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Hacking work: Critically examining the implications of the new discourse and practices of hacking for work intensification and organisational control

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Abstract
This article discusses the importance of 'hacking work' in organisations, specifically in relation to control over workers in organisations operating within the neoliberal ideological project. Noting the shift in the discourse of hacking beyond references to computer-mediated, anti-establishment oriented activities, we draw on the current meaning of the term 'hacking' that encompasses any 'shortcuts' that can be applied to more efficiently complete tasks. We argue that in workplace contexts, the emergence of 'work hacking' practices can be observed, whereby employees invest time, effort and tacit knowledge into inventing and implementing various 'tricks' in order to fulfil organisational demands while maintaining their own well-being. We discuss how 'hacking work' practices, even if seemingly subversive, present a new form of work intensification and control within the labour process. They can be seen as an exercise in 'working to work' through self-disciplining, aimed at ensuring that the employee completes the allocated tasks regardless of the insufficiency of time and other resources. Their emergence also points to the devaluing of work itself, manifested in a view of work as no more than a set of tasks that need to be 'hacked'.

Keywords
control, hacking work, labour process theory, neoliberalism, working to work

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Introduction

This article explores 'hacking' – in the context of contemporary work and organisations – as an increasingly mainstream feature of society and economy, considered critical to fulfilling work demands and maintaining personal well-being by employees and managers. 'Hacking' was initially understood as the 'illicit remote breaking into computer systems' (Jordan, 2017: 528) with the aim to fulfil various subversive functions and purposes (e.g. Deibert and Stein, 2002). This understanding of hacking has evolved to denote innovative practices for navigating and culturally 'recoding' existing institutions (Conti, 2006). In recent years, references to hacking have entered common usage in relation to everyday life and work, reflecting the changing meanings and normative evaluations of hacking beyond its original technological roots. In the organisational sphere, hacking has begun to be depicted as integral to an individual's performance and well-being: a new way of working, aiming to inspire organisational members to learn new 'tricks' to succeed despite intensified work pressures. This new discourse of hacking encourages managers to adopt 'top hacking principles' to enhance organisational profits (DePasse et al., 2014), and employees to implement various 'productivity hacks' in the face of high, and often excessive, workplace demands. It also promises to re-programme how we think so that we can 'work smarter, better, and happier' (Fabritius and Hagemann, 2017: n.p.). This transformation of the discourse of hacking, and the rising acceptability of practices of 'hacking' in organisational contexts, presents researchers with the necessity to critically examine and theorise about the implications of hacking for people and organisations.

With this article, we address this so far under-explored phenomenon of 'hacking' at work. We are guided by the following research questions: (1) *What exactly do organisational members do as they engage in 'hacking' at work?* (2) *What are the implications of the practices of hacking at work for our understanding of organisational control?* Addressing these questions in this conceptual article, we introduce the concept of 'hacking work' which we use with reference to the time, effort and intellectual investment individuals put into 'hacking' in workplace contexts. Our conceptualisation of 'hacking work' builds upon a number of insights into contemporary organisations operating within the neoliberal ideological project (e.g. Berglund et al., 2017; Fleming, 2017). Specifically, drawing on the idea of 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck et al., 2017), we study 'hacking work' as a set of practices people engage in as they navigate the often excessively demanding contemporary workplaces.

Our analysis of 'hacking work' responds to calls within Labour Process Theory (LPT) to 'decentre work from a single physical site and open up working to any space with communication facilities' (Thompson and Smith, 2009: 923–924), including digital platforms (Gandini, 2019; Veen et al., 2020). We argue that, as employees increasingly rely on 'hacking work' practices to complete their work tasks, 'hacking work' becomes integral to the labour process, serving as both an *acceptable* – in the sense of being informally permitted by managers – and *subversive* activity that workers can utilise to cope with work demands while simultaneously maintaining their well-being. When engaging in 'hacking work', individuals choose to carry out those activities they perceive as valuable at the expense of tasks which they consider less worthwhile or non-worthwhile. We see 'hacking work' practices as an exercise in 'working to work', whereby individuals use their agency to overcome the insufficiency of time and other organisational resources which they need to be productive at work.

Using examples, we argue that the seemingly trivial activities involved in 'hacking work' also provide insights into (self-)disciplining cultures of 'self-(in)visibility management', whereby workers attempt to hide their activities and whereabouts from managers in order to manage deadlines and effectively 'work' at their job. Following Gandini's (2019: 1047) discussion of emotional labour in the case of gig economy workers, we see 'work hacking' as another 'form of qualitative intensification of the labour process'. Further, contributing to the work of scholars who have problematised everyday resistance in the contemporary workplace (e.g. Bloom, 2013; Contu, 2008), we highlight how 'hacking work', through its dual permissible/subversive nature, is a new form of control within the labour process, and a symptom of the devaluing of work itself, that, paradoxically, connects personal wellness to enhanced work productivity.

In the next section, we discuss the evolution of the discourse of hacking and its relation to 'actually existing neoliberalism'. We then introduce the concept of 'hacking work', linking it to a relevant body of work within Labour Process Theory (e.g. Braverman, 1974; Gandini, 2019; Thompson and Smith, 2009). Subsequently, we present illustrations of 'hacking work', before discussing the implications of the emergence of 'hacking work' for understanding organisational control, and presenting suggestions for further research.

The shifting discourse of hacking

The emergence of hacking is linked to anti-establishment politics underpinned by a crypto-anarchist ethic advocating decentralised technology (e.g. Jordan, 2017; Levy, 1984). Dating back to the development of multi-access user systems by 1950s MIT students, the initial articulation of hacker ethics portrayed hackers as 'heroes', those individuals who behind the scenes were responsible for ushering in the 'computer revolution' (Levy, 1984; Ross, 1991). These romanticised depictions of hacking and hackers have been contextualised and problematised by sociological analyses of hacking, presenting it as a complex subculture, espousing the values of technology, secrecy, anonymity, membership fluidity, male dominance and motivations (e.g. Jordan, 2008; Jordan and Taylor, 1998), and one whose meritocratic rhetoric and androcentrism mask inequities and are conducive to gender exclusion and sexual harassment (Steinmetz et al., 2019). Over time, the original meaning of hacking has evolved beyond its initial conceptualisation and application. The term 'hacking' is now commonly used with reference to a range of daily activities, many of which have little or nothing to do with information and communication technologies (ICTs) or technological competency. Since the early 2000s, the term 'hacking' has been appropriated by the proponents of self-help, who coined the term 'life hacking' and have been using references to 'hacks' to signify everyday 'shortcuts' that individuals can and should use to be more productive, efficient and fulfilled (Reagle, 2019).

While the meaning of hacking has expanded to include activities that are not necessarily linked to ICTs, within both the popular imagination and in practice, hacking has retained connotations with subversion. Historically, hacking has been subject to ambivalent normative evaluations. On the one hand, it was deemed illicit and its practitioners subsequently framed as pathological rule breakers and deviants (Holt, 2010). At the same time, hacking has also been described as an 'ethics and aesthetics' (Coleman, 2012), and a form of 'social entertainment' (Turgeman-Goldschmidt, 2005) which can be enjoyed by everybody. The current connotations of hacking as pertaining to all spheres of life have retained the subversive and democratic element of its original meaning. However, the normative judgements of hacking, now conceived as a 'smart shortcut', have shifted towards greater acceptability and even encouragement.

In addition to the discursive expansion of hacking from computer-mediated, anti-establishment oriented practice over all domains of life, the understanding of hacking as an organisational and work-based phenomenon has evolved, too. For example, Case and Piñeiro (2006: 753) explored the ways programmers narrated their working lives and organisational commitments according to a 'hacker ethics' that simultaneously emphasised technical skill and 'coding ideals', including a 'passionate engagement with coding tasks' that offset their willingness to accept managerial dictates. Increasingly though, references to hacking in organisational settings have also transcended the realm of coding and digital manipulation to encompass broader ideas of 'smart working' (see McEwan, 2016). Here, hacking is considered an essential professional skill, a 'cunning' ability to innovate to make often overbearing requirements easier to effectively respond to. The positive framing of 'hacking' in workplace contexts hints at how this subversive ethos is being subsumed within a larger culture of practices associated with fulfilling one's work-related responsibilities.

This discursive shift can also be observed in the popular management literature, as exemplified through references to 'leadership hacks'; that is, innovative strategies which leaders are encouraged to implement in order to increase their own work productivity as well as their effectiveness in developing teams and motivating subordinates (e.g. Fabritius and Hagemann, 2017; Jetha, 2019; Stein, 2018). The titles of popular management books such as *The Smarts: Big Little Hacks to Take You a Long Way at Work* (Jetha, 2019) and *Leadership Hacks: Clever Shortcuts to Boost Your Impact and Results* (Stein, 2018) are symptomatic of this evolved discourse of hacking in the context of work and organisations, whereby emphasis is no longer on technological proficiency or even digital innovation for new forms of value creation but on discovering 'clever' tricks for maximising career success and individual productivity.

Following from the above, our discussion of 'hacking' in organisations addresses the phenomenon of hacking understood beyond its original basis in technology. We adopt this broader notion of 'hacking' as currently used in popular management literature and everyday organisational parlance to describe any 'shortcut' or technique that simplifies and facilitates a more efficient completion of a task (e.g. Jetha, 2019; Stein, 2018). We observe that within this present discourse of hacking: (1) references to 'hacking' and 'hackers' are used beyond associations with ICTs; (2) 'hackers' are no longer framed as individuals who pose a threat to corporate interests and law-abiding citizens (Nissenbaum, 2004), but as innovative, creative and productive employees and managers, who deserve admiration for their ability to invent and implement 'work hacks' (Stein, 2018).

We see a connection between this present-day understanding of 'hacking' in the context of work and organisations and traditional desires for employees to 'work smarter, not harder' (see Smith and Thompson, 1998). Their roots lie in the use of information technology to better allocate human resources to complete often complex and difficult job tasks (Hall, 2010). In present-day workplaces, especially in 'high commitment organisations' (Fleming and Spicer, 2004), this 'smart ethos' is manifested in the updated discourse of 'hacking', whereby employees are encouraged to use their intelligence and contextual knowledge for the purpose of invention and application of various 'work hacks' to complete all work tasks and to perform their work more efficiently. However, it is worth remembering that hacking is built on a subversive culture of literally 'counter-programming' that was always in negotiation with 'legitimate' forms of coding work. The presence of the discourse of 'hacking', in its current form, in organisational contexts, points to the existence of broader structural and institutional factors underlying employees' perceived need to 'recode' or manipulate the work demands expected of them.

Hacking 'actually existing neoliberalism' at work

To account for these broader factors, we situate our analysis of 'hacking' at work within the context of neoliberalism. The ideals of neoliberalism grew out of a tradition of economic and to a lesser extent social libertarianism promoted, first, by its flagship group, the Mont Pelerin Society, established in 1947 (montpelerin.org). Its founders, a group which included Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Frank Knight, Karl Popper, Ludwig von Mises and George Stigler, saw their mission as protecting society – conceived in highly individualistic terms – from the bondage of 'state tyranny', understood as any form of public intervention that was not strictly necessary, such as for national defence, and liberating them through the promotion of 'free economic exchange' via the private marketplace. The state's task was to withdraw from and 'de-regulate' as many aspects of socio-economic life as possible: from public functions and welfare provision to basic industries and the financial sector (Kotz, 2015). The discourse of neoliberalism also stressed the necessity to free individuals from oppressive bureaucratic demands (Connell et al., 2009; Styhre, 2014). Personal freedom was associated with aspirations for market driven social mobility and the capacity to challenge the 'red tape' of government and institutions. The best way, it was assumed, to advance human well-being is 'by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey, 2007: 2).

Perhaps counter-intuitively, these promises of 'free market' liberty were always underpinned by a disciplinarian ethos. Whereas key figures of this intellectual tradition such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman framed their mission as one of personal freedom, there was also a belief that the marketplace would catalyse, if not maximise, efficiency and productivity. For example, underlying the celebration by Ayn Rand (1943/2014) – one of neoliberalism's leading proponents and philosophers – of the free 'entrepreneur' was a seeming discard for economic inequality or organisational power relations. Rather, the market was meant to be an optimising, as much as liberating, force. Indeed, following its adoption in the 1970s and 1980s – first in the 'global South', most famously within Latin America, and then in the 'global North' – the justification of neoliberalism was increasingly framed in terms of economic and institutional necessity. Moreover, its failures in practice resulted in demands for state-led social transformations and even stricter techniques of authoritarian management. At the level of organisations, this translated into calls for 'downsizing' and 'cost-cutting' to make firms more efficient and better able to survive in 'a brutally competitive world' (Kotz, 2015: 30), in which the neoliberal ideology has been put into practice. For managers and employees, this meant having to fulfil work demands with fewer resources. The neoliberal drive for efficiency and profitability also created new regulatory regimes in organisations. Far from challenging organisational authority, the current era is marked by an emphasis on 'managerialism', intensive surveillance and close performance monitoring and measurement (e.g. Bal and Dóci, 2018; Harlow et al., 2012; Sewell et al., 2012).

For the purposes of our discussion of 'hacking' at work we find it helpful to refer to organisations operating within the neoliberal ideology project; in other words, organisations emblematic of 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck et al., 2017). The idea of 'actually existing neoliberalism' was initially put forward to emphasise 'the contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring projects in so far as they have been produced within national, regional, and local contexts defined by legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and political struggles' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 349). For us, it brings attention to the specific pressures that organisations, employees and managers face in the present era of 'neoliberal capitalism' (Kotz, 2015), especially in the case of 'high commitment organisations' (Fleming and Spicer, 2004).

The reshaping of organisational life, associated with neoliberalism, has produced a tension between different aspects of 'actually existing neoliberalism'. On the one hand, organisations operating in a context in which the neoliberal ideology has been put into practice is marked by significant work intensification (Selberg, 2013). For this reason, critiques of neoliberalism developed within organisation studies have focused on its reconfiguration of managerial institutional cultures for the sake of maximising individual efficiency and productivity (e.g. Fleming, 2017). In addition, neoliberalism has turned finding an effective response to the imperative of capital accumulation within capitalism into a problem to be solved by employees and managers in organisational settings. As Fleming (2017: 691) points out, the 'radical responsibilisation of the workforce' is to succeed and maximise productivity in spite of the neoliberal system. On the other hand, neoliberalism has brought an emphasis on employee well-being, whereby realising goals of workplace innovation, work–life balance and personal well-being is not dismissed under 'neoliberal capitalism' but rather considered a 'challenge' which requires original and, at times, even subversive solutions (see Boxall and Macky, 2014).

Against this background, the practices of 'hacking' in workplace contexts reflect an 'embedded' organisational response to the diverse range of pressures imposed on managers and workers by 'actually existing neoliberalism'. These practices bring to the fore the impact of neoliberalism upon the conventional capitalist labour process (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979). Existing as a form of 'responsible autonomy' for individuals, they facilitate, in innovative and not always officially sanctioned ways, the transformation of 'labour power' into 'labour capacity' for productively coping with the excessive work demands associated with processes of marketisation. Yet, in redirecting this potentially subversive energy into creative explorations for becoming resilient within this organisational reality, they also co-opt the workers' ability to actively resist these demands. The next section builds a theoretical understanding of this shift through introducing the concept of 'hacking work'.

'Hacking work'

Following from the discussion so far, we propose the emergence of practices, which we refer to as 'hacking work', in organisations operating within the neoliberal ideological project. Employees and managers engage in these practices in response to: (1) being faced with excessive demands (e.g. in terms of (a) the time that would be necessary to fulfil all the tasks allocated to them, (b) the diversity of work tasks and (c) insufficiency of resources available to them to complete work tasks); (2) being made responsible for finding ways to fulfil these demands while ensuring their own well-being so that they can continue to work and earn livelihoods, especially as they are unable to rely on welfare provision by the state. Our conceptualisation of 'hacking work' can be located within the wider 'practice turn' in social sciences (Schatzki et al., 2011) and, specifically, in organisation studies (e.g. Miettinen et al., 2009; Nicolini, 2010). The practice turn draws attention to the historically, materially and culturally situated aspects of employees' and managers' work. Moreover, it makes possible reconnecting what organisational members say and do to their wider organisational contexts (Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017).

We refer to these practices of 'hacking' as 'work' because this connotes the actual time, energy, and creativity involved in 'recoding' – rather than simply coping with – the pressures of 'actually existing neoliberalism'. It also hints that 'hacking' is focused on overcoming – rather than directly challenging – the workplace demands, resource shortages and inefficiencies. The problems of systemic shortages and inefficiencies, of course, are not unique to neoliberalism; however, the shifting of responsibility for dealing with these issues to the employee is a key feature of organisations operating within the neoliberal ideological project. Here, the conventional form of neoliberal agency composed of 'a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business' (Gershon, 2011: 537) shifts from a desire for personal and professional gain into a moral sense of 'indebtedness' in which people have a duty to be self-disciplined and find ways to ensure their own productivity and well-being in an economic and institutional environment where this is increasingly difficult. Therefore, at the level of organisations, it is helpful to note the consequences of neoliberalism as manifesting not purely in 'ideological' terms but in the continual expectation that individuals innovatively and effectively cope with organisational demands placed upon them. Lambert (2008), for instance, writes of how frontline managers confronted with demands for greater 'labour flexibility' need to make continual 'quick adjustments' in scheduling such low wage, hourly jobs.

Our argument regarding the emergence of 'hacking work' practices echoes the ideas of Labour Process Theory (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979) scholars, especially with regard to their focus on the various ways in which employers control the labour process – to maximise capital accumulation – as workers' labour power becomes transformed into a commodity or service (Smith, 2006, 2015). While concentrated on the internal dynamics of the labour process, LPT also takes into account ‘the connections between labour process and the wider context’ (Ackroyd, 2009: 264). It therefore enables a critical interrogation of the ways in which dominant systems and ideologies are translated into processes and practices of employee control. While initially, LPT ideas were applied to labour processes in the ‘traditional’ sense of control being executed by managers over workers in manufacturing settings (e.g. Burawoy, 1979), more recently LPT has served as a lens to gain insights into new issues and phenomena such as the emotional labour of gig workers (Gandini, 2019), control within the food delivery sector (Veen et al., 2020) and the effectiveness of workplace harassment interventions (Quinlan et al., 2020). We use LPT to inform our conceptualisation of ‘hacking work’ in organisations operating under conditions of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’.

Particularly relevant to our analysis is Friedman’s (1977, 1990) distinction between ‘responsible autonomy’ and ‘direct control’ as two approaches that managers can use to control labour power. As Friedman (1990: 178) argues: ‘first, workers are particularly malleable; you can get somebody, once employed, to do something beyond what may have been specified in the original employment contract. Second, workers are ultimately controlled by an independent and often hostile will.’ In this sense, ‘hacking work’ can be considered as resulting from this ‘malleability’, which makes employees capable of meeting specific organisational challenges, even if these are beyond what should be reasonably expected of workers. Put differently: ‘hacking work’ represents one way in which the ‘creative potential’ of ‘labour power’ is transformed through management techniques into a disciplined capitalist reality of ‘labour capacity’. LPT frames this transformation process as exploitative; nevertheless, as Knights and Willmott (1990: 6) contend:

> despite being systemically disadvantaged within capitalist relations of production, the worker is neither impotent nor ineffectual [. . .] as a worker s/he is crippled; but as a wage labourer s/he has many opportunities to resist a system that subordinates the exercise of labour power to the demands of capital.

Bringing together Friedman’s (1990) and Knights and Willmott’s (1990) observations implies that, in addition to being considered a manifestation of control, ‘hacking work’ practices could also potentially be seen as the workers’ exercise of agency in subverting the demands of the capitalist labour process.

Crucial to understanding how this exercise of workers’ agency and autonomy occurs through ‘hacking work’ is a consideration of the role of technology in this process. The LPT approach sees technology ‘as part of the labour process, appropriated, deployed, designed, implemented, and even “invented” by management in the interest of capitalist accumulation and with the purpose of organising work’ (Hall, 2010: 164). In particular, it has been argued that the digital platforms upon which the ‘gig economy’ relies ‘represent the place whereby the social processes of production are put under logics of managerialization and work organization within a single, clearly delimited environment’ (Gandini, 2019: 1045). While Gandini’s (2019) and Veen et al.’s (2020) LPT analyses refer to technologically mediated control over gig workers interacting with one digital platform, we observe that many workplace organisations currently tend to use more than one platform, for example Zoom, Skype and MS Teams. Each of these is utilised for fulfilling different work tasks and as such, can be viewed as a separate 'point of production' in LPT terms. In turn, each of these 'points of production' presents the potential for the exercise of both control and agency within the labour process.

With the rise of the digital workplace, LPT scholars have turned attention towards examining what new, often tacit skills are being developed, and how this opens up novel opportunities for managerial control and worker agency. For example, Briken et al. (2017) refer to studying Industrie 4.0 and the digitilisation of employment relations, noting that it needs to take into account the strategies of control and resistance at the heart of this new information economy, since, as they argue, new computing technologies capture tacit knowledge within the organisation. The notion of 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi, 1966/2009) is also helpful in conceptualising workers' ability to engage in 'hacking work'. Polanyi (1966/2009: 7) refers to this 'tacit dimension' in recognition that 'we can know more than we can tell'. For him, this involves non-codified and often implicit understandings and practices that are fundamental to making sense of and operating within our social environment. While such knowledge is not formalised, it is dynamic and key to enabling people to adapt to their living contexts.

'Hacking work' practices in the contemporary workplace involve the application of organisational 'tacit knowledge' in relation to the individual's ability to contextually understand and manipulate, according to one's aims, organisational processes. As Brohm (2006: 244) argues, tacit knowledge has an 'emancipatory' potential based on a 'rich interdependency between knowledge and organisation' whereby 'professionals can successfully negotiate the content, meaning and development of their tasks and practices'. In the case of 'hacking work' practices, employees must acquire tacit organisational knowledge, including specific self-disciplining skills, to be able to meet excessive work demands. These efforts are further necessitated by another aspect of neoliberalism, that is, 'blurring the boundaries between the market and the welfare state' (Garrow and Hasenfeld, 2014: 1475), and thus making security and well-being a primarily personal responsibility. 'Hacking work' practices emerge out of people's need to constantly strive to feel better and be healthier despite functioning in environments that are often unsupportive of such efforts (Cederström and Spicer, 2015). These practices are embedded in a culture that promotes resilience – necessary to achieve personal sustainability in an ever more competitive environment – of individuals in such 'high commitment organisations' (Fleming and Spicer, 2004). In the next section, we illustrate our argument about 'hacking work' as integral to the contemporary labour process, through presenting three types of 'hacking work' practices: 'hacking time', 'hacking space' and 'hacking surveillance'.

'Hacking work' in practice

As we have argued thus far, organisational practices of 'hacking work' are an increasingly normalised way of working in many workplaces. Indeed, they are sometimes framed as the only way a person can meet the expectation to complete their work tasks and still have time for 'real living' outside of work. As McGinn (2016: n.p.) recommends in *Harvard Business Review*:

> Instead of focusing on tips and tricks [. . .] It's also worth keeping in mind that your goal with productivity porn shouldn't be to transform yourself into a hyperefficient automaton who can take on ever larger piles of work. Rather, it should be to find a way to break free from the office more quickly and get to the outside world – where real living is done.

'Hacking work' practices are instances of self-management allowing individuals to temporarily balance their workplace obligations with desires for personal well-being. They involve 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (Reckwitz, 2002: 249). Below, we offer illustrations of some of these practices.

Hacking time

A popular aspect of 'hacking work' is what can be referred to as the practice of 'hacking time'. Its roots can be traced to the 'time greediness' of organisations (e.g. Appelbaum et al., 2000; Fleetwood, 2007) operating under conditions of 'actually existing neoliberalism'. 'Hacking time' allows people to adapt to the demand to complete more tasks than, reasonably, can be expected within the time available. One way of engaging in 'hacking time' practices involves the scheduling of 'fake meetings' in order to be able to finish one's work. This technique is elaborated on in a blog by members of the PGI team – described as 'a multinational corporation and global provider of conferencing and collaboration solution' – where having 'fake meetings' is celebrated as a necessity in the modern workplace:

> When you schedule your fake meeting it's a good idea to set the status as tentative (or use some other flag) so you can distinguish it from 'real' meetings with colleagues. This helps give you an accurate sense of your schedule's flexibility when coordinating calendars. (Anon, 2010: n.p.)

Scheduling 'fake meetings' offers a seemingly trivial but innovative way of 'hacking' into workplace cultures perceived as counter-productive. One worker, Gina, observed that:

> It got so bad that when I was on deadline, I'd book hour-long meetings in a conference room where I was the only attendee. [. . .] When the time came, I'd steal off to the conference room with my laptop to work uninterrupted. I got the most work done in the shortest amount of time during those blocks. (Pash, 2010: n.p.)

As these accounts of employees 'hacking time' demonstrate, this practice provides an effective, self-initiated and self-managed mechanism of employee control: one that both ensures that the tasks the organisation allocates to the individual will be completed and that the employee does not become overwhelmed when attempting to meet all these demands. Simultaneously, to the employee, it gives an opportunity to exercise agency and a degree of autonomy in a way that echoes the subversive nature at the roots of 'hacking'.

Hacking space

A further illustration of 'hacking work' is the practice of 'hacking space'. 'Space hacks' are sometimes officially implemented by organisations. The office architectural firm Steelcase, for example, designs shared office spaces for its clients to promote an agile work culture based on the assumption that the objects in these spaces must become mobile and adaptable to the various types of tasks that are being undertaken. According to one manager: 'Our prior space and furniture were fixed in place. Now, we feel empowered to move furniture, change our seats, even borrow stuff to make our space better' (steelcase.com). The mention of 'empowerment' points to the exercise of agency by managers and employees as they engage in moving around furniture and rearranging the workspace. However, also worth noting is that to co-create this 'agile' office space, people must develop the tacit knowledge necessary to recognise which spatial arrangements will be most suitable for which work task. This tacit knowledge as well as the effort and inventiveness involved in rearranging space become integral to the labour process.

Similarly, the company Vitra has created a new product of flexible and malleable work surfaces which, perhaps unsurprisingly given the ubiquity of the discourse of hacking, it calls 'Hack'. Their marketing speaks to the employees' and managers' need to modify their physical environments to deal with diverse tasks and ever-changing expectations:

> The system reflects the attitude of companies that define themselves in terms of constant change. Each Hack unit forms an autonomous element whose adaptability allows it to satisfy various needs [. . .] [since it is] easy to dismantle and transport and enables space-saving storage. Individual users appreciate Hack's expansive work surface, as well as its provision of a private sphere that can be personalised. (vitra.com)

Steelcase's 'Hack' solution reflects the expectation that employees should implement new 'tricks' that will enable them to engage in diversity tasks performed under conditions of 'boundaryless work', whereby boundaries between different types of work task as well as between work and non-work are blurred – here, in part because of the insufficiency of organisational space that would be necessary in order to allow for spatial separation between different types of work activity, and between work and non-work. This illustrates how, rather than relying on organisations to provide adequate space for different work activities, it becomes the employees' responsibility to put effort into rearranging their workspace so that it suitably lends itself to the activity and task at hand. Here, people use their agency to 'hack' the shortage and insufficiency of resources, such as rooms and equipment, that are supposed to enable them to carry out their work. Their engagement in 'hacking space' might not have a directly 'subversive' – in the sense of 'not quite legitimate' – character but it does echo the view of hacking as a form of democratised 'social entertainment' (Turgeman-Goldschmidt, 2005) which everyone can enjoy. Ultimately though, 'hacking space' serves the objective of greater efficiency.

Hacking surveillance

Anecdotal evidence, especially based on the authors' observations and conversations with colleagues relating to the 'work hacking' practices that have become more commonplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrates that employees use creativity to 'trick' managers into thinking that they are engaging in a particular activity while they are actually working on a different task, or taking a break from work to re-gain energy for their next task or to give attention to their caring responsibilities, such as home educating their children during lockdown. While similar to 'hacking time', the objective of these 'hacking surveillance' practices is not only to save time, but also to pretend that a person is engaged in a certain work-related activity where, in fact, they are not. These practices are applied partly in response to the organisational 'time greediness' (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Fleetwood, 2007), and partly to the requirement to work under 'intensive surveillance' (Sewell et al., 2012) and monitoring which come with the use of digital technologies at work. Examples of such practices include logging onto an online meeting – such as a departmental meeting or an online training webinar via Zoom, in which the individual participates in a silent and invisible way, with the sole objective of having their attendance registered by the 'system' – while simultaneously being logged onto and actively participating in another online meeting, for example via Skype, possibly using a different device.

Technology firms have quickly captured this 'hacking surveillance' trend. For example, Lurk From Home has developed a java plugin, which, according to the company's website: 'automatically keeps you available on your company IM [Instant Messenger] and prevents desktop logoffs when you step away from your desk. It's great for multitasking and stepping away with peace of mind' (lurkfromhome.com). The company presents this 'hacking surveillance' technology as one that allows employees to escape managerial surveillance by pretending constant online availability and activity. Crucially, this 'hack' was created not for the purpose of giving people more time and space to escape work, but was designed for employees who feel the need to cease their Instant Messenger activity in order to be able to complete their work tasks more efficiently. In the words of the product's co-developer and KPMG consultant: 'We believe that this gives our users peace of mind, and that actually helps them inversely perform better' (Sonnemaker, 2020: n.p.). As with 'hacking time' and 'hacking space', the practices of 'hacking surveillance' require planning, effort, inventiveness and tacit knowledge – in other words, they can be seen, in and of themselves, as work, and are integral to the labour process of those engaging in them. At the same time, they retain an aspect of 'subversiveness' in that they are not officially sanctioned by managers.

Discussion

'Working to work'

The above examples provide illustrations addressing our first research question, *What exactly do organisational members do as they engage in 'hacking' at work?*, while also pointing to the 'mundane nature of everyday life and the concrete material nature of the activities' (Nicolini, 2012: 9) associated with 'hacking work' practices. As the practices of 'hacking time', 'hacking space' and 'hacking surveillance' demonstrate, 'hacking work' can be seen to offer empowering and innovative ways of approaching the Sisyphean task of satisfying the excessive demands of the organisations operating within the neoliberal ideological project. While providing a comprehensive 'typology' of 'hacking

Table 1. 'Hacking work' practices.

Hacking work practice	Neoliberal organisational pressure	Aim of 'hacking work'	Examples of practices
Hacking time	'Time greediness', i.e. the excessive demands on one's time associated with completing all work tasks	Time and effort involved in reducing the amount of one's time spent on work activities which are deemed as less of a priority in order to be able to complete higher-priority tasks	'Blocking' time allocated for specific tasks; scheduling fake meetings
Hacking space	'Boundaryless work', i.e. the blurring of spatial boundaries between different types of work tasks and the blurring of spatial boundaries between work and personal life	Time and effort involved in creating 'flexible' work spaces whether at home or in the office in order to be able to better focus on each of the expected tasks and to retain some personalised space within the working environment	Turning different digital and physical work artefacts into multi-purpose resources; rearranging space, e.g. through moving furniture around
Hacking surveillance	Digital surveillance and managerial micro-management	Time and effort involved in escaping managerial surveillance, in order to show to managers that one is engaged in all demanded work activities	Simultaneous participation in more than one online meeting; using software which allows one to pretend that one is constantly online

work' practices is beyond the scope of this article, Table 1 summarises how these activities both relate to organisational conditions associated with 'actually existing neoliberalism' and can be considered a form of work.

The objective of 'hacking work' is for employees and managers to become resilient through self-management and self-disciplining, and – using tacit knowledge – finding 'loopholes' in the system of organisational demands placed upon them, in order to meet these demands. Through its effects on 'collective meaning-making, order-producing and reality-shaping' (Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017: 114), 'hacking work' represents a new form of organisational disciplining and control, underpinned by an ethos of 'adaptability' and 'resilience'.

The examples discussed above also illustrate the collective and normative nature (Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017) of 'hacking work' practices, revealing an underlying view of work as a set of tasks that need to be 'hacked', since their completion is considered by employees to require 'trickery' and cunning. While theorists such as David Graeber (2018) have noted the uselessness of many current jobs, we highlight the emergence of 'hacking work' as a testament to the devaluation of work itself, whereby engagement in work is viewed as potentially wasteful and even personally damaging, and therefore work tasks become approached as something that just must get done as quickly and 'painlessly' as possible. This perspective is supported by a study of 51,895 employees across 36 European countries which has found that 'greater work effort relates strongly to reduced well-being and moderately to inferior career outcomes' (Avgoustaki and Frankfort, 2019: 636); or, put in colloquial terms, that 'hard work probably doesn't pay off' (Avgoustaki and Frankfort, 2018: n.p.). This is not to say that people do not derive meaning from their work or that they do not make beneficial contributions, be it to the organisation, society or their personal development. What we wish to highlight is that neoliberal emphasis on efficiency and productivity has transformed from an economic imperative into a personal adaptation strategy for addressing excessive workplace demands.

Even if seemingly the main function of 'hacking work' is to help people find innovative 'shortcuts' that will make their work more 'doable', digging deeper, a more insidious reality emerges. As illustrated above, people use 'work hacks' less to find time for personal leisure and more to simply actually work. Employees engage in 'hacking work' – to save the time that would have to be spent on completing other work tasks, to avoid unnecessary distractions or to create a working environment more conducive to effective and efficient task completion – so that, through working ever more productively and efficiently, they can actually do their job. In this respect, they are not merely attempting to meet everyday organisational demands, but are also trying to overcome the technological and organisational barriers that prevent them from being an effective worker: efficient, productive and of maximum value to the organisation. In other words, 'hacking work' practices are not about 'working to live' but 'working to work'.

Viewing 'hacking work' practices as an exercise in 'working to work' offers insights into our second research question: *What are the implications of the practices of hacking at work for our understanding of organisational control?* The idea of 'working to work' builds upon Friedman's (1990) view of the worker as a 'malleable' subject: through engagement in 'hacking work', and as integral to their labour process, employees seek to make not only themselves, but also the organisation's processes, technologies and artefacts 'malleable'. In keeping with Friedman's original argument, the engagement in 'hacking work' is a manifestation of workers' exercise of agency. Further, the amount of effort required to invent and implement personalised 'work hacks', and to subject oneself to the self-discipline and self-management aimed at working 'smarter' implies that 'hacking work' should be seen as a form of compliance and control, rather than as a 'decaf' (Contu, 2008), or 'safe' (Bloom, 2013) form of everyday resistance which might lead to people feeling better about themselves, even if it does not undermine the status quo.

The management of self-invisibility

The emergence of 'hacking work' represents a 'bottom–up' movement that, while offering an innovative adaptation to the organisational expectations, at the same time can be surveilled and controlled. 'Hacking work' practices link empowerment and agency to a managerialist mindset of being 'on top' of one's work, whereby individuals develop and draw on tacit knowledge to discipline themselves into becoming more productive employees. These practices are a response to what organisation studies scholars have referred to as 'mission impossible': learning to navigate the constant adding of objectives and tasks within a culture of 'stretch goals' (Pina e Cunha et al., 2017). 'Hacking work' is emerging as a new disciplining ideal, a necessary set of skills and practices for all organisational members, including top executives, held up as exemplars of those who have mastered various 'productivity hacks and management tips [. . .] in order to work smarter, manage better, and get things done better' (McGregor, 2015: n.p.). This emphasis on adaptation permits individuals to 'focus' on what 'really' matters, and at the same time legitimises a lack of a critical engagement with either their personal employment relation or the broader system from which it derives (Ruitenberg, 2016).

What these practices – especially the examples of 'hacking time' and 'hacking surveillance' highlight, in turn, is how 'hacking work' reflects what we call the 'management of self-(in)visibility'. As Power (2004) observed, organisational cultures of counting and quantification rely on a cycle of innovation and reform which contribute to evolving processes of control and resistance. 'Hacking work' can be viewed as an example of such a cycle with the added dimension that these practices of subversion have become an accepted and expected approach to work, ironically contributing to the disciplining and control of organisational members. These innovative activities are representative of present-day organisational spaces that transcend the traditional boundaries of the workplace and monitoring of managers (see Dale, 2005; Mazmanian et al., 2013). Digital technologies have contributed to a 'boundaryless' form of modern employment where organisations expect workers to be proactive and adaptable to '24/7' demands that need to be completed 'anytime, anywhere' (Uy et al., 2015). However, as Courpasson (2000: 144) reminds us: 'the control of organizational order over subordinates can never be total'. People will always use clever tricks and techniques to evade detection and the progressively expanding digital gaze of 21st-century managers. Yet these activities are ultimately disciplining and supportive of broader organisational prerogatives: if they give people a sense of freedom, it comes from a feeling that one is effectively coping with pressures rather than liberating oneself from them. By avoiding the detection of the managerial gaze, temporarily escaping organisational surveillance and exercising one's agency to manage one's own (in)visibility, one enacts the freedom to be a productive capitalist subject.

Implications for research and practice

The article contributes to existing re-readings of neoliberalism within organisation studies (e.g. Berglund et al., 2017; Fleming, 2017). It draws on a practice theory perspective that is interested in the interconnections between people's everyday 'doings and sayings' (Schatzki, 2002) and the broader 'structures of organizational life' (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011: 1240; Nicolini, 2012), especially in the context of modern technology and its implications for control and surveillance (e.g. Mazmanian et al., 2013). This perspective adds an important dimension to discussions of the relation between management and technology. In this regard, Darr (2019) notes the increasing growth of 'automaton' and digital technologies as tools of management control, such as online sales contests for employees which ideologically reinforce market values. We have argued that individuals draw upon a variety of resources and digital technologies as they engage in 'hacking work' practices – an integral aspect of the labour process in which workers exercise agency in a way that is simultaneously subversive and disciplinary. Following from our contention that ‘hacking work’ practices are ubiquitous in ‘high commitment organisations’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2004) operating within the neoliberal ideological project, there is space for future research to empirically explore examples and implications of practices consistent with the ‘hacker ethics’ for workers and organisations.

Our insights build upon Gandini’s (2019) discussion of the role of digital platforms in shaping the labour process of gig economy workers, especially through necessitating and controlling the effectiveness of their emotional labour. We also add to Veen et al.’s (2020) LPT-based argument about the limited scope for expressions of agency in the case of food delivery workers using the Deliveroo and UberEATS platforms. Similar to Gandini’s observations, we see ‘hacking work’ practices as evidence that the labour process – here, in the case of more ‘traditional’ workplace settings, albeit ones where the labour process simultaneously occurs at different ‘points of production’, represented by different digital platforms – has undergone intensification. In contrast to Veen et al.’s (2020) conclusions, we have pointed to various expressions of workers’ agency, showing, however, how these ultimately lead to compliance rather than resistance. We have argued that it has now become the employee’s responsibility to not only (1) fulfil the often excessive organisational demands, but also to (2) use tacit knowledge to invent and apply the ‘hacks’ necessary to do this, in circumstances of an insufficiency of time and other work resources, (3) bear the risks associated with the ‘not-quite-legitimate’ nature of these ‘hacks’ and (4) ensure one’s personal well-being and sustainability under circumstances of decreased state welfare provision. We call for further research to examine the intensification of the labour process in the era of multiple, simultaneous, digital ‘points of production’, and its long-term implications for both organisational performance and workers’ well-being.

Although we consider ‘hacking work’ to be a growing trend, we do not claim that every workplace is characterised by excessive demands and ‘hacking work’ practices. However, the introduction of the concepts of ‘hacking work’ and ‘working to work’ opens up avenues for empirical research to critically examine workers’ and employees’ experiences of ‘hacking work’ practices as well as the organisational cultures in which ‘hacking work’ practices are embedded. Such research would innovatively build on studies addressing the tensions, such as between exploration and exploitation, that employees experience in balancing complex and, at times, competing organisational demands (e.g. Knight and Cuganesan, 2020). It could also explore workers’ experiences and views in a variety of work settings on whether they feel they are subscribing to – or freeing themselves from – the neoliberal agenda. In doing this, it would also contribute to a better understanding of the possibly changing views of work which, as we have argued above, seem to have shifted towards a devaluation of work and seeing it as a set of tasks that need to be ‘hacked’ through the application of cunning and trickery.

Our discussion also contributes to current understandings of the organisational dimension of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theodore, 2002), highlighting the resilience of neoliberalism not so much in ideological, but in practical terms. To this end, it illuminates the deeper dynamic of what Spicer (2005: 867) refers to as the ‘political process of inscribing a new technology’. Here, the use of a technology is never predetermined but is linked to dominant organisational interests and ongoing processes of contestation and resistance. We contend that this hegemonic inscription associated with technology is devolved to employees themselves, as they must exercise self-discipline in engagement in 'hacking work' to meet otherwise impossible to fulfil demands for efficiency, productivity and paradoxically their own personal well-being. Building upon our insights, future research might explore in depth the contribution of the use of digital technologies, especially in the post-COVID era of online work, to avoiding, rather than resolving, deeper structural issues confronting organisations and their members.

We finish our discussion by drawing attention to the practical significance of our analysis. It should not be forgotten that, in the midst of this culture of excessive organisational demands, direct challenges to 'neoliberal capitalism' (Kotz, 2015) in the form of grassroots union struggles and resurgent left-wing politics have emerged. Yet the 'hacking work' practices remain dangerous precisely because of their attractiveness to those engaging in these everyday subversions (Bloom and White, 2016), whereby innovation and change are redirected towards inventing and applying 'tricks' that are supposed to lessen the experienced work pressures through complying with them. One of the key problems that progressive movements will have to confront is a new status quo of excessively demanding organisations and resilient employees and managers, for whom 'hacking work' practices are not a tool for disruptive transformation but an innovative adaptation strategy.

Conclusion

This article has introduced the importance of 'hacking work' in organisations, specifically in relation to employee self-disciplining and self-management in the context of 'high commitment organisations' (Fleming and Spicer, 2004) operating within the neoliberal ideological project. 'Hacking work' exemplifies the broader transformation of work as that which is excessively demanding and must be effectively self-managed, in order for individuals to address both the proliferation of tasks to complete (see also Mazmanian et al., 2013) and the potential for time-wasting and damage to personal well-being inherent in their completion. We have linked the phenomenon of 'hacking work' to organisational settings in which the tenets of neoliberalism – an almost completely marketised economic system characterised by hyper-efficiency, productivity, individualism and self-responsibility – have been translated into the sphere of organisational practice and have become integral to the labour process. As we have argued throughout the article, employees adapt to the expectation to bring the neoliberal ideals to life through channelling their time, effort and innovation into 'hacking work' practices which, while aimed at meeting excessive organisational demands and maintaining one's well-being, reinforce organisational control and ultimately contribute to the reproduction of the capitalist system according to an established pattern of extracting value from labour.

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