Beyond insecurity, "Work instability" as a defining component of uncertainty in the hybrid working era

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Lucy works for D&B, a traditional company that adopted a hybrid working policy following the lift of pandemic restrictions. Yesterday, Lucy checked her diary for the week ahead. For three days, she was required to be in the office. 'However,'- she thought - 'what if I move that one meeting online and save the commute only for that meeting?'.
While evaluating how to proceed, many questions came to mind: 'What platform would I use for this group? I prefer Zoom, but I think they like Teams. How do I set that up? Who could help me? I know that Larry and Nadia are normally at the office that day. But if they also consider working from home? Where are our files for the project? Dropbox? Or Slack?'

Introduction

'We live in uncertain times' has been a recurrent quote since the Covid-19 outbreak. Uncertainty is an important topic, especially in the context of work. The literature on the gig economy, for instance, highlights the weight of insecurity in people's lives due to temporary jobs. Nevertheless, the path towards a post-pandemic world of work has been disturbed by a new dimension of uncertainty in the wake of ambiguous elements emerging from hybrid work. In this paper, we introduce the notion of "work instability" to understand this new type of incertitude. It is part of a research in progress where we focus on concepts related to time and material conditions embedded in knowledge workers' practice, particularly in the university context.

We aim to identify how instability develops in hybrid work, focusing on the coordination processes of finding a 'common ground' and a sense of shared space (digital/physical) and rhythms (temporal/routines). In the following, we introduce the current discussions concerning hybrid working and elaborate on the existing literature about uncertainty at work, explaining its current focus on insecurity and acknowledging how contemporary ways of working impose a different dimension to uncertainty. We then introduce the term "work instability" and further explain why we find it an important phenomenon worthy of further empirical and conceptual attention.

Defining Contemporary Hybrid Working

Discussions about hybrid work are not new, but they gained traction in predictions regarding the post-pandemic future of work. Yet, the central conceptual emphasis is *spatial* hybridity (Halford, 2005). For instance, the split of work time between the office and home/elsewhere (Yang et al., 2022) and the integration of digital and physical environments (Lahti & Nenonen, 2021). Although direct effects of hybrid working are present in those

definitions, they seem to lack some important aspects of the micro experience of work. For instance, the aimed fusion between physical and digital (Halford, 2005; Lahti & Nenonen, 2021) imposes new uses of technology and spaces, transforming people's material practices (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2015) and resulting in significant changes in the nature of work.

The contemporary practice of hybrid working includes tensions regarding the existence – or not lack – of agreements on where and when one is going to the office/ working from home/ elsewhere. What is involved in that? How do people (re)organise their tasks, and which types of artifacts and infrastructure make up the material fabric of work? We also highlight the self-management required to decide where, how and when to perform work. Eventually, hybrid work also stems from a lack of information concerning where and how colleagues are working and how to find support in the performance of tasks. Working hybrid entails new ways of acting upon and within technological artifacts (Orlikowski, 2016; Orlikowski & Scott, 2021), such as mobile devices, cloud services, team platforms, and messaging programs. How and where colleagues and work-related information will be at any moment is ambiguous. Here, while considering the material uncertainties of hybrid working, we note that time remains central (Langley et al., 2013) to understand the evolving processes framing the work experience.

To illustrate these new levels of complexity stemming from the entanglement of space, time, and artifacts through workers' practice in hybrid working, let's consider the mundane analogy of buying a sandwich. Traditionally it was possible to buy a sandwich from the bakery or supermarket based on a limited set of options presented ready-to-go. Similarly, before and during the pandemic, work was mainly framed by fixed apparatus from which one could choose how to rearrange them. When the franchise Subway entered the restaurant market however, buying a sandwich became a different experience since now one could choose every single element of it, from the bread to the toppings. Comparably, working hybrid offers new ways of experiencing work, requiring a new host of decisions to be made, such as how to arrange the available artifacts, what tasks to do, and when and where to perform them.

People might find themselves in a powerful or overwhelming position in such a complex environment. Either way, their experience of working, as well as getting the sandwich, has substantially changed. While the intended results of work may remain much the same as previously, the process involved in the practice is now transformed by, for example, the possibility of working asynchronously yet collaboratively. Therefore, we argue for a conceptualisation of hybrid working that comprises such complexity, acknowledging the profound change in contemporary work, especially in the case knowledge workers.

Uncertainty at Work

Uncertainty has become a feature in our contemporary lives. Technological developments speed up processes and accelerate economic, social, and individual changes (Sennet, 1999). Uncertainty may be recognised as a set of opportunities (Griffin & Grote, 2020). Still, it is often defined in terms of adverse effects (Heyes et al., 2018) and how these impact life across various dimensions, including work (Chirumbolo et al., 2021). Uncertainty is a well-established phenomenon in the work sphere. In recent times, the rise

of the gig economy (Cornelissen & Cholakova, 2021; Fleming, 2022; Gandini, 2019) and, more specifically, platform work (Davis & Sinha, 2021; Rodgers, 2019) has linked the broader issue of uncertainty at work to the more specific set of circumstances and conditions referred to as job or work 'insecurity'.

Research shows that insecurity at work assumes many forms (Alberti et al., 2018). It can be understood from objective features, such as temporary contracts, self-employment or independent work (Cornelissen & Cholakova, 2021; Heyes et al., 2018), but also subjective ones, fostered by such flexible work arrangements, which can corrode a meaningful experience of work (Tweedie, 2013). We acknowledge the continued relevance and importance of such research on the topic of job and work insecurity. We further recognise that the often neoliberal politics and economics determine insecurity as a dominant topic related to uncertainty at work (Fleming, 2022). At the same time however, we wish to highlight an additional way of thinking about uncertainty at work, that is less focused on issues of contractual arrangements and psychological experiences of work, and instead on the 'where', 'when', 'what', and 'how' of work.

Questions aiming at the where, when, and how of work now play a crucial part in the incertitude confronted by knowledge workers in their daily routines. This is because, since many offices and other workplaces around the world have 'opened up' post lockdowns, a significant question mark remains around how work 'should' be organized. Traditional routines of 9-5 commutes to central office buildings were completely disrupted during the pandemic (Wang et al., 2020) and the radical digitalisation and distribution of work that was experienced by many knowledge workers has left a permanent scar on established norms. Now many workers are finding their way through idiosyncratic patterns of online, offline, and hybrid work, unsure of when and where their colleagues will be present nor what is expected in terms of the daily rhythms of work life. Therefore, we claim the notion of *work instability* as key to defining this newly salient component of uncertainty at work. Work instability refers to the constant changes on material conditions in a specific time-space that result from the broad set of enactments in the micro level performance of work.

Concluding Remarks and Initial Propositions

In this paper we argue that a stronger conceptualization of hybrid work can be achieved by developing the idea of *work instability* as a newly salient aspect of uncertainty at work. Contemporary literature has so far emphasized insecurity as a main effect of uncertain times. However, practice shows us that even knowledge workers who are 'securely' employed are required to act in more complex ways by constantly considering where, when, what, and how to do their work. In that sense, while literature on work insecurity approaches macro developments of uncertainty by highlighting inequalities and precarity experienced by workers, with the notion of *work instability*, we focus on the microlevel of work practice and how material and temporal components of work are negotiated individually and collectively in hybrid working.

In our ongoing empirical research, we are exploring how University workers negotiate *work instability* when existing practices of laboratory, field, and desk research are unsettled by post-pandemic reconfigurations of individual and collective work practices. Finally, we

acknowledge that while we are analytically distinguishing work instability from the more well-known notion of work insecurity, these phenomena are linked. For example, instability can result in/aggravate insecurity due to the stress of several decisions to make, the impossibility to find colleagues, or not being seen/heard. Similarly, work insecurity can leave workers without a stable location or set of infrastructures with which and from which to do their work. While our initial intention is to develop and highlight the notion of *work instability*, we eventually intend to also explore the links between these phenomena.

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