

## ***‘Working the time’*: Time self-management practices of remote workers**

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**Abstract:** The large-scale implementation of remote work appears as a fundamental shift into the traditional understanding of the relationship between time and work. Drawing on sociomateriality literature and more especially on the concept of temporal structuring, this chapter suggests that remote workers ‘work the time’ by different practices, to (re)create adequate temporalities to work. The analysis results from an exploratory qualitative study conducted between May 2020 and April 2021 in Montreal with 17 remote workers who were already working remotely before the Covid-19 pandemic. It gives an overview of the temporal practices of remote workers, who are mainly blocking time (i), navigating between temporalities (ii) ritualizing them (iii) or an interwoven of all of them to try to create time to work (and thus, for non-work as well). It appears that remote workers work the time to be flexible. However, they still do it in the clock time of organizational life. They also experiment with temporal tensions, which leads them to exercise a fourth practice that is indispensable to the other three, that of labeling times. In all cases, these temporal practices represent individual metawork, a work which enables work to take place, benefiting the employer.

**Keywords:** Time, self-management, practices, remote work, sociomateriality

### **Introduction**

The notions of work and time are, in everyday language, implicitly intertwined. Historically, the association between ‘work’ (the activity which is supposed to happen at the workplace) and ‘work time’ (schedules which are supposed to be set in advance by the employer) comes from the Industrial Revolution: the worker went ‘to work’ by physically going to the factory at certain times of the day. Dennis Mumby (2012) used the term ‘clock time’ to refer to this temporality, which is a relic of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century factories, when employees were closely monitored by hours. Ever since then, workers have been renting their labor force by the hour, or by the day, i.e., according to the time spent at work. In this context, the distinction between work and private life is obvious, the two spheres being doubly segmented, both by distinct places, but also by different temporalities. Yet, working remotely represents

not only a disruption of the traditional spatiotemporal framework of work (Taskin, 2006) but also a qualitative shift from centralized forms of social organization to a more diffuse, fragmented, and emergent set of social relations (Sewell & Taskin, 2015).

Remote work is not new, but Covid-19 has speeded it up (Ozimek, 2020). In fact, the notion of ‘teleworking’ appeared in the late 1970s. However, the health crisis period in 2020 was an opportunity to experiment it on a large scale, leading to the continuation of certain practices over time, 40 years after Alvin Toffler (1981) predicted that progress in personal computing would lead to a generalization of telework for professionals belonging to the category of ‘knowledge workers’. Due to its high flexibility, this alternative working arrangement could develop exponentially, or even become the dominant organizational configuration (Erickson & Norlander, 2022 ; Popovici & Popovici, 2020). Even before the pandemic, this underlying trend was linked to the spread of high-speed and wireless Internet which, together with the growing availability of mobile communication and collaboration tools, fostered the emergence of new forms of work characterized by greater flexibility in terms of places, times, and ways of working (Aroles, Mitev and De Vaujany, 2019).

In this chapter, I focus on teleworkers who have chosen this way of working precisely to take advantage of the space-time flexibility offered by remote work. Some of them were full-time remote workers, while others were working part-time remotely. It is important to remember that the term ‘remote workers’ encompasses a plurality of profiles: some ‘work from home’ while others ‘work from anywhere’ (Choudhury, Foroughi & Larson, 2021). In fact, digital nomads define their lifestyle by their mobility and the primacy given to leisure and travel (Bonneau & Aroles, 2021 ; Cook, 2020 ; Reichenberger, 2018). However according to Thompson (2019), telecommuters (who work from home) appear to be the opposite lifestyle figure of digital nomads (who work from anywhere), because digital nomads use the flexibility of their work modality to be mobile and travel, while teleworkers use it to avoid travel and stay at home. Under the umbrella term of ‘remote workers’, some are employed while others are freelancers, an important distinction since those in the latter category are more likely to have latitude to arrange their work time. Nevertheless, they all have one thing in common: the difficulty in establishing boundaries between the different spheres of life (Thompson, 2019 ; Cook, 2020). These fragile boundaries are often invoked as a spatial metaphor, as boundaries separating the inside from the outside of organizations is an instrument to control labour (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). In fact, those boundaries can be embodied in the material

arrangements of space (Estagnasié, Bonneau, Vasquez & Vayre, 2022), for example creating an office space for working with plants and objects on the dining table. But they are also embodied in the choices of temporalities (early mornings, nights, weekends, fragmented and irregular schedules...). Of course, digital nomads or freelancers - who may have chosen this lifestyle in order 'to escape 9 to 5' (Ferriss, 2009) - can adapt their working schedule more freely than employees whose schedules might be set by the organization.

## **Contextualization**

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the interweaving between time and work has been considered from a social perspective. Max Weber (1905) studied the relationship to work of workers in Germany in order to understand the differences in productivity, and pointed out that social variables (gender, age, religion, etc.) influence the relationship to time. By collaborating in the preparation of a vast survey in Germany of workers in large-scale industry in 1907, Max Weber (2012) brought out one of the first breakthroughs in the understanding of the relationship between time and work: working time and performances are not mechanically linked, since multiple external factors (alcohol, marriage, remuneration) or internal factors (fatigue, sleep, motivation) influence the performance of work (Desmarez & Tripier, 2014). A second rupture has come with information and communication technologies (ICT), as workflows can nowadays be detached from the workers' location. In some cases, the work hours performed remotely remain the same as those in the office, but generally, the remote context allows for a dissociation of the work activity from a rigid schedule. We are thus witnessing a fundamental break in the spatiotemporal framework of work which was previously structured around the notions of space and time (Taskin, 2006 ; Taskin, Ajzen & Donis, 2017). Work performed on a fixed schedule, at the firm's place (Kalleberg, Reskin & Hudson, 2000, p. 257) is an idea that no longer reflects the current reality of work. Technological change in a wide range of occupations has effectively changed workers' perceptions of space and time. Once stable notions of how to conduct oneself in familiar social settings such as industrial plants can no longer be taken for granted as the line separating work from other aspects of human experience. Thus, remote workers are likely to experience tensions between the temporalities of work and personal life, that why Sewell and Taskin (2015) proposed the concept *spatiotemporal scaling* which has (1) a physical component (2) an experiential component and (3) a temporal component. This concept invites us to take space and time seriously and explore the demands

placed on employees who are neither exclusively tied to traditional work arrangements nor exclusively 'at home' but find themselves divided between the personal and professional scales.

### **Problematization: 'Working the time' to dedicate time to work**

This research is rooted in a context of new ways of working (Ajzen, Donis & Taskin, 2015 ; Aroles, de Vaujany & Dale, 2021a, 2021b ; Taskin, Ajzen & Donis, 2017) and spread of remote work which encourages us to renew our conception of the spatiotemporal frameworks of work. The temporal dimension of remote work has been less explored in the literature (Ancona, Okhuysen & Perlow, 2001 ; Colley, Henriksson, Niemeyer & Seddon, 2012 ; Gherardi & Strati, 1988 ; Hamilakis & Labanyi, 2008 ; Holt & Johnsen, 2019) than the spatial one (Clegg & Kornberger, 2006 ; De Vaujany & Mitev, 2013 ; Massey, 2005 ; Tyler & Cohen, 2010 ; Van Marrewijk & Yanow, 2010), even if there is a growing interest for the importance of time and temporalities in organizational literature (Hernes, Simpson & Soderlund, 2013 ; Reinecke, Suddaby, Langley & Tsoukas, 2020 ; Shipp & Jansen, 2021 ; Winch & Sergeeva, 2021). That is why this chapter aims to contribute about time work as a way of working organizational boundaries. How could we better understand the practices of remote workers in relation to the (re)creation of times dedicated to work?

In this chapter, I adopt a sociomaterial approach to time, which considers that a temporality of work is never simply 'there', as a container in which 'things' happen. On the contrary, time and the people who (inter)act with it influence and constitute each other. Since the late 1990s, organizational studies have been marked by several shifts, including a (re)turn to materiality (Dale, 2005 ; Orlikowski, 2000 ; Pickering, 1995), a processual conception of organization (Chia, 1995; Chia & King, 1998 ; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995), and a renewed focus on the practices that constitute the frameworks of collective action (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & Von Savigny, 2001). Far from opposing each other, these scholarly communities are in dialogue and share common orientations. Thus, the organization is seen as a heterogeneous phenomenon made of actors and artifacts, as a situated phenomenon, in continuous movement, which results from and constrains at the same time the collective action (Hussenot, De Vaujany & Chanlat, 2016). According to a processual ontology (Bouty, 2017 ; Hussenot, 2016 ; Hussenot, Bouty, Hernes, 2019 ; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, Van de Ven, 2013 ; Langley & Tsoukas, 2016), the organization is considered as a perpetual movement constituted by the relations between material and social elements that compose it and are themselves constituted

by it. With this in mind, the clock time orientation is linked to a Western organizational mentality, characterized by a linear, clock-time orientation optimized to enhance efficiency, coordination, and control, whereas processual approaches of temporalities are more associated with Eastern thought (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). According to this processual thought, Reinecke and Ansari suggested an agentic view of time, when time is used as a cultural resource. In this vein, the two authors presented the concept of *ambitemporality* to explain how organizations accommodate seemingly contradictory temporal orientations. An ambitemporal approach supposes to recognize plural temporalities and explicitly articulate temporal pressures. This concept is thus useful to understand the relationship between organizational temporalities and the worker's private ones.

It is interesting to see that 'work organization' could both refer to the state of the division of labor structure or the action of defining this structure, with an inherent tension, movement between both, that Alter (2003) called 'dyschronies'. In the case of remote work, there could be as well dyschronies between the division of labor structure, traditionally based on a 9-to-5 model, and the action of remote workers dealing with their own professional and personal time management. That is why I suggest that remote workers create their workspace by *working the time*. This expression refers to the actions carried out on the initiative of individuals to dedicate time to work - for example, blocking time in a calendar - and is inspired by the concept of 'making time' suggested by Martin Hand (2020). 'Making time' consists of 'everyday adjustment, coping and management of temporal demands' (Hand, 2020, p. 85), for which individuals are responsible, in a context of prosities of work and home (Gregg, 2014). While 'making time' could be applied to all types of activities, *working the time* only applies to work activities. In proposing this concept, I want to emphasize that *working the time* requires additional work on top of the primary work activities. Without these individual practices, the work may simply not take place, or, on the contrary, take up all available time.

To explore this phenomenon, I conducted an exploratory qualitative study in Montreal with 17 remote workers who were already working remotely before the Covid-19 pandemic. The data has been examined in the light of the sociomateriality literature focusing on organizational practices (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012 ; Vásquez, 2016), in a context of digitalization (Orlikowski & Scott, 2016). First, I review the concept of temporal structuring and show its interest to better situate the *working the time* phenomenon. Then, the research methods are presented followed by an overview of the different practices of remote workers that aim at (re)creating work time.

Finally, I will discuss the possible consequences of ‘*working the time*’, both at the individual and collective level.

### **A different perspective on time: temporal structuring**

There is already a extended literature dealing with the boundaries between professional and personal life among remote workers whether it is in management (Bourdeau, Ollier-Malaterre & Houlfort, 2019 ; Eddleston & Mulki, 2017 ; Mulki, Bardhi, Lassk & Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009 ; Ollier-Malaterre, Jacobs & Rothbard, 2019) in psychology (Gillet, Huyghebaert-Zouaghi, Austin, Fernet & Morin, 2021 ; Şentürk, Sağaltıcı, Geniş & Günday Toker, 2021 ; Shirmohammadi, Au & Beigi, 2022 ; Sullivan, 2012) or communication (Enel, Millerand & Aourousseau, 2019 ; Estagnasié & al, 2022). There is even a whole research field known as work-family balance literature (Alfanza, 2020 ; Como, Hambley & Domene, 2021 ; Magni, Tang, Manzoni & Caporarello, 2020 ; Ollier-Malaterre, 2009 ; Ollier-Malaterre, Valcour, Den Dulk & Kossek, 2013 ; Palumbo, 2020 ; Spagnoli, Manuti, Buono & Ghislieri, 2021) also dealing with the specific case of remote workers. Boundaries at / of work are often seen under the premise of the power-laden nature of spatiality: the management control the labor done within the workplace (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). Nevertheless, in the case of remote work, we are witnessing a shift in the control of workers from the place of work to the temporalities of work.

That is why the question of temporalities matter so much in remote working. Twenty years ago, Orlikowski and Yates (2002) have suggested the notion of *temporal structuring* as a way of understanding and studying time as an enacted phenomenon within organizations. Doing so, they followed the *organizational time* conceptualized by Gherardi and Strati (1988) which consider that time is involved in intra-organizational dynamics in relation to other times. By this concept, the authors refer to times within each individual organization, as opposed to the temporal limits that mark out each aspect of the organization with objective and external units of time (such as the reduction of work time, shift work, time allocation in strategic choices...). According to this view, time is not a “container” anymore (p. 149). Instead, organizational time is a twofold concept, where (i) the internal, particular time of the individual organizational process or event is distinct from objective, external time ; (ii) the time involved in intra-organizational dynamics is multifaceted, since it stands in relation to other times, which presumes the plurality of time (Gherardi & Strati, 1988, p. 150).

Orlikowski and Yates's main idea is that through their everyday actions, actors (re)produce a variety of temporal structures which in turn shape the temporal rhythm and form of their ongoing practices. This view is a way to bridge the so-called objective time of 'clock time' (which would exist independently of human actions), and subjective time (the one who is experienced through interpretative processes as events, routines, or cycles). For the authors, a practice-based perspective on time invites to consider it as constituted by and constituting human actions: time is viewed as realized through people's recurrent practices that (re)produce temporal structures, which are both the medium and outcomes of those practices. It is also considering time in practice, which means time by its use, and not objective (clock time, *chronos*) or subjective time (event time, *kairos*). Consequently, actors enact, explicitly or implicitly, renew or modify temporal structures in their practices. Hussenot, Hernes and Bouty (2020) make the same distinction between an objective ontology of time and a subjective ontology of temporalities.

Most management models continue to be optimized for economic efficiency driven by linear "quantitative" time and clock-based structures, which shapes people's temporal practices, for example deadlines, inventory systems, or fiscal year (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). That is why the concept of *temporal structuring* has not only contributed to management literature in general (Ancona, Okhuysen & Perlow, 2001 ; O'Leary & Cummings, 2007), but has also been featured in the literature on work-life boundary management (Rothbard, Phillips & Dumas, 2005). Time is a fundamental building block of our life as human and social beings, and, by extension, the organization is the organization of time itself (Becker & Messner, 2013). Time is then inherently social, which implies, according to a sociomaterial lens based on a relational ontology, that time is inherently material too.

The concept of *temporal structuring* has also been used in research focusing on time management (Claessens, van Eerde, Rutte & Roe, 2007), sociology (Colley, Henriksson, Niemeyer & Seddon, 2012) and organizational studies (Kahrau & Maedche, 2013 ; Winch & Sergeeva, 2021). For example, Winch and Sergeeva (2021) used this concept to show a narrative perspective on a project and move beyond the binary perspective on objective versus subjective time. Drawing on the organization of a project, they identified three different kinds of temporal work in project organizing: convincing oneself; convincing the team; and convincing stakeholders. On their side, Kahrau and Maedche (2013) identified three main goals pursued by knowledge workers performing individual time management practices:

remembering tasks, deciding what to do next, and maintaining a well-organized workplace. They noted 14 different practices of time management, all of them implying human and non-human agencies. The two authors also found that the practices were highly interrelated between them, each one having influence on the next one, then any change in one practice had an impact on another one. In this chapter, we build on this research by proposing a larger sample of respondents, relying on interviews with 17 remote workers (instead of only five in Kahrau and Maedche's study), who are also knowledge workers, but with different employment modalities (freelancers, employees, entrepreneurs) and different mobility lifestyles (digital nomads, home-based teleworkers, workers in third places). Our study also considers the impact of the pandemic, in a context of rapid digitalization (Barrett & Orlikowski, 2021).

### **Research design: Understanding how remote workers 'work the time'**

Between May 2020 and April 2021, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with different types of remote workers (part-time and full remote workers in a brick-and-mortar company, employees in full remote companies, full remote CEOs, freelancers, digital nomads) who consider Montreal (Quebec, Canada) as their home port. All of them worked remotely (at least occasionally) before the pandemic: being remote was an individual choice which was not forced by the company or the health context (although the pandemic reinforces these working arrangements in some cases). The interviews last around ninety minutes each and were all recorded and manually transcript. They were conducted virtually using the Zoom video conferencing software, except for two of them, which were conducted at the respondents' home, between the first and second waves of the pandemic. Far from being a disadvantage for the data collection, the remote setting allowed for experimentation with other methods. For example, I asked my respondents to show me around their homes via webcam or to share screenshots of their digital calendars. The context of confinement was conducive to the creation of a bond of trust with me as a researcher despite the distance, as the respondents were generally enthusiastic about sharing their working conditions and practices. I kept contact with most of the respondents during the pandemic, and they sometimes updated me if their work practices were impacted by a new event, related to the pandemic or not (childbirth, moving to another place, a new work project, etc.), which allows a better understanding of personal temporal reflexivity (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). Even though they had all worked remotely before the pandemic, the lockdown impacted their routines. In fact, their remote working experiences were all disrupted by the presence of other people of the household (for example Audrey, Rahul or



Alice), by all collaborators going online (Jeanne, or Mark), by the lack of hybridity (as Johnny), or by the closure of third places for those who were used to work remotely from there (as Rosa, Arthur or Kathleen). In any case, during the pandemic, the home has become a contested space with multiple meanings and in which competing interests play out. Whereas previously, telecommuters worked from home to have more focus in their tasks (Mark, Audrey, Stephan), Covid-19 highlights the liminal spaces of the home, i.e., "somewhere that is on the 'border,' a space somewhere between front and back - such as restrooms, hallways, stairs, and corners, are frequently used by workers" (Shortt & Izak, 2020, p. 46).

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Comments</b>
#1	Jeanne	32	Analyst	Remy's colleague.
#2	Remy	25	Computer Forensics Specialist	Jeanne's colleague and Jean-François 'son.
#3	Rosa	34	Journalist	Full-time employee but accepts additional freelance work.
#4	Mark	32	Project manager	Works in the public sector.
#5	Jean-François	55	Product Director	Remy's father.
#6	Audrey	33	Accounting system consultant	Employee of an officeless company. Stephan's colleague.
#7	Stephan	45	Professional Services Manager	Employee of an officeless company. Audrey's colleague.
#8	Arthur	56	General manager	Cofounder of the company.
#9	Paloma	28	Scenarist	Freelancer.
#10	Charbel	35	Creative director	Works from home. The company has no offices.
#11	Rahul	32	Aerospace Engineer	Entrepreneur.
#12	Kathleen	26	Corporate translator	Digital nomads.
#13	Mary	36	Business Coach	Entrepreneur. Considers herself as 'location independent'
#14	Samy	30	Social media manager	Part-time employed worker and self-employed at the same time.
#15	Alice	33	Photographer	Freelancer.
#16	Charlotte	48	Marketing and Sales Strategist	Employed in a metallurgic company which offers 'work from anywhere programs' for its white-collar employees.
#17	Johnny	50	Visual effects artists	Freelancer.

Table 1. Individuals participating in the study

In terms of analysis, I first performed a manual thematic coding of the data collected in an open and inductive manner, inspired by a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This

included the coding of emerging themes linked to the temporalities of their work, but also the practices and lived experiences associated with them. This allowed me to identify a common pattern shared by most of my respondents, who have developed specific practices to arrange the space-time(s) dedicated to work. That means that all of them are expected to be proactive in the (re)creation of a temporality suitable for work: whether it is an implicit requirement of their employer in the case of employees, or an unconsciously integrated responsibility for others.

### **An overview of the temporal practices of remote workers**

The data analysis identified three main types of temporal practices of remote workers. First, ‘blocking time’ refers to the practices of segmenting time into ‘blocks of time’ and / or a fixed schedule. Despite the attempt to separate work time from personal time, remote workers more often find themselves transitioning between these types of activities, which we refer to as ‘navigating’ practices. Finally, the third type of practices concerns the ‘ritualization’ of certain types of temporalities through which individuals give meaning to their private and professional time.

#### **Blocking time**

Being able to work from other space-time is a frequent demand among remote workers, especially among digital nomads and freelancers. As all my interviewees choose to work remotely *before* the pandemic, at least on an occasional basis, they are more likely to be favorable, *a priori*, to non-traditional temporalities. Mary, who is a freelance business coach and defines herself as ‘location independent’, admitted she chose this way of life to escape the famous ‘9 to 5’ evoked in Tim Ferriss (2009) best-seller, and to manage her time freely.

My main motivation is the freedom to manage my schedule, so that I can leave room in my life for something other than work - be it travel, personal projects, art, or family. Basically, I wanted to be able to travel more often. Also, the traditional corporate world didn't suit me because I work fast, and I hated having to stay from 8am to 5pm - which in the advertising world was 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. - Mary<sup>1</sup>.

- *Flexibility and adjustments*

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<sup>1</sup> All the interviews were conducted in French or French Quebecois and then freely translated in English for the purpose of this chapter, except the one with Rahul which was directly recorded in English.

Some teleworkers tried to stick to a fixed schedule, but all our interviewees admit they adjust it according to their energy level, or to the unexpected events of the day. For example, Jean-François, who has been teleworking for 20 years, is usually an early bird, but keeps some flexibility in his schedule.

The hours are not really fixed. I try to start around 7 a.m. in the morning to be able to finish earlier in the afternoon, but if one morning ... I'm at an age where we get up more crooked than others ... If I started at 9 a.m., so as not to finish later in the day, I'll take just 15 minutes of lunch, then finish at the same time. - Jean-François.

In a society dominated by knowledge work, working from different temporalities often actually means being connected to work at other times than regular office hours. Of course, it has always been possible to work at times other than traditional office hours, for example scholars who write late at night or early in the morning (because they don't have any other free time to do so). What is changing nowadays is the continuous access to emails and collaborative platforms, access made materially possible by smart mobile phones, which use is quasi-essential to remote workers and was increased by the pandemic (Shortt & Izak, 2020). While some teleworkers respect the same working hours as in the office, most respondents choose different temporalities for working remotely. For example, Rahul, an entrepreneur, is more efficient in the evening, and works several times a week between 10 p.m. and midnight, when his girlfriend goes to sleep. He admits usually working as well during weekends, around three or four hours a day. Sometimes, he 'gives himself a full day off to recharge'. Rahul needs to 'plan' actively not to work, so rest can take place.

Stephan, who works remotely since 2007, and in an officeless company since 2014, organizes his work tasks according to the times most favorable to his own performance. He concedes that teleworking requires an 'entrepreneurial side', because you are responsible for managing your own time, to 'adapt to your personal performance cycle'.

- *Away from the norm... but always referring to it*

Charbel, a creative director, explains the choice to work remotely because he feels 'away from the norm', away 'from the classic metro / work / sleep'.

When I work remotely, I feel at a distance from the normal ... To wake up every day, take the subway, the train, or your car, then go to work. At a distance from everyday life. I think that the distance theoretically speaking, it's really at a distance from life, I think from the habit and routine, which is the norm. – Charbel.

While he praises the merits of the choice of remote working temporalities, he works every day from '9 to 5', which surprised me. Because he has internalized the norm, Charbel is inspired by the idea he has of a traditional office work time. That is why he structures his work activities while working remotely, even if he could do differently. Kathleen, who is a translator and a digital nomad, also admits working according to traditional office hours, even if she has chosen this way of life to be more flexible.

When I asked them to tell me about yesterday, all participants described yesterday (or another day of their choice) as a succession of events. For example, Audrey, an employee of an officeless company, looked at her electronic agenda and chose to tell me about last Friday. She listed the activities which were written on it, as a 'to do list' (make this call, finish this report, go to that meeting...). She was relying on events which were materially scripted in the digital agenda instead of relying on her memory, as her workday was defined by the addition of micro times dedicated to work. Audrey reported her work tasks and her so-called 'social duties' (having lunch with a friend) in the same way. She said she asked for a day off to help her friend who had just given birth to a baby, which she considers to be a 'friendly duty', but she answered the professional calls that day anyway, despite the baby's cries in the background. Social 'tasks', whether professional or personal, are managed by blocks of time in an electronic calendar. They are interrelated, sometimes overlapping, as the Google Calendar function allows it. Within this logic, the next type of practice is the ability to navigate from one 'time block' to another.

## **Navigating**

Audrey is not the only one mixing professional and personal 'tasks' in her agenda. Same does Mary: when I asked her about yesterday, she coldly listed orally what she wrote in her agenda, which was a mix of personal growth activities, work tasks and personal leisure.

So yesterday... 6:30 a.m.: I did my morning routine: meditation, reading, sport. 10 a.m.: I had a call with a client. 12 p.m.: I had another call with a partner to create an online course. 1PM: Call with a client again. 3PM: I had a call with a potential freelance writer. Between 4 and 6 p.m.: content writing for social networks. 7 p.m.: End of my workday.  
– Mary.

What is particularly interesting about Mary's example is that it is not just work that is temporalized, but all her day-to-day activities. A lot of Mary's personal time is dedicated to activities that could increase her performance (sport, reading, meditating, etc.). It is therefore

difficult to clarify what she considers to be working or not. The differentiation of times according to their nature is perhaps not even relevant according to this entrepreneur.

- *Defining what is work*

In fact, for many people working remotely, especially those who are self-employed, it is not only a question of demarcating work time from private time, but first of determining whether the activity performed represents work or not. Sometimes, this distinction is hard to establish, especially for creative workers (Estagnasié, 2022). Rosa, a journalist, uses the criteria of being paid (or not) to determine if the activity is work or leisure.

I'm really on this quest to balance work with my private time, but it's hard to talk about because my spare time, if you know what I mean, is also writing. If I read a book, is that work? I must be paid extra to know if it is, for example, to write a review afterwards. In fact, work is really the thing that you must do something or else they don't pay you. You really must show that you've done something, so that you'll pay your rent... – Rosa.

Same for Alice, who admits that she doesn't 'see the point of getting nothing out of a given time', and at the same time admits that this conception is in tension with her anti-capitalist political convictions.

My free time must be profitable. I don't necessarily mean in financial terms, but it must be used for something. Even when I see friends, I like to feel like I'm having an interesting discussion, that I'm getting something out of it that will feed my creativity. Even if I am convinced that boredom is useful to create and that I was brought up in this logic, today I have the impression to be in an approach where I don't have much time. It's a bit contradictory. – Alice.

So, *working the time* would then not only consist in creating time dedicated to work outside the walls of a classical organization, but also in determining what are working activities, non-working activities, and those of a hybrid kind between both. This questioning and its implementation are the responsibility of the worker.

- *Collapsing*

Alice confesses that even when she was on vacation with her lover, on a trip to Greece, she thought about how each moment spent could ultimately be useful for her work afterwards. Here, we can see there is a temporal tension between work and private time, as they are collapsing. There are also 'dead times' within the set work schedules. Considering time as 'dead' or, on the contrary, as time 'put to good use' are other ways of reconfiguring the time/space of work and

leisure. In any case, there is always more interconnection than separation between these temporalities.

Audrey only records ‘actual’ work on her time sheet and does not consider the calls she makes for private business. However, she does answer her work calls when she takes a day off to visit her friend who has just given birth. Same for Remy, who is afraid that if the projects he has been assigned have taken too long to complete, he would be seen as doing a bad job.

I must report my actual hours working on a tracking tool. I don't cheat, because if it looks like it's taking too long, they'll (the management) think I really suck at my job! – Remy.

In this case, time is part of the internalized control. Rosa has a different conception of it, because as a senior journalist, she has more autonomy in her tasks.

We procrastinate a lot, during the day, we have moments of emptiness, but instead of looking at my screen, I look in detail at what's going on around me, or I feed myself a little bit ... and that's important I think, for the mind. I've never liked working in an office, within four walls, it's not my thing. I need to get some fresh air, in the alley, maybe come back ... that's part of the job. – Rosa.

- *Idealizing their time management*

Remote workers tend to be idealistic about how they see the way they manage their working time. As Mary, Rosa admits navigating between work and private times. She did not want to tell me about the day before, Tuesday, but preferred to tell me about the ongoing day. As we met during the lunch break, she told me about her morning... and what she has planned to do after the afternoon, so in the future! A future which she may consider as a perfect idea of what ‘work’ should be: efficient, limited in time to allow some free time – but always professional. But in real life, personal and work temporalities often collapse in a messy way.

After our meeting, I have plenty of messages that I'm not looking at: and so, I'm going to respond, on Slack only. And I must read two articles from Lise and a video to put online, and after that the day will be over, because I finish at 5 p.m. But in real life, I often go downstairs and have a drink with our neighbours who are our buddies. We play with my daughter, but often in the evening when she goes to bed, I take some things back for myself, I check that I haven't forgotten anything. That's why I tell you that a day doesn't really end before 9 p.m. – Rosa.

Rosa and her partner coordinate their time slots to care for their child, return to their work tasks, spend time together, return to emails, chat with the neighbours... Not only does Rosa navigate

all day long between her professional and personal time, but this navigation is so unconsciously integrated that she and her spouse have ritualized it.

## **Ritualizing**

- *Materialization*

Some of the respondents I met tried to use rituals for delimiting barriers between personal and professional times, but in the end, mixed all of them. Jean-François, who is a remote worker for more than 20 years, wears a hat while working, to show his children he is not available, but often forgets to remove it when he is having dinner. This practice is inherently material (the hat) and social (the practice toward the children) at the same time. Audrey has a hammock and a ‘relax’ pillow in her home office (but often works on it overnight on her stressful job as a consultant). Charbel likes to be near his plants to work, while Stephan moves places in his home to follow the daylight to send himself ‘signals it is time to work’. For all of them, objects or other beings are associated with different temporalities, or at least different practices of temporal arrangements. Food as well can do the trick. For example, Remy has placed a small basket with chocolates next to his writing space, and he associates these treats with a sense of success and well-being at work.

It's to congratulate me, it's my motivation: when I'm working on the big days, I'm allowed to take one! (laughing) – Remy.

- *Mediation*

Using media in the ritualization of working time is a strategy employed by the majority of the interviewed. Most respondent admit connecting to work emails first thing in the morning, as a ritual that tells them that the (work)day is starting.

I wake up early in the morning. I have my phone next to me, and I start by opening emails and checking if I need to get up for something urgent – Samy.

Finally, since checking email is often the first thing you do in the morning, it loses its symbolic value as the beginning of the working day, since it is the beginning of the day itself.

Before I got out of bed, I started looking at my cell phone...I checked my email and answered two work messages... and then I took my shower and had my breakfast – Alice.

In the same way, closing one's laptop is a material and symbolic gesture that can indicate the end of the working day. Same for Remy, who does not check his emails at night... at least not on his laptop. Digital devices could be symbolically used for different things than emails. Remy explained that he uses the alarm to remember himself to take a break.

My routine is an alarm that goes off every day of the week at noon to remind me to get up and go for a walk... Because sometimes I can get really wrapped up in what I'm doing, I don't see the time going by at all... and then I forget to get up, and that's bad for my health – Remy.

Other media can be used to delineate temporalities. When not working from home, many respondents say they consume media in a ritualized way before and after work. Charlotte says that in her previous job where she worked face-to-face, she listened to music in the car on the way to work. Jeanne prefers to listen to podcasts on the subway. When she works from home, she still uses media before starting to work, but in a different way.

In the morning, I listened to news podcasts, and in the evening, I juggled between five types of podcasts. I stopped listening to the news podcast completely since I work from home, but instead I read the newspapers every morning, on their websites – Jeanne.

Some practices for delimiting work time involve digital objects, whether to check emails, to disconnect from it, or to put oneself in a work state of mind. Thus, attempting to create a work time involves practice with material and symbolic dimension at the same time. Moreover, it implies different agencies, such as objects, different spaces, other people of the household, or other type of beings (some remote workers associate their 'work mode' to the presence of a pet or plants).

### **Discussion: *working the time to work anytime...***

Remote workers seem to be a new kind of sailors. They tend to separate temporalities into 'blocks of time', which are materially scripted on an agenda or an electronic device, then navigate between them, which often collapse, and finally try to find their compass by establishing daily rituals. The navigation metaphor is interesting, since according to a relational ontology of organization (Orlikowski, 2010 ; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008), work is not a fixed entity, neither physical nor temporal, but a process where the material and the social are entangled and in constant redefinition. Consequently, work practices are intrinsically



sociomaterial (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011 ; Gherardi, 2016), implying human and other than human agencies (Kahrau & Maedche, 2013). The social and the material of those practices are seen as inextricably linked, all social being material, and all material being social, since the agencies at the basis of these phenomena have become so saturated with each other that the boundaries that once delimited them have dissolved (Orlikowski, 2007). That is why it is not relevant to ask which structuring temporal practices are material, rather symbolic, or embodied, since, by definition, every sociomaterial practice carries all these dimensions. For example, Remy's practices with chocolate as a reward shows that material, symbolic and sensitive dimensions that are inextricably linked between them. He also put an alarm to make him think about taking a break the sound of the alarm clock is symbolically associated with a new temporality, that of the beginning of rest time. Its practice was conceived, in an ironic way, in opposition to the commonly accepted social function of an alarm clock, that of going to work. It is thus well in the practice that the social and the material intertwine, here by creating thematic temporalities, by *working the time*. In the same logic, Audrey has a (material) hammock in her office which remember her she has chosen to work remotely, and this comes with advantages and (social) consequences. The function of the hammock could only be understood in Audrey's practice of having time to work and time to disconnect from work, even if she often mixes all of them all.

So, matter does time (Barad, 2013), and this materiality appears in the objects of daily organizational life. Whether it is when Mary looks at what has been materially written in her calendar, whether it is with digital technologies (Samy's or Alice's smartphone, Remy's alarm...), presenting material characteristics, or with other objects (cushions, hammocks, hats, etc.) or food, *working the time* has an inherently material dimension. However, this material aspect is inseparable from the social norms that are associated with it. The digital practices of connection represent a relevant example to illustrate which professional norms are associated with the fact of connecting to one's professional emails with the material object of the laptop, the smartphone, or the tablet... or not. The representations of work, and more broadly of working time, are symbolic with material and social aspects. Charbel or Kathleen want to escape certain representations associated with work (transport, for example) but have integrated the norms to such an extent that they reproduce, from a distance, the idea they have of a traditional work setting and work schedule. Audrey uses a hammock in her home office, symbolically recreating the codes of the vacations, as a foil to the constraint that work represents, even at a distance. In any case, remote workers are all proactive in the (re)creation

of temporalities to work, because without it, work would just not happen by itself. The analysis highlighted three different practices of *working the time*, but what is even more relevant is the entanglement between them: blocking time is often interwoven with the practice of ritualization, as it could be a routine to ‘block time’. Moreover, there is a part of ritualization in the way to navigate between time (as the way Rosa and her spouse manage to both work while taking care of their child), which supposed to have previously blocked time for the different temporalities of life.

### **...but still into the clock time**

Like social structures in general (Giddens, 1984) temporal structures simultaneously constrain and enable (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). With the notion of *temporal structuring*, Orlikowski and Yates emphasize the human role in shaping as well as being shaped with time. As noted by these two authors, there is a fundamental dichotomy between objective time (clock time) and a subjective perspective on time, based on experiences and events. By trying to fill in blocks of time in their diaries, or by catching up in the evening on the two hours not worked in the afternoon to pick up the children from school, remote workers still adopt an ‘objective’ vision of time, based on clock time, even if they think they adopt a subjective one. As shown previously with the example of Mary or Rosa, there is a certain idealization in the way remote workers consider they manage their time. That is why, at the individual level, all the people interviewed seem to have internalized the norm of time at work (efficient, professional time, a certain number of hours...). The only thing that changes is the way in which this time is organized. This is where a practical view of the notion of time as a temporal structuring could be useful. Time at work is still time at work... and it is the one that takes up more 'space' in their calendar. Even if remote workers freely organize their tasks, they all do it in blocks, and then they fit these blocks into a linear conception of time, that of clock time. As Dennis Mumby (2012) pointed out, ‘clock time’ originated during the Industrial Revolution. The transition from task time to clock time can be explained by the introduction of hourly rather than piecework wages for workers. Thus, the notion of temporality switched from tasks to linear clock time, but this is socially and historically constructed.

### **A metawork to create a time suitable for work**

In fact, most remote workers, who do not have business hours fixed by the company, need to proactively create spaces-times dedicated to work. Doing so, they are ‘working the time’, first to manage their work, but more importantly to avoid overwork, which could have consequences on their mental health and work/life balance. It recalls the concept of ‘meta-work’, which, according to Salzman and Palen (2004) is defined as ‘the work that enables work’. In a recent article, Aroles, Bonneau and Bhankaraully (2022) explore the meta-work performed by digital nomads. Although our respondents are not all digital nomads, the concept of meta-work is useful there to understand how their practices aim to produce ‘the work of making work go well’ (Gerson, 2008, p. 196). Previous research in CSCW and in sociology of work had identified three main meta-work practices through the identification of mobilization work (activities performed to assemble the resources required to complete a task), configuration work (activities that make systems operate) and articulation work (the activities required to manage the distributed nature of cooperative work). Aroles and colleagues (2022) added to it ‘transition work’, which encapsulates all the different activities needed to deal with work fragmentation across different temporalities and spatialities. In their article, the three authors explain how digital nomads must adapt their schedules to the needs of their clients/collaborators, even if it implies working at night because of jetlag. Not only do these workers have to constantly readjust their time between the different demands of their different employers, but they remain highly dependent on the timelines imposed by their clients. It is the same for different kind of remote workers, even those who are employed full-time by a unique company. They are responsible for creating a time suitable for work.

### **Temporal tensions**

There are inherent tensions between organizational life, linear and based on clock time (deadlines, projects, etc.), and the reality of life (complex, always emergent, messy), which could be better understood with a processual view of temporalities, as suggested by Reinecke and Ansari (2015) and their concept of *ambitemporality*. As shown in the example of Alice working remotely while on holidays in Greece, or Rosa who needs to have the feeling of not being while she is in a coffee shop (however she is doing so), we thus noticed temporal tensions among remote workers’ practices. For them, labeling temporalities as ‘work’ or ‘personal time’ is difficult. In the 1990s, Nowotny (1992) drew on Martins (1974) works about ‘thematic temporalism’ to suggest the existence of ‘pluritemporalism’, which related to the existence of a plurality of different modes of social time(s) which may exist side by side, and yet are to be

distinguished from the time of physics or that of biology. In this view, work and personal time are two types of different social times, as different types of actions may shape their own time. According to Nowotny (1992, p. 429) pluritemporalism allows asserting the existence of social time next to physical (or biological) time while posting different ‘modes’ of time. Working the time in remote work thus requires an additional practice to that of blocking time, navigating between times, and ritualizing times, or even the interwoven between the three. Before these practices can be implemented, another 'metapractice' (a practice that enables the other work practices) is needed: that of *labeling times*. Labeling temporalities as being work or personal time, or indeed, having difficulty doing so (like Alice, Rosa or Mary), is characteristic of the new world of work for remote workers: a quest for a new relationship between work and time, which leads to fragmented times, with blurred boundaries, which is subject to tensions for individuals (Aroles, de Vaujany & Dale, 2021b).

With the rise of the remote work phenomenon, we have the feeling that the organization of time (whether work or personal) is freer and task-based, but in the end, the 'created' temporalities end up fitting into the predominantly used clock time at organizational (and society-wide) level. Moreover, remote work is the ‘spearhead’ of the new ways of working (Ajzen, 2021, p. 207), characterized by an apparent and increased autonomy in the ways of living and working, but also with more surveillance and control based on the subjectivity of workers (De Vaujany, Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, Munro, Nama & Holt, 2021). Therefore, at the collective level, following a single concept of time organization, that of clock time, is necessarily part of a political model, that of capitalism, from which it is difficult to deviate from, even when one wants to do differently (Del Fa, 2019). Thus, remote workers have an individual responsibility to create adequate time to work, which is an additional meta-work on top of other work tasks. Often, they are tempted to organize this time in a processual way, based on tasks and events, but are inevitably caught up in the social and organizational norm of clock time. This makes this meta-work a bit paradoxical and even more difficult.

## **Conclusion**

Rooting into a processual ontology of time, on sociomaterial literature and an epistemology of practice, this chapter has proposed the concept of *working the time* as a sociomaterial practice of remote workers. Working hours are no longer a given element of the organization, but rather a process constituted by the entanglement of workers' practices, both

social and material. Although employers and their own practices are part of this organizational entanglement, *working the time* seems to be mostly carried by workers. *Working the time* would thus be a meta-work making work possible, more precisely a type of ‘transition work’ (Aroles & al., 2022) between temporalities constituting it and being constituted by it. Recognizing the existence of this meta-work calls for an ethical and political awareness on the part of organizations, so that they consider this extra work to rest on the shoulders of workers.

Because of its exploratory nature, this research remains limited. Adopting a practice-based perspective involves getting up close and personal with workers' activities: an ethnographic approach would be useful to extend this research when the pandemic context fully allows it. In doing so, future researchers could study the place of the body in these *working the time practices*. Bodies have a center part in contemporaneous organizational studies, maybe more than ever, that is why an affective ethnography drawing on a sociomaterial lens could be an interesting avenue for future research (Gherardi, 2019).

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