

“New Ways of Working” and their managerial myths: the resurgence of liberation and distributed surveillance?

Author: Grégory Jemine, University of Liège (CRIS/LENTIC), gjemine@ulg.ac.be

Through this contribution we aim to explore how two well-known bodies of knowledge, namely the panopticism as developed by Foucault (2012) and the works from the Human Relations movement (Mayo, 1949) are being reprocessed and reinjected by managerial actors in organisational projects of “modernisation” such as “New Ways of Working”. Nowadays, in open and flexible workspaces, visual and acoustic privacy at work tend to disappear (Van der Voort, 2004) which leaves room for a constant monitoring of employees’ behaviours, mainly performed by the peers (Sewell & Taskin, 2015). The old managerial myth of distributed surveillance resurfaces as everyone is in a position to monitor his colleagues, generating a global feeling of unease. Simultaneously several managerial discourses advocate for abolishing direct supervision and liberating the employees of the bureaucratic factors through self-managed teams and empowerment. The defenders of “freedom” in companies build their argumentation on former findings from the Human Relations movement such as the improved efficiency of small groups and the benefits of removing rules. In an historical perspective, we wonder why and how such elements of knowledge produced several decades ago now become performative in several Belgian companies.

References

Foucault, M. (2012). *Discipline & punish: The birth of the prison*. Vintage.

Mayo, E. (1949). Hawthorne and the western electric company. *Public Administration: Concepts and Cases*, 149-158.

Sewell, G., & Taskin, L. (2015). Out of Sight, Out of Mind in a New World of Work? Autonomy, Control and Spatiotemporal Scaling in Telework. *Organization Studies*, Vol. 36, N°11, 1507-1529.

Van der Voordt, T. (2004). Productivity and employee satisfaction in flexible workplaces. *Journal of Corporate Real Estate*, Vol. 6, N°2, 133-148.