel in control" even when facing excessive temporal demands. In this sense, we also complement prior theorizations that have instead emphasized what individuals' engagement in relation to work time means and signifies to others (Gershuny 2005, Feldman et al. 2019). Answering the call of van den Scott (2014), we have empirically explored the temporal embeddedness of work and also, how individuals "experience the movement of time" and how they can resist temporality imposed on them.

Previous research suggested several related insights while addressing and conceptualizing temporal experiences less directly. For example, Hochschild (1997) and Robinson (2014) show that hard work can be a way to escape from a bad relationship or to make up for an absence in one's personal life. However, most of our interviewees did not have this motivation but instead, explained a need for busyness in order to enjoy their work and avoid boredom. Unlike the priests from the study of Kreiner et al. (2009) who used

different temporal strategies to ensure a balance between work and home, our professionals were instead motivated by their desire for (optimal) busyness, attempting to reproduce it as much as possible. We thus find professionals "getting a high" from busyness while viewing quiet periods and downtime as boring and undesirable. By facilitating and at times, extending "bursts of busyness" by controlling temporality (that is, by boosting their bodies to work faster, focusing narrowly on the present, and fantasizing of busyness being short term), the professionals also made choices that heightened work-life conflict in order to perform optimally as professionals. We found this to often be the case, as optimal busyness manifested itself as a relatively fleeting and fragile experience that was easily disrupted by constraining controls or periods of downtime.

Moreover, we contribute to the literature by offering a framework that helps to address prior studies' problematic reliance on an either objective or individualist view of time (Orlikowski and Yates 2002, van den Scott 2014, Feldman et al. 2019). For example, perspectives that examine individual's time choices (Slawinski and Bansal 2012, Shipp and Cole 2015) or strategies to shape work-home temporal boundaries (Kreiner et al. 2009, Trefalt 2013) are necessarily partial and cannot capture the complexity of workers' temporal experiences and how they are (re-)produced. On the other hand, we acknowledge that structural (macro-level) shaping of time use—for example, temporal constraints associated with gender, class, and age (e.g., Daly 1996, Southerton 2006, van den Scott 2014, Gerstel and Clawson 2018)—would also not enable required insight into an individual's experience. By drawing on the Orlikowski and Yates (2002) conceptualization of time, our study thus answers recent calls to theorize time use in novel ways (Feldman et al. 2019). Orlikowski and Yates (2002) provide a compelling theoretical foundation for understanding the ways in which people produce (and reproduce) the temporal structures that simultaneously characterize an organization and frame people's everyday engagements with work time. This approach offers new insights into how people construct and reconstruct the temporal conditions that shape their lives (Orlikowski and Yates 2002). This is apparent in, for instance, how individuals and collectives reproduce and desire specific temporal experiences and in doing so, enact but also, possibly reify and strengthen organizational controls. Future studies could focus more on the individual component in order, for instance, to predict which path a person would go down (optimal, excessive busyness, or quiet time). This research could explore individual goals and their fit with organizational goals (control) and pacing style—an individual's allocation of time relative to a deadline (Gevers et al. 2006) or time urgency (hurried versus less hurried individuals) (Conte et al. 1995, Jansen and Kristof-Brown 2005).

Overall, our study has implications for the management of time in knowledge organizations. It points to the fact that the pace, focus, and length of the different temporal experiences matter for our participants' experiences of time and for their perceived control over time. Most notably, this can be seen in the case of alternating busy periods with quiet time. On the one hand, if a sequence of optimal busyness is extended too long without a break, it will inevitably become excessive. On the other hand, when a quiet period is too long, it can be experienced as negative because of a shared understanding that successful people in these types of workplaces do not have extended quiet periods. Therefore, based on our findings, it is likely that for busyness to be optimal and effective and for individuals to experience control over their time, these periods need to happen at regular intervals with sufficient recovery/cooldown periods. Yet, further research is needed to explore these temporal dynamics in more detail.

Implications

This study has important implications for research in a number of areas.

Perhaps closest to our perspective of exploring the temporal experience of optimal busyness has been psychological research on work absorption and flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 1997; Quinn 2005). In this research stream, experiences such as absorption and flow entail a subjective and "holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, p. 9). Absorption involves perceiving oneself as one with the work role (Rothbard 2001) and could to some extent explain professionals' compulsive attachment to their work. The influential psychological notion of flow in Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has been used to describe "optimal" experiences of total concentration, awareness, and creativity in which workers report performing their best (Quinn 2005). However, in focusing essentially on the positive, enjoyable, productive, and playful/creative elements and outcomes of absorption and flow (not least because of their origins in the happiness and well-being literature), these studies do not attend to their potential negative aspects, such as compulsion and addiction. Moreover, although emphasizing the individual's immersive psychological states (and notably, the "peak experience" often termed as the "experience of timelessness" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975)), this research does not focus on everyday temporal rhythms and rarely includes other influence variables such as the body, treating flow as an individual difference

variable and not a social construction (Michel 2011). Our research thus contributes to a better understanding of everyday temporal experiences in the workplace.

Whereas previous literature has conceptualized work engagement, absorption, and flow as essentially positive, creativity-enhancing, and productive states (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), our research highlights the dark side of flow—the negative, compulsive, and potentially addictive aspects of these psychological states and the negative consequences on professionals' lives, such as increased work-life conflict and a desynchronization from bodily rhythms as people postpone eating or sleeping and suffer the negative consequences for their health and well-being. Optimal busyness appears as highly energizing and desirable for professionals because they experience a state of focus and productivity, which is similar to the state of flow. However, this state could become compulsive as individuals may want to recreate it as a way of coping with suboptimal temporal experiences, such as excessive busyness or quiet time.

Our research also has implications for the literature on workaholism and overwork (Porter 1996, Burke 2000, Schaufeli et al. 2008, Robinson 2014). This stream shows that, unlike other behavioral addictions, workaholics are praised and rewarded for working excessively and incessantly. Rewards, such as bonuses or promotions for showing commitment and availability through working long hours, are a central part of the control system that aligns the behavior of employees with the goals of the company. Rewards act as ways to reinforce excessive work behaviors by making employees feel valued and productive. A number of professionals in our study showed compulsive work behaviors: for example, when hiding from their families in order to work, experiencing difficulties in slowing down, or even suffering withdrawal symptoms during quiet times. However, although the workaholism and overwork literature has stressed individuals' commitment, drive, and enjoyment of work and the reinforcing influences of organizational controls, it has paid little attention to the attractiveness of temporal experiences connected with busy working. Future research could explore in further detail the link between control, temporalities, and work-related compulsion, an important but understudied question in organization studies (Mazmanian et al. 2013).

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Senior Editor Steffanie Wilk and three reviewers for their invaluable comments on this research. The authors extend their appreciation to Ruthanne Huising, Anca Metiu and the ESSEC IQual group, Johanna Moisander, Andrew Crane, Giana Eckhardt, Thomas Huber, Niklas Woermann, Daisy Chung, Davide Ravasi, Szilvia Mosonyi, the Cass Ethos group, Thomas Roulet, David Courpasson, Claire Dambrin and Ignasi Marti for their knowledgeable guidance, friendly advice, and insightful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. The first author also thanks Judy Clair and Laura Empson for their help with research design and data access as well as all the participants in this study who generously shared their time and experiences with her.

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