Being there: the acceptance and marginalization of part-time professional employees

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Summary

Part-time professional employees represent an increasingly important social category that challenges traditional assumptions about the relationships between space, time, and professional work. In this article, we examine both the historical emergence of part-time professional work and the dynamics of its integration into contemporary organizations. Professional employment has historically been associated with being continuously available to one’s organization, and contemporary professional jobs often bear the burden of that legacy as they are typically structured in ways that assume full-time (and greater) commitments of time to the organization. Because part-time status directly confronts that tradition, professionals wishing to work part-time may face potentially resistant work cultures. The heterogeneity of contemporary work cultures and tasks, however, presents a wide variety of levels and forms of resistance to part-time professionals. In this paper, we develop a theoretical model that identifies characteristics of local work contexts that lead to the acceptance or marginalization of part-time professionals. Specifically, we focus on the relationship between a work culture’s dominant interaction rituals and their effects on co-workers’ and managers’ reactions to part-time professionals. We then go on to examine the likely responses of part-time professionals to marginalization, based on their access to organizational resources and their motivation to engage in strategies that challenge the status quo. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Work in today’s organizations is in a state of rapid change, becoming more fluid and less bound by space and time. The myth of a full-time career with a single employer has been replaced by careers made up of a mix of contract work, flexible work schedules, home-based work, and part-time professional employment. These changes have been facilitated by technology (e-mail, web and teleconferencing), and driven by changing demographics, in the form of a growing number of two-income and single-parent families, along with a demanding and educated professional workforce insisting on more control over the contours of their own careers (Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Inkson, Heising, & Rousseau, 2001; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Part-time professionals represent a distinct feature of this changing organizational context, as a growing number of organizations move toward these flexible work arrangements in order to attract, retain, and utilize professionals who are unable or unwilling to work full-time (Adams, 1995; Dey,
1989; Lee, MacDermid, & Buck, 2000; Sheley, 1996). On the one hand, this shift can be seen as a win–
win solution to the problem of increasing organizational flexibility; the part-time professional
employee has been heralded as a flexible, cost-effective solution to a host of organizational problems
(Luscombe, 1994; Wolosky, 1995), and the productivity gains that can come with reduced work sche-
dules are well documented (Bailyn, 1993; Bailyn, Fletcher, & Kolb, 1997; Fletcher & Bailyn, 1996;
Lee et al., 2000; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2001). Moreover, part-time work has been
regarded as an opportunity for professional employees to shape their own careers while gaining a desir-
able work–non-work balance (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Meiksins & Whalley, 2002).

Alongside these benefits, however, part-time work arrangements for professional employees bring
with them a distinct set of challenges for organizations and professionals. Part-time professionals
represent a potentially puzzling social category, one which changes the shape of the traditional
nine-to-five (or in the case of many professionals, seven-to-seven) workplace, and introduces challeng-
ing new questions about the nature of professional work. Organizations which attempt to integrate
these new arrangements into existing work structures can end up depending on people who may not
be there when needed, as well as having to manage issues of equity and accountability among the rest
of their staff. Part-time professionals, themselves, face challenges not only in terms of managing tasks
and projects, but also in managing career advancement, professional image, and identity. They may be
considered less committed and less serious than their full-time colleagues, and their status as organi-
zational members may become uncertain and equivocal to managers, colleagues, and even themselves
(Bailyn, 1993; Barker, 1993; Pupo & Duffy, 2000). Consequently, part-time professionals may experi-
ence exclusion from professional networks and diminished organizational power. ‘Being there’ (being
present in time and space) has been a central element in much professional work; consequently, being
there less challenges the identity and ideology associated with professional employment.

In this article, we examine why the category of part-time professional workers poses such an orga-
nizational challenge. We focus specifically on the acceptance or marginalization of part-time profes-
sionals by their co-workers and managers in their local work contexts, and on the strategies of part-
time professionals in response to marginalization. We define part-time professional employees as those
professionals and managers who are considered ‘part-time’ by others in their organizations. Our defi-
nition includes a broad range of professional employees, including the computer programmer working
2 days per week in a cross-functional project team, the accountant working in relative isolation whose
responsibilities have been narrowed to 60 per cent of those of his full-time counterparts, and the tech-
nical support person involved in job-sharing so that she works only mornings. An implication of this
definition is that for a professional to be understood as part-time, it is likely to be in contrast to other
comparable professionals working full-time in the same or a similar organizational context. Therefore,
we do not include in this definition professionals whose attachment to organizations would ‘normally’
be less than full-time, such as those whose role would typically involve dividing their time among a
number of organizations (e.g., some medical specialists or contract workers). Nor do we include the
growing category of elite managers and professionals who are fashioning careers through a series of
temporary assignments with a variety of organizations (Inkson et al., 2001; Leicht & Fennell, 2001).
Instead, we focus on professionals attached to a single organization on an ongoing basis whose hourly
commitment to that organization is understood as part-time by their co-workers and managers. Follow-
ing Feldman (1990) and Pearce (1993), we argue that co-workers and managers of such professional
employees will also use comparable full-time employees as their frame of reference in evaluating the
legitimacy of part-time work.

Our analysis focuses on the part-time professional’s ‘local work context’, by which we simply mean
the situation within which they work in an organization. This might be a workgroup, a team, a depart-
ment or some other organizational structure. We examine the local work context for two reasons. First,
although firms may have developed organization-wide policies and procedures with respect to
part-time employees, these may have little impact on the day-to-day work contexts of professionals (Lee et al., 2000; South, 1989). Because the concepts of employment, professional work, and time are socially constructed within local organizational contexts (Boden, 1994; Perlow, 1997, 1998, 1999), we argue that the local culture and work arrangements within which they work will play a dominant role in determining the acceptance or marginalization of part-time professionals. Second, we argue that the local work contexts faced by part-time professionals vary significantly in terms of the types of tasks, the nature of work relationships, and the patterns of organizational commitments, and that these variations dramatically affect the dynamics for part-time professionals (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). In some situations, introducing and managing part-time professionals may be highly contentious, while it may be non-problematic or even desirable in others (Lee et al., 2000). Consequently, an important part of the theory we develop here involves an analysis of the dimensions of local work contexts that will have an impact on the status of part-time professionals.

We develop this article in three major sections. First, we examine the concept of a ‘part-time professional employee’, explicitly grounding our discussion in the socio-historical context in which the contemporary relationships among the concepts of work, time, and professional employment have emerged. Second, we address the heterogeneity of local work contexts faced by contemporary part-time professionals in the development of a model of their acceptance or marginalization. Finally, we discuss our model’s implications for research and practice.

The Concept of a Part-Time Professional Employee

Rotchford and Roberts’ (1982) call for more research into the attitudes and experiences of part-time workers prompted a flurry of studies designed to explore attitudinal differences between part-time and full-time employees, and the impact of demographic variables on reactions to part-time employment (e.g., Feldman, 1990; Shockey & Mueller, 1994; Steffy & Jones, 1990). Much of this research has been criticized for neglecting differences among part-time workers (Eberhardt & Moser, 1995; Feldman, 1990; Rousseau, 1995) and for being insensitive to the nature of the part-time employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995). One key omission in early research was the part-time professional. This can be explained in part by sheer numbers: professionals represent only a small fraction of the approximately 20 per cent of the North American labor force working in part-time jobs (Caputo & Cianni, 2001; Nardone, 1995; Tilly, 1996). The vast majority of all part-time employees occupy ‘secondary part-time jobs’ in the retail, service, and manufacturing sectors (Feldman, 1990; Pupo & Duffy, 2000; Tilly, 1991), where they have formed a convenient sample for most of the organizational research into part-time work (Eberhardt & Moser, 1995; Nkomo & Fields, 1994). As with contingent and temporary workers (Davis-Blake & Uzzi, 1993), these jobs are characterized by low skill requirements, low pay, few benefits, low productivity, and high turnover (Tilly, 1991, 1996; Pupo & Duffy, 2000). As such, they have also been the focus of labor economists and policy analysts interested in exploring broad trends in non-traditional employment (Kahn, 1985; Snider, 1995), and researchers concerned about the social implications of the growth in low-pay, low-skill, part-time jobs (Caputo & Cianni, 2001; Kosters, 1995; Pupo & Duffy, 2000; Snider, 1995).

Part-time professionals represent a very different category of part-time workers. Unlike the majority of part-time employees, they occupy ‘retention’ (Tilly, 1991) or ‘new concept’ (Kahn, 1985) jobs: these are the ‘good’ part-time jobs, with high wages and benefits, low turnover, challenging work, and career potential. In Feldman’s (1990) terms, they typically involve permanent, year-round positions whose occupants were hired by the organization as their main job and have chosen to work part-time voluntarily. In contrast to secondary jobs, part-time professional positions tend to be created by
the organization as a response to a valued employee’s needs, or to attract and retain qualified professionals (Barker, 1993; Lee et al., 2000; Sheley, 1996). Moreover, the idiosyncratic nature of many of these new part-time positions is exacerbated by their locations in professions such as law and engineering which have no institutionalized history of part-time work (Adams, 1995; Epstein, Seron, Oglenisky, & Saute, 1998).

In recent years, there has been increasing research attention paid to the part-time professional employee. Themes include trends in part-time work among various professional groups (Cull, Mulvey, & O’Connor, 2002; Epstein et al., 1998), strategies employed by professionals looking to construct alternative roles and expectations (Corwin, Lawrence, & Frost, 2001; Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Meiksins & Whalley, 2002), and studies of the institutional and organizational context as a way of predicting and explaining the adoption of flexible work practices for professional employees (Lee et al., 2000; Milliken, Martins, & Morgan, 1998). Of particular interest is Lee et al.’s (2000) finding that organizations responded to requests for part-time professional work arrangements in one of three different ways: ‘accommodation,’ in which requests are treated as ‘random, non-standard event[s] not worth development of new routines’ (p. 1218); ‘elaboration,’ which involves using the request for a part-time professional arrangement as an opportunity to develop new routines, ‘but without giving up the basic, status quo way of organizing and structuring work and careers’ (p. 1218); and ‘transformation,’ which sees the organization using requests for part-time professional work schedules as ‘a springboard for thinking about new ways of defining and organizing work or rethinking career paths and reward structures for a changing workforce’ (p. 1218). Lee et al.’s (2000) work demonstrates the importance of the local contexts in determining the success or failure of part-time professional work arrangements, and also suggests that, even as part-time professional work arrangements become increasingly common, organizations will not necessarily learn or change as a result of them. This raises an interesting question about why part-time arrangements should pose such a challenge to contemporary organizations. To answer this question, we turn to the notion of time itself, and its meaning within professional work contexts.

The concept of ‘part-time’ itself is often problematic when applied to professional employees. It is especially difficult to define part-time professionals strictly in terms of the number of hours they work. Part-time workers are defined in the United States as those working fewer than 35 hours per week (Nardone, 1995). Whereas this definition can be easily applied to research studies focusing on hourly workers, the situation with part-time professionals is more complex. Professionals have traditionally worked long hours (Bailyn, 1993; Pupo & Duffy, 2000; Starkey, 1991): in a study of women working in professional fields, Barker (1993) found that in fields such as law and finance even part-time professionals typically worked 40 hours per week. Complicating the issue further is the fact that it is not uncommon for part-time professionals to be contacted by the organization at home, or called in for a meeting on a day off (Bailyn, 1993). These circumstances make it clear that operationalizing full-time versus part-time employment solely in terms of hours worked may be overly simplistic (McGinnis & Morrow, 1990). Thus, we conceptualize part-time professional work as a socially constructed concept that is rooted in the historical development of work and negotiated locally in contemporary work organizations. Thus, our theoretical point of departure is the social construction of work time and its role in the historical constitution of ‘the professional employee.’

Work time and the concept of the employee

Prior to industrialization, most workers did not have a permanent identification with any single organization (Jacques, 1996). Instead, they were more likely to be self-employed craftspeople and artisans, or transient laborers: ‘For centuries, one’s “job” was done with every batch of work completed; taking
the next batch was a matter to be negotiated between worker and employer’ (Jacques, 1996, pp. 48–49). With industrialization, however, came a dramatic increase in the number of workers employed by organizations. As organizations become more dependent on this fixed human capital (itself a foreign concept before industrialization), and workers grew increasingly dependent on the financial and social security afforded by long term employment, it began to ‘sediment into “common sense” that workers should have an ideally career-long relationship to the organization’ (Jacques, 1996, p. 71). And with this new sensibility came increasing reference to a new social category: the universal worker, or employee. Prior to the late nineteenth century, ‘there [had been] no uniform discourse about work . . . A term equating the clerk, the tinsmith, and the iron puddler did not exist, nor was it needed’ (Jacques, 1996, p. 69). But industrialization defined new disciplinary boundaries around work and the worker that applied across occupational categories and organizational settings.

With long-term employment came the physical enclosure of more workers within work organizations which, accompanied by the social construction of ‘the normal work day’ and ‘the normal work week,’ described spatial and temporal boundaries around ‘the employee’ which had not enscribed ‘the worker’ (Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1984). Whereas we have come to accept this division as natural—conceiving of ourselves as ‘employees’ or ‘professionals’ quite separately and distinctly from ourselves as ‘consumers,’ ‘community members,’ or ‘parents’—at the time of industrialization it represented a ‘profound remapping of the boundaries of social life’ (Jacques, 1996, p. 84). To the extent that these spatial and temporal boundaries defining organizational membership are perceived as natural and enduring (a long, unstated assumption of management thought and action), the ‘part-time’ employee represents a sensible social category. The work day and the work week presuppose that work time can be measured against an ‘objective’ standard—full-time (‘being there’ 40 hours a week). ‘Part-time,’ then, means ‘being there less,’ and ‘overtime’ represents ‘being there more.’

The concept of the employee is contingent on an understanding of paid work that is closely tied to control, or lack of control, over one’s time. Even more generally, the social construction and meaning of time have become bound up in our whole method of social organization, and particularly the division of private and public spheres:

Our life is socially organized and temporally constructed in such a way that, whereas during some time periods we must be accessible to others, there are other times during which we may be legitimately inaccessible to them. This is why time is so central to the definition and regulation of social involvement (Zerubavel, 1981, p. 142)

The discipline of work time has become such a taken-for-granted characteristic of modern society that ‘the division between full-time and part-time is part of the social construction of work-time, and as such relates less to some objective standard (e.g., 30 hours per week) than to taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning the social organization of work’ (Dey, 1989, p. 466).

**Work time and the professional employee**

For professional employees, the social construction of work time has been both less and more restrictive than for other employees. Sociological studies of professions suggest that a key feature of professional work is the autonomy that its practitioners are granted over their own work (Abbott, 1991; Freidson, 1970, 1986; Macdonald, 1995; Seron & Ferris, 1995). Professionals acquire and sustain this autonomy by distinguishing themselves from other occupational groups on the basis of the possession of expert knowledge and training, societal acceptance of the profession’s authority, and codes of ethics emphasizing a service orientation (Freidson, 1970, 1986; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Professionals use these attributes strategically to legitimate professional self-control (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).
One important result of this accomplished occupational control is that professional work tends not to be tightly tied to a rigid timetable, so that it is commonly understood that professionals have greater control over their working time than do other employees (Starkey, 1991).

This autonomy, however, comes at a price. The accomplishment of professional self-control has led to a situation in which, for many professional employees, the distinction between work and home times is highly ambiguous: ‘Professional workplaces, especially among service professionals, are actually fluid and permeable, because they include an open-ended series of informal and implicit demands and processes, such as networking to ensure client satisfaction or non-negotiable deadlines to complete a job’ (Seron & Ferris, 1995, p. 23). Whereas the employee goes to and leaves from work, professional employees are expected to be involved in their work at all times, such that ‘ever-availability’ acts as a symbolic expression of professional commitment (Zerubavel, 1981, p. 153).

The issue of professionals being ever available is not only symbolic. The roles assigned to professional employees generally involve significant task ambiguity, control of critical information, and the resolution of organizational uncertainty (Abbott, 1991), all of which heighten the importance of presence in and availability to the organization. Moreover, as clients become more sophisticated, and as technology has evolved to allow more control over the activities and cost of professional work, there is increasing pressure on professionals to justify and rationalize their use of time (Leicht & Fennell, 2001). At the institutional level, labor laws and organizational policies and contracts typically assume professional overtime will not be directly compensated, a situation which has been shown to reinforce ‘greedy’ organizations (Coser, 1974) in which no amount of service to the organization is too much. Furthermore, gendered assumptions regarding professional employees have reinforced expectations of the professional employee’s ever-availability (Seron & Ferris, 1995): professional work arrangements often assume ‘a division of labor in which men’s time is devoted to the sphere of work and women’s time is devoted to the sphere of home’ (Seron & Ferris, 1995, p. 24), a partition which frees (male) professionals to respond to organizational demands at any and all times.

Thus, for many reasons, professionals’ occupational control has produced an ironic situation in which control over their tasks has often led to a loss of control over the division between work time and private time. It is useful to note here that as changes in technology make work space itself an increasingly navigable boundary—with professionals able to work in real time from a different space, using tools such as e-mail and web and tele-conferencing—the situation may become more, rather than less, difficult for the part-time professional. Technology allows the boundary between ‘work’ and ‘non-work’ time to be easily transgressed by managers, colleagues, clients, and even by part-time professionals themselves (as they work to meet external and internal work expectations within a reduced work schedule). So, as space becomes less of a restriction on professional work, time may become even more precious.

An equally significant issue is the idea that the time that professionals spend at (or available for) work needs to be understood as a collective and socially enacted phenomenon (Perlow, 1999). In her study of how software engineers use their work time, Perlow (1997, 1998, 1999) found that interactive activities (e.g., working jointly to solve difficult tasks, creating plans and schedules, checking on the status of collaborative work) broke up the software engineers’ work day significantly. This contributed directly to both a crisis mentality and an emphasis on ‘individual heroics’: high-visibility, ‘critical and urgent’ work; being physically present to deal with ongoing demands; and accommodating interruptions of other engineers. Recognizing that professional interaction was central to the engineers’ tasks, but that the patterns of interruptions were themselves creating a ‘vicious work time cycle,’ Perlow worked with the engineers to minimize the impact of interruptions by structuring dedicated ‘quiet time’ for independent work. However, even when organizational members were confronted by, and acknowledged, the productivity benefits that could be gained by altering their traditional ways of working, they still reverted back to their ‘traditional’ use of time once the experiment was relaxed.
Perlow’s study demonstrates that resistance to using time differently represents tacit and deeply held assumptions about how work is, and should be, done, and what the organization does and should look like. Moreover, such resistance is reinforced by reward systems which continue to glorify the notion of face time as a symbolic indication of professional and organizational commitment. Given this context, part-time professional work patterns may clearly have the potential to violate deeply institutionalized assumptions about the obligations, interests, and nature of professionals.

Local Work Contexts and the Acceptance or Marginalization of Part-Time Professional Employees

Although the concept of work time has played a critical role in the historical development of professional employment as a broad social category, the range of occupations and employees associated with professional status in contemporary organizations is wide and heterogeneous. In particular, attitudes toward time and its proper use vary across different work contexts (Butler, 1995; Clark, 1985; Hassard, 1996; Perlow, 1997, 1998, 1999). Thus, the degree to which part-time professional employees will be accepted or marginalized will also vary significantly across types of organization, tasks, and cultures. In some work contexts, part-time work arrangements and other alternative uses of work time may be easily accepted or even the norm; in others, they may violate deeply held beliefs about the ‘proper’ use of time. We argue here that time plays a more or less important role in determining the legitimacy of part-time work arrangements as a result of the pattern of interactions and relationships that characterize the local work context. In order to examine this issue systematically, we develop in this section a theoretical model of the relationship between the nature of local work contexts, with respect to their social construction of time, and the acceptance or marginalization of part-time professional employees.

Interaction rituals and work time

In order to examine the relationship between local work contexts and the acceptance or marginalization of part-time professionals, we require a theoretical language that can describe the dynamics of local work contexts and allow us to differentiate between them on a systematic basis. For this purpose, we rely on the concept of ‘interaction rituals’ because this concept theoretically connects the cultures of social groups with the micro-interactions that are enacted within those cultures and which together constitute those cultures (Collins, 1981). An interaction ritual is defined as any routine (as opposed to extraordinary) interaction between two or more people that is vested with some symbolic significance (Collins, 1981, 1988; Durkheim, 1995; Goffman, 1967; Lukes, 1975; Van Maanen, 1992). Interaction rituals commonly associated with work contexts include meetings, coffee breaks, conference calls, sales pitches, interviews, as well as after-work drinks and pub nights (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schwartzman, 1989; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Interaction rituals in many work contexts increasingly occur electronically through such means as participation in discussion forums and e-mail exchanges. The cultures of local work contexts provide a basis for understanding what interaction rituals are appropriate for members to engage in, at the same time that those interaction rituals produce and re-produce those cultures.

Our focus on interaction rituals stems from our belief that they establish the nature of work time in local work contexts: the character, frequency, and meaning of these rituals create expectations regarding patterns of participation and attendance. We argue that these rituals work not only to facilitate
specific tasks or social purposes, but also to structure work and work relationships in ways that have important impacts on the social construction of work time among members (Boden, 1994; Collins, 1981; Goffman, 1967; Schwartzman, 1989). Here, we follow research on the sociology of time in social settings that conceptualizes social time as ‘operational’—tied to social events and the meaning of those events (Clark, 1985; Gurvitch, 1964; Sorokin & Merton, 1937). This conception of time suggests an episodic rhythm driven by events, rather than a linear and continuous ‘clock time’ (Gurvitch, 1964).

An event-driven understanding of time suggests that key interaction rituals will affect a group’s perceptions of time and its relationship to them as a group: some patterns of activities and events will create a rigid sense of time and its importance, while other patterns will produce a more fluid conceptualization of time and its role in work relationships (Butler, 1995). In a study of police organizations, for example, Van Maanen and Katz (1979) found that, for new recruits, a key challenge was to ‘position themselves in organizationally legitimate time and space’ (1979, p. 33). ‘To the newcomer in an organization,’ they argue, ‘time is problematic. One must discover when to take a break, have lunch, quit work, how long one must remain at a certain paygrade, when to press for a promotion, when to approach the boss, and so on’ (Van Maanen & Katz, 1979, pp. 33–34). As another example of how organizational members are socialized as to the ‘proper’ meaning of time, consider the explicit and extreme time demands placed on medical residents: these demands serve as a way of defining their identities as medical professionals by subordinating their private/personal time to public/professional time. Although these examples emphasize the correlation of time and space in interaction rituals, this need not be the case: the demand for participation in e-mail exchange or online discussion forums can equally structure the work time of a group.

**Ritual participation and the negotiation of membership**

The examples discussed above highlight the potential relationship between appropriate participation in the interaction rituals that structure the rhythm of work time and one’s status in a local work context. As in the historical development of employment more generally, the interaction rituals in contemporary organizations help determine the social boundaries that delineate social relationships. To clarify this relationship, take as an example a common and critical interaction ritual—the meeting. The meeting clearly constitutes an interaction ritual, in that a group of two or more people are interacting in a routinized way that has symbolic significance. Meetings tend to follow a highly standardized format: most of us know with varying degrees of confidence how to ‘do’ meetings, and the general structure they are ‘meant’ to assume. Similarly, most of us could agree on the broad technical purposes of a given meeting: to arrive at a decision, for example, or to resolve a crisis. So, on the surface, ‘the meeting’ appears mundane and predictable, but as a key interaction ritual meetings ‘may be a major form for the creation of community or organizational identity (however tentative),’ and, once constructed, may become ‘a vehicle for the reading as well as validation of social relations within a cultural system’ (Schwartzman, 1989, p. 41).

Caught in a meeting and connected through a series of interactions across time and space are the people, ideas, decisions, and outcomes that make the organization. It is in the closed internal times and spaces of meetings, as well as in the many phone calls that link people, topics and tasks, that the actual structure of the organization is created and recreated. (Boden, 1994, p. 106)

Meetings are richly symbolic events that involve far more than task-oriented interaction: meetings are where organizational actors attempt to negotiate shared interpretations of what organizational membership entails—who belongs, who does not, and what that means.
The example of the meeting illustrates a critical effect of interaction rituals—the symbolic production and reproduction of group membership (Collins, 1988; Durkheim, 1984, 1995). Interaction rituals provide both the structure of membership (in their ritualized delineation of social boundaries), and the contexts in which individual actors negotiate their own membership status (in the specific sets of interactions): the location, composition, organization, and agenda of a meeting symbolically express a great deal about organizational membership structures, while those in attendance use the opportunity to position themselves strategically in the work context. The same argument applies equally to other, less formal, interaction rituals in which managers and professionals engage. For example, Van Maanen (1992) studied alcoholic drinking occasions within a London police agency. Although these ‘organizational time-outs’ were ‘often thought by those who take part in them to be among the least rule-governed . . . occasions associated with organizational life,’ they were, in fact, highly ritualized occasions, patterned according to locale, participants, and the intensity of the drinking. These drinking episodes played an important role in clarifying role expectations and terms of membership as evidenced by the reaction to non-participants: officers who chose not to participate in the numerous drinking rituals were ‘often made sport of (as aloof “Hooray Henry” types) to their faces by regulars’ (Van Maanen, 1992, p. 46).

The importance of interaction rituals in organizational life presents a potentially critical threat to the acceptance of part-time professional employees. Participation in key interaction rituals may be essential to acceptance in a group; members who fail to engage in important interaction rituals may be regarded as violating the group’s symbols of membership. Whether it is another employee’s going-away lunch, a regularly scheduled staff meeting, the gathering in the lounge to celebrate a birthday, or an escalating series of e-mail jokes and ‘real time’ banter, these rituals are ‘“thick” with information’ (Boden & Molotch, 1994, p. 259). Missing key rituals can have a range of concrete and symbolic effects on the relationship between the part-time professional and his or her work context. The pace and rhythm of professional work, often based on an assumption of ever-availability, may lead part-timers to miss important occasions in which information is disseminated or alliances formed. With a great deal of professional work dependent on access to personal networks for information or influence, the potential marginalization of part-timers might compromise those professionals’ ability to accomplish organizational goals. Symbolically, part-time status may invite speculation from managers and co-workers about the professional’s commitment to and social involvement in the organization (Bailyn, 1993; Van Maanen, 1992). As part-time professionals miss key rituals, co-workers and superiors may feel ‘uneasy’ about the part-time professional’s status as a group member, and express this discomfort in indirect ways. For example, rather than criticizing their absence from a regular group meeting or their delayed response to a group e-mail from the boss, they may question the ‘commitment’ of the part-time professionals to the workgroup (Hochschild, 1997), or engage in ongoing ‘jokes’ about part-time professionals leaving the office on Thursday to enjoy ‘a nice, relaxing, long weekend.’ Perhaps more critically, part-time professionals may disrupt the rhythms of the organizational culture itself: co-workers and supervisors may question their own tacit assumptions about the relationship between working time and organizational membership in the face of colleagues making explicit and public choices to move away from a level of time commitment that had previously been taken for granted.

**Dimensions of work contexts**

Although we have emphasized the potential for missed participation in key interaction rituals to lead to marginalization, contemporary part-time professionals work in a wide variety of different occupations, tasks, roles, and cultures, and so face a similarly wide variety of patterns of interaction rituals.
Consequently, there will also be differences in the difficulties they experience integrating into existing work structures, with different patterns of interaction rituals affecting how far an individual’s part-time status affects his or her perceived legitimacy. Our general argument is that characteristics of interaction rituals will affect the work contexts of part-time professionals, which will in turn affect the likelihood of acceptance or marginalization by co-workers and managers. Specifically, we draw on Collins’ description of interaction rituals in terms of four central characteristics: ritual density, uniformity of participants’ attention, emotional intensity, and frequency of order-giving and order-taking. Interaction rituals could, of course, be described along other dimensions, such as the level of surveillance involved or the degree to which performance is assessed. We draw on these four characteristics, however, because (as illustrated in Figure 1) we argue that these characteristics of interaction rituals affect the acceptance of part-time professionals through their impact on three dimensions of local work contexts (Collins, 1988; Douglas, 1973; Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982): (1) members’ experience of the workgroup boundary as strong or weak; (2) pressures for conformity within the work context; and (3) the level of stratification within the work context.
Group boundaries

Membership boundaries associated with work contexts can be experienced by members as variously strong or weak (Douglas, 1973; Collins, 1988): in work contexts in which boundaries are strong, members perceive a real, material difference between themselves and non-members. In this way, strong group boundaries promote a sense of superiority associated with membership (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). Such strong, enduring social boundaries are formed out of interaction rituals that act as ‘a kind of energy-producing machine, a sort of social “battery” for charging up individuals’ (Collins, 1988, p. 192). Group-focused rituals provide rewards for individuals in the form of emotional energy and self-righteousness.

Three key dimensions of interaction rituals interact to effect social boundaries in local work contexts; the stronger the elements, the more that members experience social boundaries as real and powerful. The first dimension is ritual density: the frequency of interaction rituals and the degree to which those rituals demand face-to-face interaction. Whereas some work contexts are associated with a large number of mandatory, in-person meetings, others hold relatively few meetings and involve less face-to-face communication. The second dimension is the degree to which the interaction rituals demand a common focus of attention among participants; whereas all interaction demands a certain level of common attention, some work situations are more demanding in this respect, such as the highly focused attention of the participants in a professional string quartet. The third dimension is the degree of emotional intensity associated with the rituals, with some rituals involving a more coercive or emotionally charged relationship among participants, such as those typical in military or ideological organizations.

Interaction rituals that effect strong membership boundaries involve high densities of interaction, highly focused attention across participants, and high levels of emotional intensity (Collins, 1988). One example of a highly bounded work context is the Swedish advertising agency studied by Alvesson (1994). In this firm, members frequently engaged in rituals which explicitly worked to differentiate insiders (agency employees) from outsiders (clients), and provide them with a sense of superiority over their clients. Alvesson (1994) argues that a key function of the firm’s rituals is to distance the advertising professional from the client, in terms of knowledge, ability, and taste in the production of advertisements. A key ritual in this process involved the presentation of a proposed advertisement or ad campaign for the client’s evaluation, and especially the ritualized discourse among agency employees after the presentation. At this point, the social boundaries were made clear in the way that ad agency employees described clients to each other: clients are ‘stupid,’ ‘careless,’ lacking stamina and courage, and ‘completely lost’ (Alvesson, 1994, p. 548). Similarly, in the London police agency examined by Van Maanen (1992), drinking provided the basis for frequent, focused, emotional rituals which worked to effect a highly bounded workgroup with a strong sense of moral superiority. Part-time professionals are unlikely to find an easy fit in work contexts where co-workers and superiors perceive such strong boundaries. In work contexts in which full-time status is the norm, the role ambiguity created by the part-time professional’s employment status will conflict with the culture of a workgroup that understands its boundaries as strong, and consequently understands its membership as distinct and unambiguous. This relationship leads us to our first proposition:

Proposition 1a: Acceptance of part-time professional work as legitimate is less likely (marginalization is more likely) when co-workers and managers perceive strong social boundaries.

Proposition 1b: Co-workers and managers are more likely to perceive strong social boundaries when interaction ritual density is high, interaction rituals lead to a high degree of uniformity of attention across group members, and interaction rituals are emotionally charged.
Demands for conformity
The second important dimension of local work contexts is the degree to which conformity is demanded within the work context. This dimension is primarily affected by two characteristics of interaction rituals: uniformity of participants’ attention, and ritual density. The first factor affecting this dimension, uniformity of participants’ attention, will be strongly influenced by the degree to which co-workers face homogeneous work situations (Collins, 1988; Douglas, 1973). Co-workers sharing similar work situations will be attendant to similar issues, problems, and ideas in work-related interaction rituals. The relationship between homogeneity and conformity can also be illustrated by the example of the work team. Where work is structured such that there is little differentiation among co-workers’ tasks and responsibilities, commonality is often stressed as a central cultural value (Collins, 1988). Working and succeeding as a part of the team is glorified in contrast to individual accomplishment (Duffy, 1993; Orasanu & Salas, 1993). Thus, this type of context will produce a culture in which self-selected differentiation, as in the case of part-time professionals, is likely to be perceived negatively by co-workers.

The demand for conformity elicited by structural homogeneity will be exacerbated when the density of interaction rituals is high. Frequent face-to-face interaction rituals allow for a greater degree of surveillance among co-workers, ensuring that participants whose orientation or focus of attention differs from that of the group will be noticed. Again, the formation of work teams often heightens the density of interaction rituals through group-based decision making, planning, and quality assurance. All of these processes encourage the elaboration and routinization of ritualized interactions, often involving the team as a whole (Dobyns & Crawford-Mason, 1994; George & Weimerskirch, 1994). In such situations, behaviors or situations that are atypical, such as part-time status, will more easily be noticed and less easily accepted by group members than in contexts in which work is less tightly coupled.

Proposition 2a: Acceptance of part-time professional work as legitimate is less likely (marginalization is more likely) when co-workers and managers perceive strong pressure for conformity to rigid, non-relativistic rules.

Proposition 2b: Co-workers and managers are more likely to perceive strong pressure for conformity to rigid, non-relativistic rules when interaction ritual density is high and interaction rituals lead to a high degree of uniformity of attention across group members.

Stratification
The third dimension affecting the acceptance or marginalization of part-time professionals is concerned with the stratification of participants within the work context. Stratification involves the assignment of authority to some members over others, so that some members are understood as legitimate ‘order-givers’ while others become ‘order-takers’ (Collins, 1975). As with social boundaries and conformity, the stratification of a work context is related to the pattern and character of what he refers to as ‘order-giving’ and ‘order-taking’ rituals:

The experience of giving orders makes people self-assured, proud, or even arrogant, and they identify themselves with the official ideals in whose name they give orders. Conversely, the experience of taking orders from other people makes people fatalistic, externally conforming but privately alienated from authority and the official ideas in whose name they are given orders. (Collins, 1988, p. 211)

This experience is exacerbated by the level of emotional intensity associated with the order-giving rituals, such that work contexts in which supervision involves inspirational appeals, threats, or intimidation will have greater ‘ritual obeisance’ among members (Collins, 1988, p. 213).

Work contexts that involve high levels of stratification might be located in very traditional hierarchies where compliance with superiors is highly valued; extreme examples would include military
organizations or quasi-military organizations, such as police forces, fire services, and penal institutions. Within organizations, highly stratified work contexts might include those departments or workgroups that involve a high degree of status differentiation among participants, such as professional employees supervising non-professional employees. As with strong organizational boundaries, high levels of ritualized stratification in the work context will result in difficulties for part-time professionals. As argued above, part-time status lowers the professionals’ involvement in all interaction rituals, including order-giving and order-taking. If a part-time professional’s role involves supervision of others, their status as order-giver may be compromised by their part-time status, as the acceptance and compliance of those under their direction are partly conditional on the extent to which they engage in such rituals. As order-takers, part-time professionals will again be involved in fewer stratified interaction rituals, which may lower others’ acceptance of their role in them. Furthermore, part-time status is likely to lessen the potential coerciveness of order-giving rituals as the part-time professional is less susceptible to surveillance as an order-taker and less able as order-giver to directly ensure obedience through observation. These dynamics lead to our third proposition:

**Proposition 3a:** Acceptance of part-time professional work as legitimate is less likely (marginalization is more likely) when co-workers and managers perceive and accept a high degree of organizational stratification.

**Proposition 3b:** Co-workers and managers are more likely to perceive and accept a high degree of organizational stratification when frequency of order-giving and order-taking rituals is high and these rituals are emotionally intense.

We have argued here that part-time professionals, by virtue of their reduced time commitment, violate many of the key interaction rituals through which organizational membership is affirmed, and that patterns of interaction rituals effect social structures within work contexts that affect the tendency of workgroup members to accept or marginalize part-time professionals. The group boundaries, demands for conformity, and stratification experienced by workgroup members provide them with a cultural template against which to measure the acceptability of part-time professional work, and the social resources, in the form of interaction rituals, with which to include or exclude the part-time professional.

**Strategies of part-time professionals: compliance and innovation**

Although we have so far focused on the influence of the work context on co-worker and manager reactions to the part-time professional, we want to suggest neither a deterministic model nor one in which the actions of the part-time professionals themselves are inconsequential. As interaction rituals structure local work contexts, they also create the tensions that could lead to the transformation of those work contexts. To the extent that dominant organizational rituals marginalize part-time professionals, excluding them from economic or social rewards, we expect those professionals to be motivated to overcome the situation (Bourdieu, 1993; Collins, 1975). As the environmental conditions of work change, the potential disruption to existing interaction rituals may allow part-time professionals to develop new rituals which allow part-time work greater legitimacy and acceptance. Such innovation strategies are not without costs, however; they may require the part-time professional to draw on their organizational resources, such as status and informal networks (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Meiksins & Whalley, 2002), while risking that a new ritual may not take hold or may not engender greater acceptance.

Thus, we argue that a focus on interaction rituals suggests that part-time professionals are faced with two basic alternatives if they wish to resist marginalization by co-workers and managers: compliance
with existing rituals, and the innovation of new rituals. Our argument follows other work on the relationship between social structures as enacted in interaction rituals and the conflict created by those social structures (Collins, 1975); according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), the differential effects of interaction rituals on individuals’ access to resources set up a situation in which conflict is embedded in social structure such that people will either work to participate in privileged rituals or attempt to enact new rituals in order to redistribute resources. Although there are, of course, many alternative typologies of strategies that could be used, we draw on this one because we believe it connects directly to the concept of interaction rituals and is consistent with other work that has examined organizational and individual strategies for the development of alternative work arrangements (Lee et al., 2000; Rousseau, 2001). In the remainder of this section, we address the factors that might lead part-time professionals to engage in either compliance or innovation strategies.

**Compliance with existing rituals**

For part-time professionals, a compliance strategy involves working to participate to whatever extent possible in key rituals that define membership under the organization’s traditional terms. For example, part-time professionals who remain accessible to their organizations on their days off for phone calls, e-mails, or meetings in the office are adopting a strategy of compliance by respecting the traditional temporal boundaries of the organization. Similarly, part-time professionals might accommodate organizational demands for travel (which might often be confined to within the work week for full-time employees) such that they end up adding significantly to their formally designated ‘work time.’

A compliance strategy is consistent with the ‘accommodation’ response described by Lee et al. (2000): learnings from these individual arrangements tend not to be transferred to other employees or workgroups. For the part-time professionals themselves, although this strategy may overcome many of the membership issues associated with part-time status, it may not be possible to sustain over the long term. For part-time professionals, compliance requires relatively little in terms of access to organizational resources or power; it does not challenge existing rituals or social structures. Compliance does, however, demand significant expenditure of home- and family-based resources: remaining on-call and available during off hours involves preserving work rituals at the expense of non-work life (Seron & Ferris, 1995). As discussed above, the employment situations facing part-time professionals today are vastly different from when the category of professional employee first arose. While many employees and employers still value long-term employment commitments, the prospect of life-time employment with a single firm is far less likely, and moving between employers is often seen as a positive tactic for career success (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Moreover, part-time professional work is seen by some employees as a short-term strategy to deal with contingencies of limited duration, while others consider it a long-term approach to integrating their work with other aspects of their lives (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). These dynamics lead to our fourth proposition:

**Proposition 4**: Part-time professionals will be more likely to engage in compliance strategies when (a) they have little access to organizational resources or power, and (b) they view their part-time status as short term.

**Innovation of new rituals**

Part-time professionals might also engage in an innovation strategy—attempting to redefine the terms of organizational membership through the development of new rituals. This strategy does not involve a simple dismissal of previous terms of membership, but rather substitutes new means of affirming membership, such that broad understandings can be reached within the organization about the role of the part-time professional. Some part-time professionals are, for example, negotiating ‘idiosyncratic deals’ (Rousseau, 2001) that allow them to work part-time without missing key interaction rituals,
persuading their managers, for instance, to schedule meetings regularly and on their work days, rather than have them scattered throughout the week. Similarly, extended work-related travel, which often conflicts with the part-timers’ schedules, might be replaced by the use of electronic communications, such as tele-conferencing or groupware, thus introducing interaction rituals with less need for face-to-face communication. More generally, innovation strategies involve part-time professionals working to reform the manner in which performance and commitment are measured in the organization. This approach echoes Weick’s (2000) discussion of continuous change in which he argues that emergent, bottom-up change processes tend to be more sensitive to local contingencies and involve greater real-time experimentation and learning than top-down planned change programs. Innovation is also consistent with the ‘transformation’ strategy described by Lee et al. (2000), whereby individual part-time work arrangements prompted continual experimentation around how professional work was conducted.

For innovation strategies to successfully change organizational routines, however, part-time professionals are likely to require significant influence and access to organizational resources. Thus, part-time professionals whose status is relatively high in the organization will be more likely to be involved in the innovation of new rituals. Indeed, for high-status part-time professionals, co-workers and managers may be obligated to develop rituals that work to save face for the part-timer (Goffman, 1959).

Another route to ritual innovation might involve the efforts of multiple part-time professionals jointly leveraging their collective organizational resources. Although innovation strategies may be more demanding than compliance strategies in terms of access to organizational resources, they are ultimately more sustainable for the part-time professional: fundamental changes to the pattern of interaction rituals that structure the local work context may make it possible for the part-time professionals to maintain their effectiveness and their careers over the long term. These dynamics lead to our fifth proposition:

Proposition 5: Part-time professionals are more likely to engage in innovation strategies when (a) they have greater access to organizational resources or power, and (b) they view their part-time status as long-term.

Conclusion

Part-time professionals represent one of the new categories of workers spawned by the social, economic, and cultural changes of recent decades. Whereas previously one of the primary associations of working as a professional or manager in an organization was a willingness to sacrifice personal/private time for professional/public time, this view is being challenged. As the myth of a life-long career with an organization is shattered by the stark realities of downsized and flattened corporations, and young professionals (particularly women) seeking to balance family and work life, organizations are being presented with the challenge of a professional workforce less willing to conform to old patterns of work. With more professionals demanding alternative work arrangements and schedules, organizations must not only allow part-time professional work, but must find ways of productively integrating these new schedules into existing work routines and structures. Organizations that do not recognize this need may well find themselves losing some of their brightest, most productive employees to more flexible, responsive firms.

The theory of part-time professional work that we have developed highlights the criticality of what we have referred to as the local work context in determining the acceptance or marginalization of part-time professionals. We have argued that the category of part-time professional potentially challenges
institutionalized assumptions about the relationship between ‘working time’ and ‘the professional employee’ and may therefore disrupt local patterns of ritualized interaction. In turn, the characteristics of the local work context—the strength of its boundaries, pressures for conformity, and level of stratification—will affect the likelihood of co-workers and managers accepting or marginalizing the part-time professional. These dynamics have several important implications for research into professional and part-time work, and for managers and part-time professionals attempting to deal practically with the new realities.

**Implications for research**

The first implication for research involves the attention we pay to the contextual details of part-time professional work. We agree with Rousseau (1995) that, given the specifics of their local work contexts, part-time employees can negotiate any number of new membership agreements with their employers. By focusing on the interaction rituals which characterize specific local work contexts, we provide a theoretical framework for predicting and understanding what different forms those part-time membership agreements might take. We argue that this understanding will require a healthy respect for what Jacobs (1994) called ‘the nontrivial nature of trivia’: the coffee breaks, lunches, regular meetings, informal chats, etc. through which organizational membership is affirmed and sustained.

A second implication for researchers concerns the conceptualization of time in the study of alternative work arrangements. Simple measures of involvement based on clock time are insufficient to understand the complexity of the rhythms of working life. Instead, we suggest using the rhythm of a work culture’s interaction rituals and workers’ involvement in those rituals as a means of understanding the implications of part-time, flex-time, and other new patterns of work. We argue that whether employees are in the office for 20, 40, or 60 hours per week may be less important to their organizational effectiveness and careers than is their ability to participate in key rituals that affirm their membership status and commitment. Thus, researchers interested in the new forms of organizing (Daft & Lewin, 1993) and their effects on employees should pay closer attention to patterns and rhythms of interaction rituals (Perlow, 1997, 1998, 1999).

A final implication for research stems from our discussion of the characteristics of interaction rituals and local work contexts that affect the reaction of co-workers and managers to part-time professional work arrangements. We have focused on three characteristics—perceptions of boundaries, pressures for conformity, and stratification—that we argue are critically important, but there are other factors which should also be explored. One such factor is gender. Although we have not explicitly discussed the issue of gender in this paper, it plays an important role in the dynamics of part-time professional work (Epstein et al., 1998) and, we would argue, in the interaction rituals that structure local work contexts. Gender roles in organizations are socially constructed through the rituals in which members engage, drawing on both local culture and broader societal institutions regarding appropriate and legitimate roles for the sexes (Ferguson, 1984; Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998). Consequently, an interesting avenue for research would be to explore the relationship between gender and the interaction ritual characteristics we have examined. One might study, for instance, the impact of different gender constructions and compositions on the emotional intensity of rituals or the frequency of order-giving and order-taking ritual (Iannello, 1992).

**Implications for practice**

For managers in organizations that are attempting to institute part-time professional work, the theory developed here suggests two key success factors. First, managers must ensure the development of
effective work relationships by focusing on the manner in which the part-time professional is integrated into the local work context (cf. Trice & Beyer, 1984). With often only the sketchiest of guidelines at the organizational level (Hochschild, 1997), it falls to part-time professionals, their managers, and their co-workers to translate a simple reduction in working hours into a set of practices which allow the work to get done, perceptions of equity to be maintained, and new standards for assessing performance to be developed. Although a typical organizational strategy may be to develop human resource policies that legitimate and regulate new arrangements, these policies may well fail to achieve their goals if they are not matched with careful management in local work contexts (Lee et al., 2000). We have argued that it is in the local work context that interaction rituals occur which will either facilitate or discourage part-time professional work through the establishment and maintenance of social boundaries, stratification, and pressures for conformity. If organizational policies ignore the importance of these local structures and local managers rely on those policies to integrate part-time professional work arrangements, their efforts may lead to marginalized, ineffective part-time professionals.

The second implication for managers is that even if they recognize the criticality of the local work context, they also need to recognize the heterogeneity of those contexts. For part-time professionals to be effective members of a workgroup, dominant patterns of interaction rituals may need to be reformulated so that part-timers are able to participate as fully as possible and, just as importantly, be perceived by co-workers as legitimate members of the workgroup in good standing. This will be particularly important in local work contexts which have developed work cultures that might be seen as close-knit or family-like, but to a part-timer might just feel closed and incestuous. So, managing the work context to facilitate part-time professional work may require changing the frequency, structure, and meaning attached to such rituals as formal and informal meetings, lunches, and dinners. It may require increased sensitivity to temporal boundaries around work, through altering the timing and pattern of e-mail correspondence, or acknowledging that technology which allows work to be done from ‘anywhere’ can bring with it increased pressure to work at ‘anytime.’ It might also require changing the patterns of direction and supervision in the workgroup so that part-timers are better able to occupy positions of authority. Of course, all these changes may have costs associated with them for full-time professionals and for the organization as a whole: altering patterns of interaction rituals in order to include the acceptance of part-time professionals may lessen full-timers’ sense of commitment and weaken the overall culture of the workgroup. This suggests that managers may need to be creative in developing alternative ritual patterns to avoid these problems. Where these problems are difficult to avoid, they should carefully assess the costs of attempting to integrate part-time professionals into an existing, well-functioning work context.

Finally, for part-time professionals themselves, the most significant implication of our theory is that if they wish to succeed in traditional, professional work contexts they face a host of challenges, both concrete and symbolic. They must negotiate ways in which they can be perceived as legitimate members of the work context, as insiders rather than outsiders or marginal members. They must develop ways of delegating authority and accepting direction that do not require ever-availability. They must also arrange their dealings such that they are seen to be conforming with local practices to the extent demanded by co-workers. For each of these challenges, part-time professionals have a range of strategies available to them. These principally involve either complying with the demands of the local work context in some way, often through the sacrifice of non-work time, or working to develop new rituals so that the work context might be more amenable to their alternative schedules.

In this article, we have attempted to develop a theoretical approach that will provide a foundation both for academics to engage in systematic research into part-time professional work, and for managers and professionals to transform their organizations. The challenge for these groups is to understand the work contexts of part-time professionals in terms of sets of ongoing interaction rituals which define the boundaries and meaning of organizational membership. We believe that if organizations are
going to be able to adapt to the changing demographics and lifestyles of their professionals and managers, there needs to be a redefinition of organizational membership away from simply ‘being there’—that is, present in *either* time or space.

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**References**


