*Title Page (including Author Details)

Financialization as a Strategy of Workplace Control in Professional Service Firms

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Abstract

Recently, there has been an increased focus on finance as a form of control in corporations. In this paper, we explore financialization as an employee control strategy in a Big Four accountancy firm, and more specifically how it affects the everyday lives of the professionals within the firm. We found financialization involved attempts to transform employees working lives into an investment activity where work was experienced as 'billable hours' that are 'invested' in the hope of a high future pay-off. Employees sought to increase the value of their investment by skilful manipulation. If wisely managed, this investment could yield significant benefits in the future. We argue that financialization involves active employee participation and is a way of binding other forms of control together.

Key words: Professional Control; Financialization; Performance Management; Professional Service Firm.

1. Introduction

According to some commentators, we have now entered an age of financialization (e.g. Martin, 2002; Erturk et al, 2008; Davis, 2009). Despite some concerns about the fuzziness of the concept (Engelen, 2008), researchers have noted the increasing importance of speculative financial instruments in the shaping of the economy (e.g. Boyer, 2000; Froud et al, 2001; Krippner, 2005; Palley, 2007), and financial aspects have become central to the management and control of corporations (e.g. Aglietta & Breton, 2001; Roberts et al, 2006; Froud et al, 2006). Anglo-Saxon corporations are now often run by CEOs from financial or legal backgrounds (Fligstein, 1990), and financial groups seek to extend their control over large corporations (Davis & Thompson, 1994). Shareholder value has become a dominant logic within some firms (Froud et al, 2000; Fiss & Zajac, 2004) and senior managers have become increasingly responsive to financial agents such as fund managers (Roberts et al, 2006). Various aspects of organizational life are now dominated by financial technologies (Ezzamel et al, 2008) and the result is that while in past, corporations may have been controlled by management and managerial knowledge (Grey, 1999), today they are controlled by financiers and financial knowledge (Davis, 2009).

Professional service firms such as lawyers, consultants and accountants (Froud et al, 2006; Carter & Mueller, 2006; Quack, 2007) play an important role in the process of financialization (Folkman et al, 2007). While we know that professional service firms (PSFs) have been an important agent of the financialization process, we know less about whether these PSFs are themselves the target of financialized forms of control. Recent work on law firms suggests many forms of financial control in large corporations, such as ‘economic value added’ or ‘profit per equity partner’ measures, have become common (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2009). This has driven extensive restructuring of employment, and has become the core indicator of firm success. However, what remains to be seen is how these forms of financialized controls affect the control of professionals’ work. To address this gap we would like to ask *how financialized forms of controls have been applied to employees in professional service firms*.

In order to explore this question, we have decided to examine systems of control in one PSF. Existing studies have identified various control strategies mobilized by PSFs including recruitment, human resource management, management by objectives, career systems and client control. All these were present in the organization which we studied. However, we also noticed that in our case, these control strategies were bound together by the drive to financialize employees’ working lives. Broadly this involves attempts to transform the professional service employees into ‘investor subjects’ (Knights, 1997; Langley, 2007, 2008), whose working lives are increasingly disciplined by financialized technologies, mirroring the processes apparent in market transactions (Barley & Kunda, 2004). These technologies gave their working lives monetary value that could be invested, traded, speculated and leveraged. It occured through employees seeking to transform activities in the workplace into billable hours. Moreover, we noticed that employees would put significant effort into manipulating the system in a way that made their activities ‘billable’. The billable hours were subsequently ‘invested’ by employees with the expectation that they would render future returns. The value of this ‘investment’ was manipulated through various formal performance management techniques that sought to put a price on performance and ‘soft’ skills. Finally, we found that the commodity of billable hours was traded through employees seeking to off-load less profitable billable hours and invest (albeit briefly) in more profitable ones. By doing this, they hoped to increase their stock of capital (billable hours) with the intention they could eventually convert this into partnership. This resulted in a ‘financialization’ of control whereby everyday work became understood as a kind of investment that should be wisely manipulated so the employee could later reap the benefits. Not only did this profoundly impact how employees experienced their working lives, it also had an impact on their behaviours. In particular, it transformed how they used their time and changed the kinds of projects they pursued.

By attending to financialization as a control strategy in PSFs we seek to make three contributions. First, we extend the literature on control in PSFs (e.g. Covaleski et al, 1998; Morris & Pinnington, 1998; Anderson-Gough et al, 2000; Alvesson, 2004). In particular, we argue that financialization is an important but under-recognised form of control in PSFs (see also Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2009). Secondly, we extend the growing literature on financialization of corporate control (e.g. Fligstein, 1990; Froud et al, 2006; Davis, 2009). We do this by pointing out that this involves not only shifts in who controls firms and the rise of financial monitoring technologies, but it also shifts in how employees are controlled in the workplace in their everyday activities. In particular, we show that financialization comes to infiltrate the life-world and activities of employees, making them into 'investor subjects' (Martin, 2002; Erturk et al, 2008). This means that they experience their own work and behaviour as kinds of capital that need to be wisely invested and traded in order to ensure a good return. Finally, we make a contribution to recent studies of the disciplinary affect of financialization processes (e.g. Knights, 1997; Roberts et al, 2006; Langley, 2007, 2008). We argue that financialization works as a disciplinary micro-control strategy where people actively use, mobilize and invest in their career. It is something that actually encourages active game playing, intervention and entrepreneurial manipulation. While existing studies have tended to focus on the sphere of consumption (e.g. Langley, 2008) or corporation-investor interaction (e.g. Roberts et al, 2006), we extend these insights to the workplace, and more particularly the control of professional service workers. This shows how such financialized modes of control can operate in the contexts of some of the more minute aspects of everyday workplace interaction.

In order to make these contributions, we proceed as follows. We begin by reviewing existing studies of workplace control in PSFs. We identify an important aspect of control that has not been sufficiently explored – namely the logic of career, of ‘investing’ in oneself (Grey, 1994). We ask how this form of control has played out in PSFs. We then outline our methods, followed by our findings. We draw out three processes associated with financialized control in the workplace: valuation, manipulation and arbitrage. We argue that each of these processes lead to a financialization of workplace control. We conclude by drawing out the contributions of the present study, the limitations and some lines for future research.

2. Control of Professionals

In order to explore financialization as a form of employee control in PSFs, we will begin by placing it into the context of other workplace control mechanisms. Existing research has identified a range of sources of employee control in PSFs. Firms can control through recruiting employees who have appropriate norms, values and dispositions inculcated through education, family background and early life experiences (Hanlon, 1996). The recruitment process itself makes neophyte professionals feel they are part of an elite and thus increase their commitment to the firm (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Once individuals join the firm, Human Resource Management systems become an important conduit of control (e.g. Aharoni, 1999; Maister, 1993). Rhetoric in PSFs typically emphasizes ‘soft’ HRM systems based on commitment, skill and cultural orientation. In reality, these ‘soft’ models appear side by side with ‘hard’ HRM systems that treat employees as a factor of production (Legge, 1995: 67).

Management by objectives is also a typical control strategy, ostensibly providing clear performance criteria and objective evaluations of these (Covaleski et al, 1998). One of the most potent forms of control in PSFs is the ‘up or out’ career system. The core characteristic of this system is that an employee is only allowed to stay at a certain level for a certain time, after which it is ‘up or out’. At each higher level, fewer places are available, and when at the top, one needs to fight for one's existence by broadening the market or out-manoeuvring others (Baden-Fuller & Bateson, 1990; Morris & Pinnington, 1998; Sherer, 1995). The result is that employees must show significant commitment if they are to make a career within the firm. In addition to these control systems within the firm, clients can act as an important form of control. This happens when employees in PSFs are pushed to put on professional displays to the client that model rationality and client-centeredness (Clark, 1985; Power, 1997; Werr et al, 1997; Anderson-Gough et al, 2000). Such strong identification with clients and demand to ‘be professional’ often means that employees need to look like their clients: White, male, middle class heterosexual is the norm, and any deviation from this has to be carefully managed (Grey, 1994,1998; Haynes, 2008).

Recruitment, human resource management, management by objectives, career systems and client control are all well-known forms of control. Recently, a number of commentators have pointed to the increasing importance of another particularly powerful form of control in PSFs – financial technologies (e.g. Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2009). These can come in range of forms from the demands of various financial intermediaries such as fund managers (Roberts et al, 2006), to complex technologies that compose and track the financial performance of firms against certain metrics (e.g. Froud et al, 2000), to far more subtle forms of self regulation where people begin to think of themselves and their various projects in financial terms (e.g. Martin, 2002). We might expect that the partnership-based ownership structure of many PSFs might make them fairly immune to the increasing influence of financial markets. However, this does not seem to be the case. For instance, some have argued that the far-reaching restructuring of law firms has been driven by the increasing obsession with various forms of corporate control (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2009). Others have noted in passing that professional service employees experience their professional careers as a process of 'investing' in themselves (Grey, 1994). This appears to tap into what other commentators have noted is the process whereby financialized forms of control instil a sense of self-discipline into subjects (e.g. Knights, 1997; Aitken, 2007; Langley, 2007, 2008). We want to explore how this process of self-disciplining financialization plays out as a form of control in the context of PSFs.

3. The Study

3.1 Setting

In order to explore financialization in a PSF, we will focus on the results of a study of the Swedish part of a Big Four auditing firm. While the process of financialization is usually identified as originating in the US (Montgomerie, 2008) the impact is present on a global basis. Changes in ideologies and institutions of corporate control, changing financial technologies as well as mass savings provide a context which increase demands on various actors to act as ‘investors’ (Fligstein, 1990; French & Kneale, 2009; Langley, 2007; MacKenzie, 2006). Sweden is a particularly interesting case, since whilst neoliberal pension reforms in the ‘90s fuelled mass savings, and with this supported the dissemination of the discourse of financialization, in general there seems to exist a significant resistance and that ‘financialisation lacks legitimacy in Sweden’ (Belfrage, 2008: 278). Thus, the context can be seen as presenting a particularly unlikely environment to find financialized control.

Specifically, the department for tax consulting (referred to as DM&I) is our focus. Tax specialists are interesting because they have played an important role in the process of financialization. They did this through helping large corporations to minimize their tax burden (Sikka, 2009; Sikka & Willmott, 2010). Perhaps more importantly, tax consultants have leveraged their position as knowledge brokers between national tax collectors and corporate clients (Hasseldine et al, 2011). The tax department is a specialty within the firm, sometimes working as back office support to the accountants but also with their own clients. The work largely concerns the structuring of various transactions in order to obtain tax advantages. The tax consultants, almost exclusively with a law background, pride themselves on being able to provide ‘safe’ solutions, which means solutions that will hold up in court. In fact, this sometimes requires them to hold clients back from being too opportunistic in their behaviour. Furthermore, they see it as important to take the whole business situation of the client into consideration when giving advice.

Two years prior to the study, there was a change of management in the firm. While the change process itself is not in focus in this paper, it provides an important background for the case. Before the change, the firm was very similar to the professional partnership (or P^2) archetype as described by Greenwood et al (1990). The structure was simple and informal. One partner nostalgically described it as a situation where you had very few formal requirements and a wide scope of possibilities. The subsequent development at DM&I mirrors the findings of other studies which note how PSFs have moved towards more formal forms of control and greater structural complexity (cf. Hinings et al, 1999).

The most notable control technology involves the importance of registering billable hours. This will be developed in more detail later; of importance here is to note that formerly, the time spent on specific jobs were estimated before sending the bill to the client, and the consultants kept informal notes on the time spent on various jobs. With the management change, there was an increased emphasis on the systematic registration of billable hours. A web-based reporting system was put to use where the consultants submitted their time-use on a weekly basis.

The purpose of this was to increase the precision of the time reporting and also to make it easier for the consultants to submit their reports.

Another important aspect is the HRM system. Formerly, personnel development was up to the individual and her or his ability to create productive mentorship relations. The HRM system is supposed to formalize this and ensure that each and every one gets the support s/he needs. The HRM system also seeks to systematize and homogenize the development process. A set of dimensions has been defined, through which the individual is supposed to develop in order to become a more productive consultant. Dimensions include communications skills, leadership skills, knowledge development and business acumen. A number of HR professionals have been hired in order to develop and formalize everything from recruitment via performance appraisals to exit management for those who leave the firm. The focus on HR has also materialized in things such as free gym cards, increased support for parental leave, and the possibility to get partial funding for a maid to take care of household chores. The discourse about the HRM system within the firm heavily emphasised the strategic importance of it. The aim is that it will help the organization achieve its goal of becoming perceived as the best employer in the business, thereby increasing the supply of competent people. The tax consultants themselves are less enthusiastic. While most recognize the positive intentions, they also find it less important. As one laconically remarked when talking about performance appraisal: “When you get out of the room [from the appraisal] there’s so much reality that you don’t do those things anyway." Despite the cynicism towards these systems, the importance of billable hours and shifts in the HRM systems makes this an ideal case to explore how the dynamics of financialization and self-disciplining play out.

3.2 Methodology

The study is based on a broad methodological approach, drawing inspiration from ethnographic case study approaches (e.g. Rosen, 1985; Stake, 2000). The study took place during 2001–2003. During three phases of field work 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees at all levels (See Table 1). Two of these interviews were conducted with former employees. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours. All interviews have been transcribed verbatim and translated from Swedish. Initially, interviewees were asked to talk about their broader work situation (e.g. 'Tell me about your job'). The researcher then wrote down the topics that the respondent raised, using them as a starting point for follow-up questions. As the study developed, certain themes became more prominent, as the researcher's understanding of the empirical context developed. These helped to narrow the agenda of research questions that were asked. The three major offices in Sweden were visited. Also, informal observations of meetings, participating in and observing a Christmas party and some 'hanging around and asking questions' (Dingwall, 1997) were done. Finally, internal and official documentation (such as HRM documentation and employment policies) were obtained and included in the analysis.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As the research project progressed, the theme of billable hours emerged as important. When interviewed about the HRM system and performance reviews for instance, respondents constantly bought up the issue of billable hours. Also, in one of the offices a list with the latest billable hours report, allegedly for the office manager's eyes only, was publicly displayed at the table in the common room. Finally, we noticed that junior and senior employees related differently to billable hours, indicating that the system itself was maybe part of the socialization process for the professionals. All these indications led to a closer focus on the issue, in particular we sought to investigate the design of the system and examined how employees related to it.

Once we had collected the material, we then looked through all the data again for material related to the theme of billable hours and other forms of control. Through successive iterations between theoretical material on financialization and control in PSFs and the data, we identified three central issues which were raised: the transformation of time into money through the technology of billable hours, the attempt to accumulate these billable hours by employees in order to progress through the organization, and the various techniques which were used in order to accumulate these billable hours. Once we had identified each of these issues, we explored in more depth how each of these processes worked. This involved three aspects: Describing how processes actually worked; identifying the various technologies which were involved; examining how employees responded and how it impacted on their work lives. Once we did this, we were able to construct an account of how each of the elements of financialization worked.

4. Findings

4.1 Time is money

As in PSFs in general (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), several forms of control appear simultaneously at DM&I. There are mentoring programs, direct supervision, performance appraisals, and a formal hierarchy consisting of Assistants, Consultants, Managers, Senior Managers and Partners. Moreover, the DM&I staff deem clients important. But the most apparent form of control is billable hours (Brown & Lewis, 2011). We will return to the informal reasons for this later, but there is also a clear official emphasis on this. In the words of a partner working with HR:

> Put harshly, what we make a living of is billing for our work. And work in consultancy is normally related to time, so to speak. That means that the utilization totally determines the survival of the firm.

‘Utilization’ means the number of billable hours divided by full work-time working hours, normally this is expected to be above 75 %. The accumulation of billable hours is thought to operate like clockwork. Every hour worked gets reported into the web-based accounting system and is assigned to a specific client project, all on an individual self-reporting basis. Thus, one hour registered is supposed to equal one hour worked. In the clients’ view, the role of billable hours is important in that it seems to be the basis for the total sum charged for a project or task. This is not correct however, since the bill is almost always a *post facto* construction. Sometimes the amount of time spent on a specific job is less than what can be charged to the client, and sometimes all the time spent cannot be charged. Thus, there is no clear-cut relation between how much time is spent on the job and how much the client is billed, even though the client’s bill is written in terms of hours spent. The client is billed in accordance to how much the job is worth to the client and how price sensitive the client is.

In practice, registering billable hours is more difficult. For one thing, the auditors must decide upon what counts as valuable work. One Partner told us: ‘You are supposed to debit all time spent on a task . . . but at the same time, it may be that you head off in the totally wrong direction . . . there are always situations where I can’t bill millions of hours for something I cannot charge for.’ Moreover, as an Assistant remarked, ‘you feel by yourself how effective you’ve been’. Thus, for the person reporting their billable hours, a form of self-monitoring is always apparent. Was I good enough? Will the client be willing to pay for this? Did I deliver good enough quality? The effect of this is that the professional often devalues some of their work by not billing. Reporting billable hours is a question of self-valuation and judgement.

The ever-presence of billable hours is obvious. Working at DM&I often means that several issues are on one's desk at the same time while incoming calls and emails from clients or peers disrupt the workflow. In order to keep track of time, several tactics are employed. Some use paper sheets with six-minute slots, continually recording what they do, while others use spreadsheets on their computers. A Consultant explains the way of managing this:

> If I have a five-minute telephone conversation with a client, as a beginner I recorded five minutes, 'ok, five minutes telephone call', but if so, I forget to record the two minutes it takes to bring out my time report, they should go in there too, and I forget the ten minutes it takes to open an account if the client isn't already there, and I forget the ten minutes it takes to... If I have given advice I have to take notes on it, for someone else to review and also charge time for. So, often, tasks are more complex, and in the beginning you tend to forget to enter all time.

One common strategy to manage this extra time which cannot easily be allocated to individual clients is to spread them over all projects at the end of the day in order to not 'lose' time. Here, a possibility of manipulating the system arises, since if one is fortunate enough to have clients that are 'billing-insensitive', the opportunities for adding some extra time on their report arises; this is called 'over-billing' and is possible, but the frequency by which it occurs varies between hierarchical levels.

All this self-monitoring is not something that disappears into an automatic routine. An Assistant comments that 'you keep an eye on the watch all the time' and a Consultant notes that 'all my time is devoted to thinking in six-minute intervals'. Meetings that cannot be charged to a specific project are experienced as frustrating and corridor talk is kept to a minimum. At the coffee machine there's talk while you wash your cup and refill, then you rapidly return to work. The quiet atmosphere of all the offices visited was striking.

From these observations, it is quite clear that billable time is not as neutral as it may appear. It enters into everyday practice of the professionals and as a form of control. It also appears quite short sighted, as it always focuses employees on the 'now'. Many express the opinion that there is a lack of objectives and visions, and that billable time is all that counts. A Consultant said that 'the next week we know about, because that's always about optimizing billable time […] the rest is sort of out in the blue somewhere.'

The dominance of billable hours has a number of effects. Perhaps the most obvious result is that the chaotic flow of the working day is transformed into something quantifiable. By pushing employees to record their time, they are asked to apply the precisely quantifiable ‘clock time’ of the capitalist workplace to each moment of their day (Thompson, 1967; Clark, 1985; Adam, 1990; Hassard, 1990). The flow of work-time and the strict structuring of clock-time often do not neatly align, and we have seen that our respondents recognise that this is often a highly artificial process. For instance, difficulties arise when recording time involved in engaging in multiple tasks, transitioning between tasks, or engaging in non-client related activities (cf. Anderson-Gough et al, 2001). The importance associated with clock-time means that the tax consultants have to put significant work into ensuring that every minute at work can relate to specific projects.

Through quantification of time into six-minute slots, the organization is also able to directly value an employee’s time. By doing this, it becomes possible to make a direct link between the time spent working on a particular issue and what is charged to a particular client. Moreover, it becomes possible to assign value to some kinds of activities and not to others (Anderson-Gough et al, 2001). In particular, work which can be reported as billable hours is considered valuable, while activities that cannot be clearly tied to billable hours are not valued by the firm. This valuation seemed to work in two ways. Firstly, it works through creating monetary value, as efforts are directed towards client activities. A strict link to short term firm profitability is the result. Activities like internal projects or competence development outside client relations are not encouraged. The second way it works is through the construction of moral value. In particular, it constructs an image of what a ‘good employee’ is (cf. Anderson-Gough et al, 2000). Indeed, the technology of ‘billable hours’ collapsed these two aspects into one another. One palpable example of this was the public display and an on-going discussion between juniors of billable hours.

A related effect of this process of quantification and valuation is that employees begin to discipline themselves in order to ensure that their work time maximises their billable hours (cf. Brown & Lewis, 2011). The strict focus on working appeared to be the result of employees internalizing the notion of billable hours and carefully accounting for all their own time in relation to this. They begin to ensure that each hour could be attached to a specific project. The result is that their experience and orientation to time becomes ordered and disciplined. They begin to start ‘thinking in six minute intervals’. This means that employees are constantly forced to make judgements about what is valuable work by using the sole criterion of whether it might be charged to a client or not. The result is that all tasks that are not billable (or potentially billable) tend to be considered to have no value. Other studies of accountants have found similar patterns. For instance, a study of trainee auditors' orientation to time found that initially young auditors would see ‘available time’ (i.e. time when they were not specifically assigned to a task) as a benefit (Coffey, 1994). However, the young auditors quickly realised that this non-chargeable time is something that should be avoided. The result is that they actively sought to be, or at least look, busy. In DM&I, looking busy means being able to charge one’s hours out.

4.2 Investing in the Future

In PSFs, making a career is often a main objective for employees: 'People do not join professional firms for *jobs*, but for *careers*' (Maister, 1993: 6). This is also the case for consultants at DM&I. An HR-person claimed that 'climbing the corporate ladder is what they mean by personal development'. Partners are, in this regard, important role models in that they display what is expected in terms of career:

> In the way of looking at work as, you could say, the work's part of your life. They have been career-focused. It's all work for them. Then you have a family on the side that the wife cares for.

This Consultant goes on to note that she and her generation will demand a better work/life-balance, since many have spouses that also have career-oriented jobs. Still, the up-or-out system clearly promotes advancement and careers, and, as noted by the HR-person mentioned above, people will not be content staying at lower levels forever; progression is the norm. Challenges and progression keep the tax consultants motivated (at least as they phrase it), and DM&I is generally considered to be an environment that facilitates development. Moreover, the career is not something that gets taken care of by anyone else or by bureaucratic systems. It is all up to the individual. The individual is understood as being in charge, and among partners it can even be seen as a career disadvantage to not take individualism seriously. Requiring too much assistance is a sign that you have not quite understood the rules of the game. ‘It’s all ad hoc’, a Manager said, and continued: ‘It’s you yourself who have to make sure you get to do what you want to do, no-one else will do it for you.’ One Manager told us that you ‘have to view it in a long-term perspective. The reward will come, but it will not come in this month’s time-report.’ As this Manager sees things, working hard at DM&I is an investment that will pay off in the future. Some are, however, not sure whether the investment will pay off. One Consultant noted that becoming a partner ‘is all about making money for the firm. And maybe my drive is not strong enough to progress very fast. We’ll see.’ For some, practical circumstances make the career an all too insecure investment. One employee noted:

> We already have four partners here in [this city], and that’s too many already. So someone has to quit, and how old are they? The oldest is 51, 52. And they quit at 60. And the rest, they’re not even 50 the rest of them. So before they appoint any new partners [here], it’s a lifetime! [Laughs] It’s not something to strive for, I think. At least not for me.

Thus, the value of the future investment varies between different individuals, but the idea that an amount of effort now will (or will not) pay off is an important way of relating to work.

One reason the tax advisors ‘bought into’ the practice of billable hours was they saw it as a necessary way of investing in their careers. The reasons given for this includes personal development (becoming a better person), professional development (becoming better at the job), building status (getting respect in the firm and wider society), and economic reasons (getting the big payoff associated with partnership). This orientation to invest in one's career is certainly encouraged by particular technologies such as the up-or-out system. Moreover, the career becomes the responsibility for an individual to shape and build – not something that the organization automatically gives them (Hanlon, 1994). In other words, the career becomes an important disciplinary mechanism that employees actually buy in and begin to see as the royal road to self-development (Grey, 1994; Anderson-Gough et al, 2001). But the way they invest in this most precious of commodities is through the accumulation of billable hours. By accumulating billable hours, the employees are able to clearly show they are adding value to the firm. We also noted that most employees recognise that like any investment, there is a certain risk involved. This might be due to the period of pay-off being too long (e.g. due to older partners blocking their career progression), or due to the uncertainty around whether an employee will 'make it' in the up or out system. This meant that for many of our respondents, a career was something that they had to speculate in – they must stake their time and significant effort against the risky future outcome of 'making partner'.

4.3 Quantifying Soft Skills

As with most companies of its kind, DM&I have developed a formal rhetoric emphasising human resource management. This is apparent in publications such as the annual report:

> We aim to be the dominant consulting company on the Swedish market when it comes to tax advice. In order to fulfil this aim we must provide our client companies service of the highest quality. Our ability to provide such service is depending on the collective competence and effort of our employees […]

Thus, developing its workforce is seen as an important target for DM&I. This is also apparent in interviews, especially with senior partners, where there is a general agreement on the importance of developing the employees. This also regards 'soft' aspects, where a performance evaluation system has been developed. It consists of several dimensions (including those mentioned in the annual report). The list of dimensions is divided into two columns (see Table 2). The idea is that 'Consultancy evaluation factors' are supposed to represent how the 'Competence criteria' are realized in relation to clients. Each dimension is supposed to be peer-reviewed and superior-reviewed twice a year (although in practice, once a year seems to be the norm). Some consider the performance reviews helpful, in the sense that they provide feedback, while most see them as merely an administrative ritual.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

One problem is how the ‘soft’ values are supposed to be weighted against ‘hard’ billable time. For instance, one of the ‘soft’ aspects, ‘contributing to business profitability,’ regards being a ‘rainmaker,’ i.e. being able to provide work to others. But when given the choice between putting billable hours on your own time report and handing the task to someone else, the former is perceived as the safer choice. Even more so when it comes to non-quantitative aspects such as helping and supporting others or spending time developing internal organizational issues, as a Consultant explains:

> You gain nothing by being humble or spending time on things that can’t be billed. If you can push those things away, get someone else to do it, spend time on at least looking like you’re pulling in money, then… And this makes those on their way, those climbing the ladder, not always behave as you could perhaps wish…

Another claimed that ‘this is the headquarters of egoistic behaviour’. It is quite clear that the general view is that ‘hard’ values, i.e. billable hours, are viewed as more important.

Despite the dominance of 'hard' measures of billable hours, there are some attempts to upgrade the importance of 'soft' values. For instance, one partner has developed a system for more precise measurement of ‘soft’ values. This lengthy interview excerpt illustrates the line of reasoning and the difficulties encountered. During the interview, the partner illustrated the spider web diagrams he used on a piece of paper by drawing a diagram with several dimensions such as business acumen, team building, and social competence (interviewer in *italics*):

> – All these components are there, and then you can, as I have done, draw a circle with, what can it be, five or six arrows like this, where is says business acumen… [drawing on paper] You must have a five here, then you’re a Partner, a four and you’re a Manager, three and you’re a Consultant, two and you’re an Assistant…
>
> – *And at one you’ve quit… [An attempt at irony that doesn’t quite hit its mark]*
>
> – And at one you’ve quit. When you look at a person, you look at business acumen, look at social competence, look at material competence, and so on, and you mark these with dots, you’ll get a profile there…
>
> – *Spider web…*
>
> – Exactly. And then you see that you made it on these [points with pencil], but your business acumen is crap, because you never send out bills, you never debit your clients, and so on. You’ll never make partner if you continue like this. Or you’re sloppy generally… You’re good at attracting new clients, you’re good at team building and you’re good at, maybe, leadership, but you you’ve got to make this work financially too. And then

you can see, you can set a target for the next year, if you're going to become a Manager, then you'll have to move your positions forward, from two to four, right, two to five. Otherwise you're done for. Because if you ask the question 'How come I'm not Manager?' 'No, because you remain [knocks on diagram] there.'

[…]

– *So how do you get these figures?*

– Well, the figures, you have to do with… It's not that easy to measure, but I have…

– *Let's say business acumen?*

– But there is a lot of ingredients to that! [Self-confidently] Behind business acumen there may be like ten different headings.

– *But then you get uncertainty in those values?*

– Well, it's not possible to… With absolute certainty…

– *But that's what I mean, it…*

– The best would be if you could enter exactly, you can see that, ok, you have… eight weeks out of ten you have handed in you time report too late. And then I say you're going to get a one on that. You should, ten times out of ten must be in time. I mean, of course it's possible to measure it exactly eventually, but we're not there yet, but it will move towards greater objectivity, towards creating demands for the employee and saying like this: 'This doesn't work.' But it's hard. And we're at the beginning of a process that will take like five to ten years before it has settled. This is a

> very complex area, it’s also hard to get measurable figures in an adequate way, and it will take some time, but it will pay off in the end.

These attempts at quantifying the ‘soft’ aspects of the performance reviews must be understood in relation to the strong focus on billable hours at DM&I. While the conversation clearly indicates that there are difficulties in creating clear-cut measures, the partner insists on its feasibility. In terms of financialization, the partner creates a direct link between ‘soft’ aspects of performance and financial reward. Moving up from one level to another, e.g. from Consultant to Manager, automatically means an increase in pay and also a higher billing fee. Thus, an increase in ‘business acumen’ and other aspects would render a higher leverage on billable hours. The logic underpinning the quantification effort is one where ‘soft’ aspects of work are transformed into the currency of billable hours.

Of course, not all partners agree in the possibility of actually measuring performance in these aspects. Still, however, there is a belief in the fairness of progression when it comes to investing in soft aspects.

> Er, well, we can’t be mathematically precise about it, there is no machine that can spit out a paper and say that it’s three point seven this month. It has to rely on judgement for measurement. [...] We know if John is a lone wolf sitting in his office all day and we know that Lisa is a happy soul who

> always have three co-workers on her missions. It's… pretty easy to see. Even if it's hard to measure by the millimetre.

Formally, these judgements are supposed to be evaluated and quantified. Even if everyone is not as confident as the spider web-drawing partner above, in the peer review process a fact sheet about each individual's performance is supposed to be produced, where each performance indicator is graded in five steps ranging from 'poor' to 'exceptional'. In this system, the degree of correspondence between quantified performance is more ambiguous, as each indicator is supposed to have 'been seen in relation to career development' and the manual also notes that the indicators have 'varying degrees of importance in different phases of the career'.

Although there is a range of different performance measures at work within the firm, they are not all valued in the same way. Despite significant lip-service being paid to the 'soft' dimensions of the performance criteria, the 'harder' economic dimensions of the performance reviews were clearly more important. Despite attempts to upgrade the importance of soft measures, managers within the firm acknowledged that these dimensions are very difficult to measure. In contrast the 'harder' dimensions such as billable hours are easily measured. The result is that employees tend to focus on these measures. Indeed, directly quantifiable outcomes that are closely tied to firm profitability are the major focus of most employees' efforts. This is by no means unusual to PSFs. A recent study of a manufacturing company found the preponderance of more 'despotic' modes of control that imposed assessments on the basis of direct contribution to a firm's financial performance (Ezzamel et al, 2008). Through linking these hard forms' measures (such as contribution to profitability) to each individual's behaviour, the firm was able to push the 'discipline of the financial markets' down to the level of the workplace. But what is more surprising for us is that employees do not just experience this as a form of despotic discipline (as Ezzamel et al, 2008 suggest), but rather as an investment in their own future which may pay significant dividends in the future.

4.4 Putting a price on performance

It is quite clear that the billable time is the dominating indicator of performance. As mentioned in section 4.1 above, several difficulties appear when trying to value one's time in terms of billable hours. These difficulties are however only one aspect to the problems of accumulating billable hours. Another regards the fact that the hours billed on a particular job are the result of a negotiation between (usually) a superior and a subordinate. The common way of organizing work is that a senior person manages the client relation (cf. Alvehus, 2008). Work tasks are either solved by the senior or handed to a more junior employee. Before handing a solution over to the client, the senior employee reviews the job. If s/he does the job her/himself, it is supposed to be reviewed by a peer (although this only happens when the task is considered very difficult). The hours billed are then shared between both consultants. In this process of ‘sharing’, employees engage in a process of ‘game playing’ whereby billable hours are manipulated and changed. A Consultant spells this out quite clearly:

> If you notice that you have to put in some more time, then the problem is that you may have to seek assistance for either controlling your work or get support from a Manager. And they are really expensive. And then you start worrying about which parts of the work you want him to see in order to avoid him from taking over the job entirely and start spending so much time on it that there's nothing left for you. Or you can, if you have the opportunity, hand it down to someone really cheap, someone who debits as little as possible, and try to squeeze this person. Take me for instance, I bill 1600 kronor [SEK] per hour, and we have a Manager, he bills let's say 2000 kronor. And you have a new Assistant who bills 900 kronor per hour. And you know that this job is worth 10 000 at a maximum. If you're going to do it yourself you quickly figure out that six hours, then you're at 9000 kronor, and a thousand for peer review, that doesn't work. 'Six hours, shit, I can't do this in six hours.' Then you ask, maybe, let's say Eve, and you say 'Hell, why don't you do this job Eve, you get four hours maximum, not more then four, maybe five.' You know what I'm getting at? You force her to do a job you should have done yourself, could have done, but in order to keep within the price, to avoid over-billing or not being able to get the client to

> pay, for instance, or in order to get some more time for yourself you squeeze someone else, push it down to some Assistant who can do it cheaper. And you can keep the margin for yourself, maybe review what she has done, and go below the 10 000. So you can bill 10 000 without having to go to a Manager. Or you spend a little time on it and when you come to the manager it's just for him to read through, 'yes it's ok,' it's a cheap way of dealing with it. This becomes a necessity because of the system itself.

Here, many aspects of the billing game are made clear. First, it's worth noting that the person with the client relation not only has to relate to subordinates but also to superiors. The amount of time available for reviewing has to be taken into account. Second, it's worth noting that what cannot be billed to the client is pushed downwards in the organization (since subordinates are cheaper). If it's impossible to do a job yourself in six hours, it's perhaps possible to 'squeeze' someone else into doing it in four or five hours. And the more subordinates you have access to, the easier this becomes. If others do the job and you do the review, leverage can be achieved for the individual. In this way, it is possible to avoid non-billable hours, and one's time can be spent on more rewarding jobs. This effectively puts an end to the idea that junior employees report the number of hours they actually work.

At the same time, it is common to keep profitable jobs (where the client's willingness to pay is higher) for oneself. Also, sometimes the review process is seen as too encumbering and it is more efficient to do the job oneself rather than to delegate and review (the so-called 'under-delegation problem'; Maister, 1993), which in turn makes experience transfer and learning more difficult. And, as noted above, registering hours to one’s own time report is considered a safe way of getting credit for one's work. As one partner said, 'the more time you can bill yourself, the more money in your wallet.'

This situation from a certain perspective looks rather diabolic. For the junior employee, however, there are quite instrumental reasons for engaging in this system. From the view of someone on the receiving end (Eve in the above quotation), there are basically three options: to bill the number of hours spent on a job, to under-bill or to over-bill. The latter option is attractive since it immediately impacts on billable time, and thereby facilitates progression. The possibility to over-bill is highly related to the kind of clients and jobs one works with.

> The first time you do something it takes much more time. But if you just handled a question for another client you can perhaps copy the letter you wrote, and then I can bill some extra time that day, and that makes me happy.

Over-billing is a lot less common than the opposite, but still it remains an option for some. More commonly, the question is whether to bill the number of hours worked or whether to under-bill. ‘It’s a question of marketing,’ as an Assistant put it. To get more assignments from a specific superior it is important to look efficient, the Assistant explains, and to keep the number of billable hours down. And this is of course taken advantage of:

> If someone calls you and, he’s going to get on his report how much you bill, and he’s going to bill the client, and if he calls me it costs 25 000 and if he calls Charlie it will cost 50 [000], I mean… […] And of course they take advantage of this.

As a junior, you compete on an internal market for assignments, with your peers as competitors. In order to sell your services, prices have to be kept low. As a junior, you still have no definite expertise, and thereby it is hard to gain a competitive advantage by specialization. Price competition is the only option. In order to gain repeat business, and thereby secure your future billing rate, under-billing becomes a rational solution. Thus, while in the quotation from the Consultant above the limitation in billing was enforced, there is a willingness from junior employees to engage in this behaviour.

Building up billable hours was seen as an investment. However, simply accumulating hours was not the only strategy available to employees. There was a range of other ways they could seek to build a stock of billable hours. This often involved a process of arbitrage, i.e. exploiting possible imbalances in various internal markets within the firm. This was facilitated by the fact that there is a highly ambiguous relationship between time actually worked and time that is billed to a client. This ambiguity provided significant room for manoeuvre in the assignment of particular billable hours to particular tasks and particular people. This ambiguity allowed the exploitation of imbalances in the types of people doing the work (particularly between highly paid seniors and less well paid juniors). Typically this involves a senior (or partner) using the services of a junior (with a cheaper billing rate) to do the work. They would then 'share' some of the hours with the junior under the pretence of supervisory time. This often involves processes of intricate accounting whereby employees will consider the value of the job, whether their charge out rate will allow them to complete it in time, and if not, whether it can be shifted to a more junior employee (with some advantages rendered to the employee themselves). This is what we call 'the billing game' – a frequent process whereby seniors seek to exploit the relatively cheaper billable hours of juniors within the firm, and in the process take a cut themselves.

Another dimension to this 'billing game' is that seniors seek to avoid doing the difficult tasks (tasks which will often take longer than what they can bill for – often due to price sensitive clients) and monopolise what they see as easy jobs (tasks which will taken a shorter amount of time than what they can bill – often due to large, price insensitive clients). Because juniors have a lower charge out rate, and are able to be 'squeezed' (i.e. render non-billable time after-hours) this sets up an imbalance which wily seniors are only too willing to exploit. Juniors are often only too willing to acquiesce in being exploited in such a way. One reason for this is that working overtime is a symbol for commitment to the organization (Coffey, 1994); something they hope might later be picked up in their performance reviews. A second reason is that juniors are completely reliant on their seniors for a stream of work. If a junior is seen as being compliant and helpful then their stream of (lower paid) work is likely to expand, subsequently meaning they are able to expand their 'investment' in billable hours more rapidly. However, if a junior is reluctant to take on difficult jobs and work overtime, then it is likely that they will be seen as non-compliant by seniors and their stream of work might begin to dry up. The result – spending too much time 'on the beach' (i.e. between projects and without any billable time) – could be the kiss of death in any PSF (cf. Evans et al, 2004).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper we have examined how employees are controlled in a PSF. We found many of the control mechanisms in place one would expect in a PSF, such as professional knowledge bases (Abbott, 1991), human resource management systems (Maister, 1993), management by objectives (Covaleski et al, 1998), up-or-out systems (Baden-Fuller & Bateson, 1990), and forms of identity control (Alvesson, 2004). However, what seems to tie each of these systems together is an over-arching concern with investment in work. We have noted this involves the flow of work-time being quantified and valued through the technology of billable hours (see also: Brown & Lewis, 2011). These billable hours are carefully invested in by employees in the expectation that they might later convert them into career advancement (in particular a partnership). Finally, this opens up space for arbitrage whereby employees can convert other forms of currency (such as good performance evaluations) into billable hours or exploit differential rates for billable hours between seniors and juniors within the firm.

What is particularly interesting here is how this notion of 'investment' was linked to one specific form of control, financialization, within the organization (e.g. Davis, 2009). According to existing studies, this process involves an attempt to infuse the logic of investment and shareholder value into all business decisions and aspects of organizational life (Ezzamel et al, 2008). It is interesting to note the importance of the ideological aspect of financialization in the DM&I context, as the firm is not publicly traded. Thus, pressure from investors to emphasise financialized control forms is not apparent. Rather, Partners embracing it as part of 'how the business works'. It is also associated with the increasing shift in accountancy firms away from a logic of civic-professionalism towards a more hard-nosed market-oriented logic (Hanlon, 1994, Leicht & Fennell, 2001; Suddaby et al, 2009). In our study of DM&I, we found that the auditors did indeed extensively use a financialized language and logic for talking about and thinking of their work. This was based on fairly minimal instructions that have been a stable feature of the firm that require auditors to report their own time and allocate it to specific projects/clients. Thus the official version is that the number of worked hours should be reported in a straight-forward and accurate fashion. The manipulation of the system, which we term financialization, is based on an understanding of the system as something that can and should be manipulated and 'worked' in order to promote oneself within the firm. We have seen that strategies for this vary, especially between junior and senior employees. However it is important to note that these understandings are displayed in interpersonal relations, and they do turn into a form of instruction. The demand to creatively manipulate one's billable hours is a kind of skill that is widely known, rewarded and informally taught, but not officially sanctioned. Indeed, it could be seen as a certain kind of 'game playing' (McGivern & Ferlie, 2007) that allows people to not just get the job done but also progress in their career.

Of further importance is how financialization relates to the notion of time employed in the use of billable hours. Billable hours can be seen as an allocation of time (Hassard, 1989) according to 'clock time' (Ancona et al, 2001). As the system is designed, there is supposedly a linear relation between time and activity. The actors do, however, engage in several forms of manipulation of the system. While time can be seen as either representing the unfolding of events or as something experienced differently by different actors (Ancona et al, 2001; Perlow, 1999), financialization creates a notion of time that is only vaguely related to either the clock or to the experience of time. The relation between actual time spent on activities and 'financialized time' is, as we have shown above, quite loose. The billing game is somewhat dependent on the actual time a task takes to perform, but other considerations as well. Billing rates make time relative to certain actors, as some individuals' time is more valuable than others'. This further loosens the link between 'clock time' and 'financialized time'. The latter transforms time into a currency that is comparable with other aspects of everyday work, such as the valuation of soft skills, and with other notions of time, such as investments in the future.

As well as being a kind of game playing, the focus on billable hours was an important form of employee control because it facilitated a process of self-monitoring and self-management (Morris & Pinnington, 1998; Brown & Lewis, 2011). In the simplest terms, it focuses employees on work by ensuring that all six-minute slots of the day are accounted for. But it also links a sense of an employee's worth to the firm by directly quantifiable and measurable hours. Finally, it places the accumulation of this worth in direct relationship with developing a career within the firm. It does this by pushing the employee to not only ensure that they are accumulating the most billable hours possible, but also that they reflect and think about how it might be possible to accumulate ever-more of this precious commodity. This contrasts with more traditional images of professionals as being more concerned with tasks and knowledge than time *per se* (Blyton et al, 1989).

Each of these processes means that thinking about one’s work as a kind of investment became central. Questions about what one should and should not do within the workplace became increasingly governed by the test of whether it would increase one’s stock of capital. The result was that each employee came to think of themselves as financial investors and their work as a kind of investment. Working did not just mean executing tasks – it also meant investment, speculating and engaging in arbitrage with one's time. What is more, notions of investment continued to inform and discipline the working days and identities of each employee. Thus financialization was a central way that work was controlled in this particular setting.

Viewed from a managerial perspective, there are several reasons for developing and enforcing these systems. The increased emphasis on time measurement is a way of establishing a more precise control over how time is spent. Each individual becomes accountable for his or her contribution to the firm’s profitability and this is all put in an easily manipulated and aggregated form. When firm value is reduced to simplistic financial measures, this creates a link between individual performance and firm value and reputation (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2009). It also gives a clear track record of the historical performance of each individual, helping in deciding on promotions. The HRM system is partly a way of marketing the firm on the important input market (i.e. competing for top students to recruit). It is also a way of defining which behaviour and dispositions the firm wants to promote, it created an evaluation grid to which everyone is supposed to conform

(Townley, 1993). All in all, these systems can be construed as a way of establishing a more precise control over the firm's resources: time and the employees. This is also the way the situation is perceived by the senior partners in the firm. As was often noted at DM&I, all questions in the firm ultimately turn into what they called 'wallet questions' (whether the partners benefit from it financially).

By pointing out the role financialization plays in control of the workplace, we have extended existing research on financialization as a control strategy at the firm (Fligstein, 1990; Froud et al, 2000; Ezzamel et al, 2008; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2009), market (Arrighi, 1994), and societal level (Martin, 2002; Davis, 2009). In particular we have suggested that financial techniques and processes of reasoning have come to infuse how employees think about their work, their careers, and indeed about themselves. We have noted that through emphasising billable hours, employees' work-time became understood purely in terms of this quantifiable measure (see also Anderson-Gough et al, 2001). This leads to a kind of internalised discipline whereby employees seek to invest their time at the firm wisely. This involves seeking to accumulate as many billable hours as possible, as billable hours become the preferred way of displaying performance and progression. It also leads to a kind of speculative attitude on the part of employees, whereby they would seek to increase their stock of investments – largely through the exploitation of junior colleagues. The result is that working life was experienced as one large market that should be skilfully negotiated in order to reap the benefits. This suggests that not only have we seen the financialization of economy and firms; we have also seen the financialization of workplace control.

6 Limitations and further research

Our findings are limited in a number of ways. First our findings are limited in temporal scope. Our study only examines how financialization works in a recent setting. This means that it is difficult to trace in detail the historical trajectory of financialized control in this particular workplace. If we had examined this historical dimension in more detail, it would have become possible to identify when financialization became an important form of control in PSFs, whether forms of financialized controls are particularly novel or if they have important antecedents, and what were the conditions which drove the increasing importance of financialized control.[1] By providing a historical and geographical account of financialization, it might become possible to provide a more detailed account of the underpinning drivers of financialized control in PSFs.

A second major shortcoming is that we have focused on one kind of PSF (a Big Four accountancy). In many ways this is exactly the kind of the environment where one would expect to find employees using their training and expertise in financial and accounting technologies to think about their own work time. It is

1 As one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out, these systems have been around for quite some time in Anglo-American firms.

possible to argue that the same may not be the case in PSFs which are less infused with financial technologies. On the other hand, we must note that the case discussed here is one where we would not necessarily expect pressures for financialization, as the shares of DM&I are not publicly traded and hence there is no external pressure for financialization. Rather, it seems that financialization has become part of how the business logic is perceived to operate, despite obvious counter-indicators (as actual revenues are only loosely coupled to hours worked). Would we find the same kind of financialization of workplace control in a legal office, in an architecture firm, or a design consultancy? What about outside the realm of professional services? Do we find the financialization of control in the manufacturing and service sectors? How about the public and non-profit sector? There is some evidence to suggest that the financialization of workplace control is not simply limited to the professional service workplace. For instance a number of writers have noted the increasing dominance of shareholder value within large corporations and the dominance of the work process by a range of technologies which are associated with ensure the increased in shareholder value (e.g. Ezzamel et al, 2008; Gleadle & Cornelieus, 2008; cf. Fiss & Zajac, 2004). This opens up the question of how generalised the financialization of workplace control has become?

The third clear limitation is that we have only studied one particular institutional context – namely an Anglo-American based Big Four accountancy in Sweden. Given the basis of this company largely within the Anglo-American institutions associated with shareholder driven capitalism (Whitley, 1999; Hall & Soskice 2001), it is not surprise that we find the financialization of workplace control. To be sure, the fact the auditors were working in Sweden may have had an important mediating effect – in particular it would have added elements of co-operative and welfare oriented capitalism (Belfrage, 2008; Esping-Anderson, 1990). However, the Swedish context continues make a strong role for the financial market oriented forms of control – particularly in more recent years (Blom, 2007). International studies of PSFs tend to indicate that Anglo-Saxon mores have some influence on how the firms organize work in a range of national contexts (Boussebaa, 2009). Many PSFs have served as important sites that have facilitated the travel of ideas and the creation of markets which have actually created global spaces that nonetheless bare important imprints of their national origins (e.g. Morgan & Quack, 2005). What remains to be seen is whether this same kind of financialization of work is limited to Anglo-Saxon dominated workplace or whether it can also be observed in workplaces that have not traditionally been dominated by 'restless' financial capital such as Germany, France and Japan.

Fourth, there are notions of various labour markets that must be developed in more detail. As noted by Faulconbridge and Muzio (2009), increasing financialization seems to affect labour markets. Comparing the professionals at DM&I with itinerant experts working through temporal contracts, there are striking similarities in terms of the commodification of time and how activities become targets for careful financial consideration (cf. Barley & Kunda, 2004; Evans et al, 2004). For contractors, time between contracts becomes a commodity that can be invested in e.g. developing skills or in freedom from work. These considerations are, for the 'ordinary' employee, managed through the employment contract. When a firm employs financialized forms of control, the investment considerations appear also within the employment contract. Investing in the future, considering the importance of different skills, negotiating and marketing oneself are important activities. To some degree, we find similar characteristics between internal and external labour markets (Doeringer, 1967). There are however differences that should be emphasised and investigated further. Where itinerant professionals have mainly horizontal career trajectories (job specific; see Barley & Kunda, 2004), the employed professional's financialization involves a vertical dimension. For some, this can mean a degree of security while for others it can become a difficulty (if career opportunities within the firm seem bleak). In the first case, a return to employment is an option (however often not desired; Barley & Kunda, ibid.). In the latter case, transitions between different employers may become an option. Thus, the horizontal and vertical dimensions can become blurred, and this should be a target for further qualitative studies. Moreover, the bureaucratic relationship within a firm requires more elaborate systems for e.g. translating between soft skills and the financialized 'hard' currency (e.g. billable hours), while the marketing of skills mainly involves billable hours. For the itinerant professional the question of marketing is more open, e.g. involving presenting and delivering certain skills as well as putting an hourly billing rate. While transactions are reduced to financial transactions within market relations, this also creates a different system for negotiating (in itself is an important skill for the itinerant professional). Thus, the experience of career investment is framed differently, and how this impacts subjectification through investing and tracing a career trajectory into the future (Grey, 1994) should be studied in more detail.

The final question that is opened up by the global financial crisis is whether financial logic and technology may have lost some of its legitimacy. Some analyses have suggested that financialization led to an increasingly tenuous relationship between the actual productive output of the firm and its representation through the means of various accounting technologies (e.g. Froud et al, 2004). Others have suggested that the financial crises suggest that one of the central driving factors is financial and other business professionals giving up on any notions of public service and instead being solely driven by market-based criteria such as billable hours (Sikka, 2009). Still other commentators argue that the severe problems generated by complex financial technologies have led to a full-blown crisis in finance-dominated capitalism (e.g. Crouch, 2008). One of the results is that firms may abandon the kind of financial logic and technologies that produced many of these results. A second outcome may be that the power of financial capital over corporations will markedly decline, particularly with increasing state investments in some industries and even wholesale nationalization programmes. This could mean that firms no longer are called upon to justify their operations in the language of financial returns, but use some as yet unidentified new scheme of justification. This remains to be seen, but it is certain that tracing the shifting power of finance and scope of financialization following the global financial crisis would certainly repay further study.

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TABLES

TABLE 1: Interviews in the study of DM&I

	Phase of investigation			
Personell category	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Total
Partner	4	5	0	9
Senior manager	0	1	2	3
Manager	0	2	2	4
Consultant	3	9	0	12
Assistant	2	4	1	7
Support staff	1	4	0	5
Defectors	0	0	2	2
Total	**10**	**25**	**7**	**42**

TABLE 2: Performance indicators at DM&I

Competence criteria	*Consultancy evaluation factors*
Technical competence	Degree of autonomy
Analysis/Judgement	Ability to sell
Initiative	Client relations
Work- and organizing ability	Contributing to business profitability
Communication ability	Problem solving ability
Linguistic competence	Ability to finish jobs on time
Profit thinking	Ability to manage conflict and handle critique
Social competence	
Leadership	
Ability to cooperate	
Business acumen	

(from the *Personnel development handbook*)