

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

Overview

In this dissertation, I have described how management practices and the lives of employees are changing as global teams work in an increasingly dispersed fashion. I have attempted to show some of the recent economic and industry challenges being faced in the high tech industry. This dissertation has explored how one global corporation is attempting to evolve in response to these external factors, and what the impact has been on knowledge workers in its U.S. workforce. This dissertation has shown how the imperatives of daily work are reinforced through the highly rational rhetoric of finance and re-engineering, in combination with compelling psycho-social factors. Throughout this work, I have shown how Foucault's (1988) four domains of power (labor or production technologies, language or sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self) work in concert to shape the daily experience of employees at TechSoft. Ethnographic detail has demonstrated ways that subjects comply with, co-construct, or subvert these forms of power.

There are many familiar tools and practices at work at TechSoft, from socio-technical systems to human resource practices. The concurrent, growing prevalence of market-focused messages targeted at employees is not an accident; mechanisms of control have become increasingly cloaked in a market discourse that seeks to have the employee self-regulate in response to conditions outside the corporation. In closing, I would like to review two of the

key themes in this dissertation – consuming work and producing self – to summarize my research findings, bring together some conclusions, and suggest directions for future research.

Consuming Work

Through the stories and analysis in this dissertation, I hoped to transmit ideas of work being consuming in two ways: as an adjective describing a way of life that engulfs employees, and also as a verb showing how employees themselves consume work by virtue of how they conduct themselves in the work setting. The dictionary definition alone is foreboding: consume means “to destroy or expend by use; to use up” (Random House 2000). Work in the corporation today is demanding (and some might even argue destructive) at a number of levels. It alters the boundaries of work and home, dictates the rhythms of life at and outside of work, and demands mobility. At the same time, workers must willingly consume work, and demonstrate both their satisfaction with and commitment to corporate life in order to succeed.

Because knowledge work is not dependent on the fixed location of a manufacturing facility, it can be executed anywhere from a home office to an offshore contracting facility. In order to ensure work is getting done, new forms of surveillance have developed, which workers are required to consent to as a condition of employment. Thus, even when working in remote locations, workers are never completely sure who is watching them and by what means. In addition, as described in Chapters 2 and 3, working at home requires being

accessible, either by giving out a home number or by carrying a mobile device like a cell phone or a pager. These mobile technologies then also allow work to penetrate into home life. The balancing act between work and home has already been studied by Perlow (1998), Wacjman (1991), and others (U.S. Congress 1985), but this area is a rich area for ethnographic research, especially as more and more women (who may also choose to have families) embark on successful and demanding careers in the corporate arena.

As with many work settings, corporate life is highly deadline-driven. In Chapter 3 I described how the urgency in the high tech environment is compounded by devices like phone systems and pagers, that demand (and measure) instant responsiveness. In Chapters 5 and 6, I explained how financial reporting to press and analysts creates cyclical, quarterly performance pressure for the salesforce and the organizations that support them.

Although I did not address it in depth in the dissertation, the globalization of work does have a direct impact on employees and their daily activities. Work consumes time that might have otherwise been spent with family, and career development itself often demands a variety of sacrifices. Staying connected to dispersed team members may require phone calls at odd hours, and travel to ensure connectedness through face-to-face contact. For the most part these are conditions of employment. In many cases, career advancement is also dependent on another, more permanent kind of mobility – relocation of individuals and families. The impact of these activities on the local presents

important areas for further study. If the local is conceived of geographically, seldom-available neighbors and frequent changes in home ownership can only undermine a sense of community. And if the local is conceived at the family level, ethnographic research could lend insights into how worker's personal and families lives are expected to change in support of career aspirations.

For the corporation, it is also imperative for employees to remain satisfied with work, because their happiness makes them more productive. But this need to manage employee attitudes and understanding is crucial for other reasons as well; employee satisfaction is directly correlated to customer satisfaction, and employee conviction on key marketing messages correlates to brand strength. Both of these factors in turn contribute to the positive perception of the corporation in the market. As a result, employee perceptions are tightly managed and monitored; their ability to internalize (read: consume) and re-present the corporate image to customers is a key element in the complex chemistry of company success.

Employees accept these conditions of work because as consumers they have become dependent on a quality of life that is afforded by their corporate salary and benefits (Deetz 1992:57, Rose 1999:66). In turn, they demonstrate their compliance through the performance of commitment (Jaffe 1995). In the process, they seek to produce themselves as corporate citizens and as unique commodities in the job market, which is the subject of the following section.

Producing Self

Du Gay (1996:57-8) has argued that it is precisely because corporations are working with dis-located employees with various cultural experiences that the discourse internal to the corporation is so urgent. But it is the internalization of this discourse in employees that, in the end, makes it totalizing. The performance review process (described in detail in Chapter 5) provides one of the most compelling examples of how employees use an existing corporate ritual to demonstrate their understanding of the corporate discourse and their ability to perform it, with the goal of achieving a measure of personal success.

Additional insights about the challenges of 'producing self' can be extracted from the change management efforts described in Chapter 6. During re-organizations, all hierarchies and existing 'best practices' are subject to review and re-definition. So in order to survive, employees must remain flexible in understanding existing categories, how they are perceived within those categories, and they must be prepared to re-produce themselves within categories as yet unknown. The realities of change management have been treated relatively briefly in this dissertation. Future ethnographic research could study these processes in greater detail and as they are transpiring, rather than providing a tidy summary of events after the fact. In fact, there are a number of anthropologists at work in corporations today who must surely experience organizational change, but their analysis is focused outwards on their company's needs, and not inwards on their own experience as employees in the corporate setting. In depth research in this area would provide a better understanding of

how change is rationalized, understood, and made tolerable at an individual level, and would give insights into a major aspect of corporate life today.

At the same time that understandings of self are shaped by the corporation, Deetz (1992:41) argues that institutions outside of the corporation are eroded. I would not disagree that traditional, geographically local support systems are eroded by these changing patterns of work. However, self-reliant individuals find other means of survival. For example, it appears based on my research that resourceful individuals establish dynamic, contingent, extra-institutional networks for support. Recent research by other social scientists has resulted in similar conclusions (Cross *et al* 2003, Fisher 2004). And, while social networks have been well-studied by social scientists, further study might help clarify whether there is a growing dependence on these types of networks, if the nature of these network has evolved as work becomes more dispersed, and if there are correlations to the increasing mobility demanded by industries and corporations that span the globe.

In Chapter 3, I briefly discussed consumer culture and market discourse inside the corporation as part of a larger economic trend called the culture of enterprise. This trend is not just about the changing nature of free markets and corporate practices, it also has to do with changes in individual behavior, and the way that producers are subordinated to the needs of consumers. But what happens when we consider that employees are consumers of corporate discourse, and producers of their own careers? In this case it might be possible

to argue that workers are producing themselves as commodities, and that their self-interest takes precedence over their interest in the corporation. Du Gay (1996:56) has argued that the language of enterprise extends into self-understanding “in which certain enterprising qualities – such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals – are regarded as human virtues and rewarded as such.” Thus, the personal and emotional labor that the service economy requires encourages the “rationalization, commodification and exploitation of personal characteristics” (Sturdy 2001:6). I spoke a bit about this in Chapter 3, where employees in the IT Support Center came to measure their value to the organization (and their value relative to co-workers) based on weekly bar graphs on the bulletin board.

The tendency to seek out networks of support is not necessarily in contradiction with the desire to distinguish oneself. In fact, perhaps it is because employees feel the need to differentiate and market themselves internally that external networks of support (including identification with occupational groups) are necessary. This would present an interesting area for further study, as there might be an opportunity to draw parallels between the political and economic pressure internal to the corporation, and the role of networks as a sort of social movement to provide the support system and camaraderie that is (in some cases) missing internally.

In Closing

As mentioned in the Introduction, my research agreement with TechSoft required that staff from the legal and corporate communications department review the dissertation. When I first submitted chapters for review, I was still working on the Conclusion. One of the things that I was asked to consider for the Conclusion – if I could include it without compromising the integrity of my research – was whether I could balance the account of tumult and hardship with an update on the organizational and economic improvements that have occurred since the period of my study. I thought about it for a long time, and deliberated on how to accommodate the request while still being true to my analysis of TechSoft and the corporate landscape more broadly.

As a matter of fact, as I complete the writing of this dissertation, TechSoft is a much different place than it was during the period I documented. The organizational turmoil described in Chapter 6 was quite real, though certainly an extreme case. The current executive team of the U.S. subsidiary has now been in place for some time, and the company is now executing against a vision and plan that has been well communicated to the employee base. While there are occasional changes in management or in the organization, the time since the conclusion of my research period has been a relatively stable and well-executed period in the company's history. The U.S. subsidiary of TechSoft is in the middle of a substantial turnaround as a result of these internal efforts, as well as shifts in the economy and in the industry. And while there are still employees who are reeling from the changes of the past several years, for the most part employee

satisfaction (and concurrently customer satisfaction) has improved. At this point in time, TechSoft would be an ideal case study for the management literature. However, Rabinow said that “... modern discourses are characterized by enduring instability and only momentary coalescences which are soon contested” (1989:58), and like both Rabinow and Law (1994), I believe that TechSoft will change again before too long.

“But Natalie,” I can already hear my advisor telling me, “what does this contribute to *anthropology*?” And that is where I really struggle to articulate the positive outcome. While the U.S. economy has improved, and while the situation in the high tech industry is not as dire as it was, the daily conditions of work inside the corporation still remain very much the same. It still remains crucial to be flexible, adaptable, in tune with corporate strategy, and sensitive to the changing undercurrents of office politics. I would even argue that the turnaround in the economy, the industry, and the U.S. subsidiary may encourage employees to work even harder than they did before. That is not to suggest that the trends external to the corporation are irrelevant – to the contrary. The changes in world politics, in the economy, and the industry are the foundation for the market discourse that pervades corporate communications. Market discourse serves to relate employees directly to external realities through the lens of corporate objectives. In some ways, a major responsibility of management at TechSoft has become to educate the employee about the market, assuming that the employee will self-regulate given the right information. Understanding these external

factors and how they are transformed into compelling messages for employees is absolutely critical for making sense of life inside the corporation.

But these outcomes are shaped by trends that extend well beyond TechSoft. Neoliberalism and the flawed concept of free markets is often cited as the reason for this driving market discourse. I agree that there is something fundamentally wrong with a system that distributes wealth (and even basic social services like health care and education) unequally. However, I find that a critique of 'free markets' at such a high level makes it difficult to take action. Perhaps it is my positivist, action-oriented bias (that serves me well in the corporate world), or my limited knowledge of economics that leaves me feeling frustrated with these conclusions. In any case, I have found ideas about *corporate feudalism* (Korten 1999) or *wealth imperialism* (Kelly 2003) helpful in making sense of these trends and what we can do to effectuate change. Both theorists use these heavily loaded terms to compare the current age to historical periods where wealth and power was concentrated in the hands of a few. Corporations used to be formed for public good, and then disbanded when their services were no longer required (Kelly 2003:7). Now, corporations are shaping our societies, undermining the power of national governments, and seeking profit for shareholders before improving the lives of their own employees. These theorists argue that we have conflated political democracy with economic democracy, and that in the process we have lost sight of what it would involve to provide a true economic democracy. While this alternate worldview is visionary and perhaps at times

unrealistic about our ability to change the way corporations work, it nonetheless provides a more actionable path forward than a broad critique of the free market system in general. Within this type of theoretical framework, anthropology can offer a more human-centered way of thinking about business, one that perhaps this new democracy can build on.

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