Loneliness *and the* Crisis of Work

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The Invisible Frame

An empirical philosophical study of the production of loneliness in "responsible capitalism"

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Philosophy has trivialised loneliness for too long. We need to acknowledge that loneliness is not just an inexorable ingredient of the human condition that can be veiled with a romantic rhetoric claiming for loneliness an ulterior purpose. Here, we study loneliness from the perspective that we, collectively, *produce* loneliness by the way in which we allow work to be organised.

The present chapter addresses the connection of loneliness and work by tracing an apparent paradox: Over the last decades, there have been more and more calls for a "responsible" or "sustainable" capitalism. As business magazine *Fortune* formulated this, a form of capitalism in which "companies have a clear purpose to serve society, their customers, and their employees as well as their investors. When they do so, they create the most sustainable long-term value for their shareholders" (George 2019). Businesses have followed suit, vying with one another for better reputation as employers, offering programs that focus on the wellbeing of their workforce, and so forth. In this context it may seem surprising that there could ever be a "crisis of work", that employees feel in fact "burned out", overwhelmed and lonely in and due to their work. And yet, a host of HR managers, job coaches, cultural pundits as well as, indeed, individual introspection can inform us that this is in fact the case. How is this even possible? To answer this question, we analyse the nexus of loneliness and work in the context of today's "responsible capitalism" in an empirical-philosophical way, combining conceptual insights and interview data. We suggest that the employee-facing side of "responsible capitalism" is in fact the combination of two potent ideologies, neoliberalism and the human potential movement in management studies. Combined, they provide a "frame" that structures policies, programs and perceptions, yet—and this is crucial—without the individual even noticing this. To all intents and purposes, the frame is "invisible".

The structure of the chapter is as follows. (1) We introduce the problems of the modern workplace through a short discussion of Zygmund Bauman's *Liquid Times*. (2) We then analyse responsible capitalism into its constituent elements. (3) We demonstrate the invisibility of the framework with an interview conducted with

"Ellen", HR manager in a multinational energy company, and (4) end with a short conclusion on the implications of our argument.

1. Liquid Times?

In his book *Liquid Times*, the Polish-British philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman analyses *inter alia* work in contemporary society. He states that work used to give security and connectedness, but is now a place where employees have to prove their use and are in constant competition with each other:

> Interhuman bonds, once woven into a security net worthy of a large and continuous investment of time and effort, and worth the sacrifice of immediate individual interests (…), become increasingly frail and admitted to be temporary. Individual exposure to the vagaries of commodity-and-labour markets inspires and promotes division, not unity; it puts a premium on competitive attitudes while degrading collaboration and teamwork to the rank of temporary stratagems that need to be suspended or terminated the moment their benefits have been used up. (Bauman 2007, 2-3)

Employees have to act as entrepreneurs, managing and promoting their skills and knowledge. They continuously have to decide and plan how to develop themselves and learn about future possibilities that match their knowledge and experience. To do this, they have to know what sort of work will be required and how they can compete for these jobs with other (younger) workers. The competition is complicated by the fact that companies do not have fixed career paths anymore, and they do not know what will be the requirements of future jobs. This uncertainty makes each and every worker into a "hunter" (Bauman 2007, 104), a hunter for possibilities and chances. Who cannot keep up, becomes the prey. Life as a hunter does not bring meaning to life, Bauman states:

> Having reshaped the course of life into an unending series of self-focused pursuits, each episode lived through as an overture to the next, it offers no occasion for reflection about the direction and sense of it all." (Bauman 2007, 109)

Bauman tells us how everyone is left alone, trying to "make it":

> In a world, (…) in which each individual is left on his or her own while most individuals are tools of each other's promotion. The solitary life of such individuals may be joyous and likely to be busy—but it is bound to be risky and

> fearful as well. In such a world there are not many rocks left on which struggling individuals can build their hopes of rescue and on which they can rely in case of personal failure. Human bonds are comfortably loose, but for that same reason frightfully unreliable, and solidarity is as difficult to practice as its benefits, and even more its moral virtues, are difficult to comprehend. (Bauman 2007, 24)

Bauman's analysis of work and loneliness today is an odd mixture of acute observations and a disturbing undertone of quiet resignation. The resignation seems tied to the generality of his analysis. It seems a matter of necessity that our "liquid" time leads to such scenes, attitudes and practices; Bauman may or may not wish himself beyond its reach, towards a utopian future that resembles a paradisiac past. Arguably the best use of Bauman's analysis is, therefore, twofold: first, to acknowledge that Bauman has correctly identified large-scale and largely unrecognised loneliness that forms the background to a vast variety of practices we see around us today. The metaphor of the "hunter" is valuable in this regard, conjuring up social contract theorists' imageries of the pre-social condition. Clearly, Bauman shows no inclination to glorify this status in a Rousseauian fashion. Second, however, we ought to move forward, beyond Bauman's generalities towards a more specific analysis. Which ideological constructs inform the structure of modern work to produce this omnipresent loneliness? In the next section, we offer a suggestion.

2. Moving beyond generalities: Neoliberalism, Human Potential Movement and Responsible Capitalism

The contemporary *homo economicus* (or *femina economica*) sketched by Bauman is clearly the representative of a recent stage of capitalism. The individual job (and life) hunter, we hear, has temporary, insecure bonds to employers or organisations and temporary, fragile bonds with colleagues through teamwork and cooperation. None of these aspects, however, marks an entirely new situation. What places our hunters firmly in the present is their being cast as "entrepreneurs", who are ultimately responsible for their own lot. The individual job and life hunter is given key divine attributes of the premodern metaphysics and theology; the imagery of an unmoved mover is held up to us: an unmoved mover who should live unaffected and invulnerable through those "liquid" times.

We suggest that this specific constellation should be seen as a combination of two ideological forces: the neoliberal world view and the human potential movement.

In what follows we shall begin with a brief discussion of neoliberalism, since this has become a well-known concept and a focus of political contention. For our analysis here, the exact history of neoliberalism—whether or not we can trace its principles backwards beyond the Reagan and Thatcher era to the early twentieth century—is hardly relevant. We follow Bal and Dóci's definition that focuses firmly on a contemporary understanding of neoliberalism:

> The core principle of neoliberalism is that human welfare will be maximised when individuals have the ultimate economic freedom to act. (…) in neoliberalism, the meaning of work is reduced to a mere transaction between two parties, thereby neglecting the intrinsic meaning of work and employment relationships for people. (Bal en Dóci 2018)

It is this ideology that is ubiquitous in our society and workplaces today. Its view of the individual is largely that of an independent, self-governing male, who must take care of himself to make his life a success. Bal and Dóci (2018) state that the main goal of organisations is to achieve high organisational performance, profit and shareholder value. The value of employees is instrumental and they must, therefore, continually prove their worth in competition with other employees or applicants. "Neoliberalism presents all human skills as simple commodities with a price tag. Skills used at work are separated from social relations and are presented simply as individuals putting them to use for the rewards—or wage 'premiums'—that they can bring" (Holborow 2015, 20). Neoliberalism has become a background assumption that we rarely recognise as such due to its pervasiveness (Monbiot 2016): "We appear to accept the proposition that this utopian, millenarian faith describes a neutral force; a kind of biological law, like Darwin's theory of evolution. But the philosophy arose as a conscious attempt to reshape human life and shift the locus of power" (Monbiot 2016). Neoliberalism shifted the locus of power from governments to the market because "neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that "the market" delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning" (Monbiot 2016). As a result, workers are also part of this market, and employers expect entrepreneurship from their employees. This "entrepreneurship theorem" requires people to stand up for themselves, perceive opportunities and actively work on their career, while at the same time clear and lasting career paths are increasingly disappearing from organisations, due to their shorter-term orientation towards profit.

At first sight, it might seem surprising that the entrepreneurship theorem that is inherent in neoliberalism did not lead to protests, since it does present a major change in the status of the workforce, who are credited with key attributes of the capitalist entrepreneur, yet without the concomitant financial benefits. The reason for this seems to be that entrepreneurialism had begun to be perceived as a normality, something rightfully expected of every employee, of every human being. The massive mentality change has been the effect of the human potential movement. To our knowledge, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has been the first to highlight that the movement is a key indicator of large-scale cultural change. In Taylor's analysis, the human potential movement only values behaviour aimed at self-expression, self-realisation and the discovery of authenticity. The way of life promoted by these goals tends to be superficially consumerist, according to Taylor, because nothing is allowed to trump the value of self-realisation as a subjective construct. Ideas such as community spirit and togetherness come second (Taylor 1989, 507). The human potential movement perfectly undergirds neoliberalism, since it presents a normative anthropology that universalises and thus devalues entrepreneurial capacities and attitudes. One cannot expect extra protection or remuneration for what is a mere normality, a universal human trait.

The emphasis on self-realisation began to take hold in the 1960s.[1] It achieved large-scale cultural penetration in the 1980s, parallel with Reagan and Thatcher-style neoliberalism. Today, the movement's basic principles are a staple of management books, employee programs, trainings, and so forth, at an international scale. The (self)management book market is replete with titles from the perspective of the human potential movement.[2] In terms of self-management programs, the activities of organisations such as Scientology and *est* (which was later called Landmark) are well-known examples (Chryssides 1999). In this type of activity, participants learn to set and achieve personal goals. Those goals often have to do with performing better and acquiring wealth and success in business and personal life. The core of this type of training and coaching is that by "flushing out" limiting beliefs and learning new behaviour, people can achieve whatever they want and be more successful at work.

[1] The emphasis on realising the potential of the individual human being is certainly older; the beginning of the human potential movement is often dated to the founding of the Esalen Institute in 1962 (see e.g. the Wikipedia entry "Human Potential Movement", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Potential_Movement, last accessed 15 November 2020)
[2] Examples include Covey 1989; Robbins 1991; Eaton and Johnson 2001; Beck 2002; Brown 2010; Pink 2011.

Indeed, self-realisation is also credited with being a key dimension of "meaning" of the modern worker to give meaning to their working life (Martela en Pessi 2018).

Against the background of the prevalence of human potential thinking, it is evident how organisations today priding themselves to be representatives of a "responsible" and "sustainable" capitalism conceive of, approach, and manage their personnel: Employees are attributed entrepreneurship, the linchpin of human potential thinking and neoliberalism. "Responsible" or "sustainable" organisations thus continue a tradition of normative anthropology that derives from those two ideologies. And due to their prevalence, those (twin) ideologies act as an invisible frame that informs the thinking of participants to an astonishing degree.

3. "Ellen" and the invisible frame

The present chapter builds on interviews with CEOs and senior HR managers in the Netherlands, conducted in 2019 and 2020. The interviews are part of ongoing research about the future of work, and the way people find meaning through their work. In this article, we will focus on one of those interviews, conducted with a senior female HR manager ("Ellen") of an international energy company also operating in the Netherlands ("Ellen's company"). What this interview illustrates is the incredible, unrecognised hold that the ideological framework of entrepreneurialism in neoliberalism and human potential movement exerts over the thinking of a conscientious, empathetic and well-meaning senior manager. When asked about role of her company concerning the meaning of work and the wellbeing of employees, she is confronted with numerous instances of the darker side of work: way beyond being instrumentally necessary for maintaining one's economic status, work is claimed to be key to the self-realisation of individuals. From this perspective, the vulnerability of workers has increased, yet workers are on their own when it comes to performing and keeping their job. They should of course feel a connectedness with the purpose of the organisation and with colleagues, but they cannot count on reciprocity from the organisation.

We do not want to pretend that anything about this situation is unusual, on the contrary. The international energy company is a "model citizen" in the economic landscape of today, having very much the interest of their employees at heart. Ellen is—and we would like to stress that again—a "model employee" whose thoughtful answers could inform more analyses than the one conducted at present. What is interesting about this specific interview is the extent to what Ellen says is

representative of the larger current of "responsible" enterprises today. In this sense, our interview with Ellen illustrates the role of the ideological framework for the analysis of work and loneliness way beyond the specific case. In what follows, readers should stay alert to the ideological work that Ellen is performing, making light of or glossing over the evident darker sides of work. In fact, the only thing Ellen will not be seen doing is to turn round to question the ideological framework itself. We structure Ellen's replies according to five key issues.

3.1. Individualisation and social isolation

In the interview,[3] Ellen outlines the environment in which employees must do their jobs. They work in a matrix organisation, where an employee can have several managers because of different projects. One manager may ask to give priority to assignment *x*, while another asks for assignment *y*. How the employee deals with this, depends on empowerment and the ability to understand the purpose beyond the projects. Add to that the fact that this organisation works across borders and that employees must therefore be able to deal with cultural differences. Moreover, this international cooperation requires personal independence because employees do not see their supervisors every day. "Individual responsibility is part of the culture", Ellen says.

Social isolation may be an effect for members of teams that work across different countries; for them, it is not possible to walk into the office of a manager or meet team members at a coffee break. They can only be reached online. Ellen tells us that to have the opportunity to meet (new) employees, there is a quarterly drink at the office and a monthly information session to meet new employees where they talk about how business is going. The management team takes care to plan meetings at different locations each time. They plan an "ask & share" hour with employees, where employees can learn about how the business is going and where they can share own experiences. These meetings are meant to organise connectedness, but we wonder if an hour now and then really gives enough room for discussing personal questions. The pressure to perform is on the employee. Perform the best you can, cooperate with national and international colleagues, manage work and private life, take care of being noticed by superiors, follow training programs, take care of relaxation by sport or yoga (all provided by the company as we later will see), is key. Working in an international

[3] The interview was conducted in Dutch, in what follows we provide our translation.

organisation means working with different time zones and forces people to work outside office hours. The company thus swallows up the employees.

It is not the case that Ellen is blind to disadvantages the company culture may have, but at the same time, company culture is a convenient shorthand for placing choices beyond the control of individuals. So, even if Ellen thinks that the responsibility for managing careers sometimes lies too much on the employee, this is not held against the corporate culture. The way Ellen talks, any unfairness is no more than a corporate culture that is a "little bit" unbalanced in a specific regard. People who fail, who fall through the net, as it were, fall "a little bit" through the net. In this vein, Ellen talks, for instance, about "people who just stand still": "they do not know exactly where to start, and if you don't have a manager who also takes them along and guides them, (…) that leads to (…), slower growth or stagnation. So, yes, I think that sometimes we place the responsibility a bit too much on the employee for that." There is no clear direction for employees to manage their careers and that creates frustration, she says. If there are real possibilities for managing careers that would not have to be a problem, but there are no fixed career paths. Ellen: "We also have the policy within our company that (…) all vacancies are advertised (…). So there is always an open process, which of course is very much in line with our culture. But the downside of that is that (…) succession planning is hard to do. So, it is complicated to say to a talented person: '(…) if you just do well these next two years, we'll have an opening (…).' You can't really promise that because you always have to go external, I mean not external, but in the group. You have to; there must be a procedure (...), so you cannot promise people much perspective, in that sense and for many people it is a barrier (…)." With these words, Ellen demonstrates the working of the internal job market in her organisation. She does see the lack of commitment to employees' continued career, but she does not question the organisational culture.

Ellen recognises the problem of self-management as we ask about other training programs for employees. Ellen: "that's where that whole self-management problem comes into play again, if you don't have a manager who is somewhat active in that, and you're not very resolute yourself, then it may just be that you fall a bit through the net."

3.2. Open plan office

Ellen also mentions the burden of working in an open-plan office. The idea behind this spatial arrangement was to create workplaces where people could efficiently work

together—and, of course, to cut costs—, but that caused new problems, she says. Since nobody has their own room anymore, not even Ellen herself, everybody has to find a place to work every day in an environment that is noisy (at least most of the time). It might seem as if being together in an open plan office were an antidote to loneliness, but this would a mistake. Workers do not have a permanent spatial anchor in all of this. The result is what might be described euphemistically as a "healthy struggle" for the best places, and that has literally turned out to be the case. The massiveness and lack of private space in an open office plan make people smaller, a mass product. That can increase feelings of loneliness amid the hustle and bustle. Those who want to consult with colleagues must plan space to work themselves. The daily need to search for where and how employees want to and can work is an extra burden. In fact, more and more employees ask for the opportunity to work at home, alone. Ellen, therefore, wonders aloud whether a smaller and more local organisation would not better for the wellbeing of people. Ellen describes the energy it costs to work in such a flexible environment and wonders how it would be: "people wonder is it still worth it, you know, to allow this energy drain." She notices that people even leave the company for that reason. "I now see quite a few people leaving, who (…) go to entirely local companies, who opt for: 'I just want everyone in one location again, and it is all manageable, and I have, say, the whole scope of responsibilities in one place (…).' Those are reasons why people say they are leaving."

3.3. Self-improvement

Today, organisations state proudly that they offer employees possibilities to develop themselves. Ellen has started setting up four different talent programs for employees who show great potential and/or leadership qualities. In these training programs emphasis is laid on "making an impact", Ellen tells us. The programs focus on the question "where do you want to make an impact?" She explains this by the choices people (have to) make for different roles in their lives. As young parents, for example, employees make different choices about working long hours.

All of this is very well meant, of course, and one might see in this the company's intention to support employees in difficult times of their life. However, Ellen tells us, as a matter of course, that in those programs the ideas of Franklin Covey (1989, see above) are key, obviously adjusted to the European context. The core of Covey's ideas is personal responsibility in every situation and attention to self-growth. The individual takes centre stage, and much less attention is directed at the importance of team efforts. Employees who can take part in the self-improvement programs are the

ones that are seen as "high potentials". In that respect, the mere fact of being invited to the programs is some sort of reward. Even at this level, the company makes visible a difference between two constituencies, those with promise, and those without, increasing the pressure on those who want to keep their place near the top. Just being "good enough" is no option. Employees who put family first, however, will put less effort in their careers, and the question is, of course, what impact this will have on their careers. So, inviting young parents to take part in the programs amounts to contradictory signalling. The overt goal is to support employees in making choices that are best for themselves, even if that might reduce their "output", at the same time the very way of organising the programs, pre-empts the possibility of actually choosing that route. In effect, the company has offered no more than a rhetorical blanket to employees, increasing instead of lowering the pressure on them.

3.4. Flexible workers and employee rights

In the Netherlands, 40 per cent of the workforce work flexibly, and this is a situation that leads to several problems, as the Work Regulation Committee's (2020) report "In what country do we want to work?" has concluded at the behest of the Dutch government. The flexible Dutch workforce consists of self-employed workers, temporary workers and workers on short-term contracts. The problem identified in the report is the emergence of a class of workers with almost no rights, no insurance and no pension; and a growing gap between people with secure work and people with precarious work. Of course, there is a big difference between highly-educated self-employed consultants and the mail delivery men and women, but both are vulnerable to (economic) crises. Working on short-term contracts or being self-employed means extra pressure to perform. Labour laws can add to the pressure: a temporary contract can only be renewed for a small number of times, otherwise, the employer is obliged to enter into a permanent working contract. Trade unions have lost their influence and are therefore not in a position to negotiate good working conditions for flexible workers. Employees and employers are, therefore, continually assessing their positions and are looking for better opportunities. This assessment affects commitment. Why should one commit to an organisation when employment contracts can be dissolved at any time, and when it is always uncertain whether a contract will be renewed? In addition to that, the broader cultural trend and public rhetoric amount to a wide-ranging "expectation management" vis-à-vis work. It has become an article of public religion that lifelong employment does not exist anymore. Employees should

rejoice in this, because it is bad for one's career to commit oneself to one employer for too long. To all intents and purposes employees and organisations are thus trained to see flexibility, the scarcity of legal protections, a relationship between employer and employee of few regrets and demands as the cultural norm. And it shows: in the Netherlands, employees change employers on average every ten years (Dekker 2018). Many organisations, including Ellen's company, still have "permanent" employees, in the attenuated sense of the word that we have explained above: in the case of Ellen's company, more than a thousand employees fall into that category.

In our present context, another group of employees is even more interesting: Ellen's company has, as so many others, a sizeable "flexible" layer. Ellen's favoured term for this "layer" is the Dutch word *schil* that primarily refers to the skin of fruits and vegetables. Ellen talks about the "flexible peel", as if it was a matter of course and of no concern to "peel off" those employees if circumstances make this desirable. For Ellen it is also a matter of course that her company's primary responsibility lies with the "permanent" staff. There are even different kinds of "flexible peel"; next to staff on flexible contracts, there is a host of contractors, with even lower standards of protection. In the organisation, little is known about the latter, even about something so elementary as whether and how employment standards are being complied with. Ellen recognises that fact, and accepts as a matter of course that her company has only an attenuated responsibility for them: "so we have the internal employees, then we have a flexible peel of temporary contracts who are still directly employed by us, and on top of that there is the contractor peel. So those are contracts that we put out to tender, right? So then .... a company that will, for example, lay the foundations of wind turbines for us. Yes, they will arrange it all again with subcontractors and personnel, and of course, we have standards for this, about human rights, equal pay, health and safety, things like that, but they are of course a good bit further down the line."

The "flexible peel" is not really connected to the company, and Ellen notices some dilemmas around this: "So we have always been cautious not to become too big too fast because then you no longer control it, but because of that you now see that we have a relatively large number of external parties, say, who are less involved. The mission of your company, the values of your company (…) um, that sometimes makes it difficult. For example, we had, which is a foolish dilemma, but last Christmas (...), we actually always had a drink before [Christmas]. But we wanted to do something nicer for once, so we made a deliberate decision only to invite the internal people, because there were already 200. And we went to The Cooking Factory, a cooking workshop for large groups. But yes, if you had to invite all those external parties as

well, we would have had another 150. And that becomes too much, but you don't really want to make a distinction. (…) Somehow you turn them into second-class employees, and somehow that's (...), yes, of course, they aren't, but they're not really internal either. (…) So I have to say that I myself have mixed feelings about it."

Ellen's company offers a permanent contract for positions for which the work has been proven to be structural, but even then, Ellen adds, laying off employees is not too difficult. Here, too, the employer benefits from the increased flexibility. According to Ellen that is advantageous for both parties. After all, it also becomes easier to hire someone if the employer knows that a dismissal will be not too complicated. One might wonder whether that is a rather one-sided advantage for the employer, but Ellen argues that this reduction of workers' rights is a good thing after all: "I do think that people realise that (…) internal people also have more and more flexibility, of course, so in that respect, the laws and regulations around this are of course also changing and if I am honest, we also have a large activity in Denmark, where this is very flexible, so it is relatively easy to get rid of the employee as an employer, but that also makes the entire market much more liquid. So, (…) at first, that seems a disadvantage for employees, but on the other hand, companies are also hiring people much faster." Asking her for confirmation of the point, she continues: "Yes, you can clearly see that, so because (...) what employees initially think is a disadvantage, is actually ultimately an advantage for the entire economy and also for the employee, because it is therefore much easier to go elsewhere. And (…) um, well, you see that happening more and more in the Netherlands, so I think the fear of really helping employees to get a (permanent) contract is just gone. So, we hardly ever make annual contracts anymore. Because then I think, 'why would you do that, a contract for a year?' (…) I mean, a permanent contract under the current regulations ...., if it doesn't work out after six months or a year, you know, you can, then the difference is not that big compared to what you must do with an annual contract."

We ask if the point of a permanent contract is to give employees the confidence they can stay for a longer time. Ellen answers: "We actually only do it (offer short-term contracts) with roles that we really are not sure if there are still there. For example, we are setting up our solar business now, and we just have to see if that will work. So, yes, there we give an annual contract. (…) how do you treat people who are connected to the organisation in different ways and where the internal employee is of course very purpose-driven, for (...) not always the same for the external employees, I mean, there are also plenty of them who just want to grab an hourly rate. They are all happy,

whether it is a project about wind energy or a project at the tobacco industry, they don't really care."

3.5. Workload

In all the interviews we have conducted in our project, workload was an important issue. This is also the case with Ellen: "it's just always busy. So, yes, it's not like it used to be, then you just had a peak, and then you recover. It is simply continuous performance under high pressure." She tells us how this is reinforced by digitalisation, the pressure of being available all the time. Employees are thus consumed by their work. Officially, there is a "culture" at her company, that allows not to work outside regulated working hours, but Ellen also has some doubts about the extent to which that culture actually conveys rights: "So people do feel that they have to explain that (they leave early). I think the culture is indeed not like that at all. Think that at around 5:30 PM people go home, we don't have a company culture where everybody stays till seven. But, I do think that, because you are always connected, that you (…) still have work input all the time (…) do you have the discipline to just turn off your mail? That will not always work, and that is why I thought about it when you asked about the possibility of taking time for informal care. Look, it is, of course, one thing for you to arrange this contractually. But it is another thing that if you want to spend every Friday with your sick father, that you really have that time, or feel that you have it, you know, is your workload really reduced by 20 per cent, or are you just expected to work a bit more efficiently in the four days that you are at work. You can therefore delete all meeting requests, but are you still expected to comment? I'm not entirely sure about the latter." This is an interesting and revealing admission from a senior HR manager, whose job it is to know and offer guidance in such cases.

We ask how employees deal with this high pressure, and she answers with great composure: "That depends. There are people out there who are just pretty good at drawing a line, saying: 'okay, if I have to do this, then this should be taken off my plate. Manager, tell me what to prioritize, then.' What we see among our specialists, and what is very difficult for them, is that they often work on multiple projects. Their line manager is not in those projects, so they are in a challenging situation, where all kinds of projects want to prioritise all kinds of things, their line manager actually does not fully oversee it, and they themselves have the feeling that they are out of control. And that is also what we place a lot of emphasis on in [our] specialist training program. We say: 'okay, how can you, looking ahead in your agenda and in the planning of those

projects, how can you already see where things will soon go wrong? If you have a deadline there in May, and also another project has, then you already know that you will have a huge problem in May. What can you do about it now?' So we try to teach people (…) also to look ahead a bit more structurally and (…) um, yes and a week has 40 hours, but you should not plan them full, because there are always unforeseen things. Some can handle it better than others. Some are a bit more assertive about this than others. What makes it difficult in our international organisation, is that you do not always realise in time if someone is having a hard time. So for us, it is really normal, potential burnouts or people who really, uh, well (…) get a bit overworked. And yes, that is just a big risk, or sometimes difficult to see in time."

Ellen tells us that "the management" tries to set a good example, showcasing how to deal with situations such as these. She tells that she herself had gone on a sabbatical in the past and communicated to the employees about it on the company's intranet. Officially, this possibility is open to all employees, but how likely is it that employees outside the smaller circle of "the management" can actually make use of it? It depends on financial reserves, and also on experienced job pressure. In a competitive environment, it is not convenient to disappear from the scene for a longer time. So it may well be that we see here the parading of privilege rather than a scheme that actually helps employees.

4. Conclusion: Towards a new perspective?

Organisations feel the obligation to take care of the wellbeing of their employees, to be "responsible" citizens in the land of the globalised economy—or so we hear in our interviews. What do they mean by this? In practice, it seems to boil down to "opportunities for self-improvement"—in effect, highly selective training programs for "high potentials" that only serve to increase competition and pressure—and courses that teach those stressed-out employees "how to relax".

Remarkable is the amount of intellectual energy that our interviewee Ellen expends at glossing over the cracks in the system, and the composure with which Ellen integrates obvious injustices into larger ideological constructs that make her company, ultimately, the best of all possible worlds: a benevolent company culture; individual, "bit-sized" shortcomings that represent no more than slight unbalances in the overall advantageous scheme of things, for the greatest mutual advantage for employer and employee.

In his book *The Thought of Work*, John Budd states that "the pull to translate personal fulfilment and positive affective states into productivity, job performance, and competitiveness is a powerful one. (…) The overarching question in the academic and practitioner field, therefore, is what set of human resource management practices optimises employee performance" (Budd 2011, 96). In the all-pervasive managerial discourse of today, there seems to be no room for another view. Just as any other brand of capitalism, "responsible capitalism" focuses on return on investment, shareholder value and maximisation of profit, created through disadvantages for workers. In a market, where every worker is a competitor for the best jobs, the highest salary and the best opportunities, many fall short and are seen as losers, especially in their own eyes. Workers have nothing to expect from employers other than pointers to their (the employees') responsibilities: "People are obliged to sell their potential to work in the labour market because this is the only way to earn a living and to pay for things that they need; however, once they enter the work system, their creative potential becomes something over which they have little or no control" (Holborow 2015, 15). The result is an atomised workforce consisting of lonely monads involved in a constant struggle to reach optimum performance.

Could this ever change? Bal and Dóci point out that we require new theories concerning the workplace. They write about "workplace dignity". This theory postulates that everything in the workplace, including people, animals and resources have their intrinsic worth, and should be treated as such (Bal en Dóci 2018). Arguably, such attempts are destined to become the latest fad in managerial jargon, but no more than that—comparable to the darling projects in Ellen's company, increasing rather than reducing the stronghold that the organisation exerts over its employees.

Perhaps, we need to rethink work altogether and associate it more with play. Dutch political philosopher Govert Buijs, for one, has described in an interview the kind of workplace he would like to see emerge: "It would be nice not only to design work processes from an efficiency point of view but in such a way that everyone feels they are doing something valuable. Work is not just a cost item; it is also a consumer good: we derive a great deal from it. How come we continue to put enormous pressure on something that can also be in the sphere of relaxation and creativity?" (De Jong 2019). We cannot even begin to spell out what sort of changes would be needed to realise such a vision, but it is evident that the direction in which we are collectively headed today is a cul-de-sac.

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