Digital Working Environments. The De-Socialization of Workplaces

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Abstract

Professional interaction is being transformed by digitization of communication and decision making. Both the increasing use of video conferences and the launch ChatGPT are at risk of contributing to the de-socializing work. Based on recent research on video conferencing and the use of AI, we identify dimensions of professional interaction, which are affected by this development. It is the very competitive interaction, which allows workers to excel. This interaction is diminished by digitization of communication and decision making. With reference to, theories on competition, work ethics and psychological wellbeing, we suggest rating workplaces according to the extent to which they satisfy these needs. Such a rating system would identify criteria and methods for improving organizations' ability to integrate employees in collective agency. At the same time, this rating would require debates with ideological connotations regarding the legitimacy of competitive meritocracy. We suggest that scholars should engaging in such debates.

1. Introduction

This article explores the ethical implications of the recent technological developments and their effects on workplace dynamics. Two recent waves of digitization are momentarily affecting professional workflow, collaboration and communication. The first is the increasing use of video conferencing, which enables employees who used to attend the office to increasingly work from home (WFH) (Bloom, 2020). The second is the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) systems, which has been accelerated by the launch of the large language model (LLM) powered chatbot ChatGPT. Both technological developments are changing the quality of professional interaction in a manner, which poses opportunities as well as challenges.

Online meetings enable many people to come together independent of geographical location. As a replacement for phone calls and emails, it enriches communication. As a substitute for onsite meetings, however, it reduces the intensity of interaction, and it changes the conditions for human bonding, collective creativity and for professional competition. The use of AI in professional context exhibits an equally ambiguous pattern. On one hand, AI can replace time consuming, monotonous and lonesome work and strengthen innovation and efficiency. It is even expected that LLM powered chatbots will initially primarily assist workers in these lonely and monotonous tasks (MIT Technology Review Insight, 2023). On the other hand, chatbots can also replace professional exchange and collaboration and lead to alienation (Vredenburgh, 2022; Tang et al., 2023; DeCremer, 2024).

The two waves of technological development are at risk of de-personifying office working environments. This is a long-term risk, and one that is difficult to measure. Considering the increasing political and cultural polarization of societies, it is nevertheless a risk, which ought to be addressed.

Corporations thrive in open and politically stable societies with efficient market-based economies (Heath 2023). Alienation and social and political polarization are threatening to undermine the stability of democracies and the international institutions, which enable free trade. Corporations would therefore have an incentive to maintain their function an employer for people, who through their work can participate in public life. By enabling employees to contribute to collective agency corporations can strengthen the social fabric.

For corporations to serve as key to participation in society, scholars and managers need to recognize how work in its many forms contributes to individual identity constitution by enabling collaboration between individuals in public spaces. It requires an understanding of the self as socially embedded, and of the need for citizens to participate and excel in impersonal interaction with fellow citizens.

This article addresses the question of which theoretical approach will provide the best framework for understanding future challenges of creating good

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working environments. We emphasize the importance of creating fields of interaction which enable employees to perform professionally in a competitive environment. Academics mistakenly tend to identify competition with unethical behavior (Lütge 2019, Heath 2023). Accordingly, they underestimate the importance of for individuals receiving recognition for professional performance. Human flourishing is rather associated with moral virtue "that enhances human life and flourishing, such as solidarity, freedom, peace, justice, respect for human life, and so on" (Alford, 2013).

We argue that the presumptions that only this kind of moral virtues motivate decisions on how to interact professionally undermines the understanding of what renders work meaningful. Participating in interaction with fellow citizens which encompasses dimensions of performance and competition is crucial for human flourishing. This is often underestimated in academic literature (Lütge, 2019). This tendency is rooted in political debates and in academics disputes on which values should weave the social fabric of stable, open and prosperous societies. This article therefore also contributes to this more fundamental debate. We will encourage academics as well as managers to recognize the human need to excel and to approach questions of professional interaction from a realistic, instead of an idealistic, perspective.

Professional performance is socially imbedded, and thus conditioned by collective agency. The opportunity for citizens to enter structures of collective action is therefore paramount for individual wellbeing and for social cohesion. Working in solitude will lead to alienation. Future design of organizational structures and work processes should therefore aim at maximizing human interaction, collaboration and collective decision making within the framework provided by organization.

Despite dire warnings that AI can pose risks to humanity, the immense advantages and benefits of both technological developments momentarily appear to overshadow abstract warnings. Addressing this risk of de-personification and alienation is also no call for local luddism. Too important are the advantages of geographical flexibility and the massive intellectual power of generative AI, the steam engine of the fourth revolution (weforum.org) to analyze vast amounts of data, drive innovation, solve scientific problems, provide information and raise productivity.

The design of future workplace dynamics and processes should nevertheless consider the consequences of this development for the wellbeing of their employees and for workers in general and take these dimensions into consideration in the design of future workflows. This article will therefore address the ethical dimensions of professional interaction, which are affected. We will show how agency can be weakened as a potential consequence of technological developments in focus (Kellogg, 2022) and indicate directions of how to mitigate these risks.

The article argues that the participation in working environments which are both collaborative and competitive are an essential source identity and self-esteem. Unfortunately, the competitive dimension of professional interaction and the pursuit of influence are often addressed as something which ought to be diminished (Namin, 2022; Heath, 2023).

To respond to this tendency, this research first identifies dimensions of technological de-socialization, which are relevant for professional cooperative and competitive interaction. Secondly, we will present ideas from philosophical theories of work and interconnectedness, which support the hypothesis that, not only bonding with fellow human beings, but also performance within a framework of competitive professional interaction is essential for human flourishing.

The idea is further is supported with reference to a theory on basic human needs. The central argument is developed that competition and socially embedded performance is essential for work, if it is to serve as source of identity and as key to participation in society, and that the design of future organizational structures and workplace dynamics should enable workers to participate in cooperative as well as in competitive interaction with fellow employees. Workplaces should offer employees a place where they can participate in collective creativity to bond with fellow citizens and to experience themselves as competent in this context. Therefore, this basic human need should – for the sake of wellbeing and for the sake of social cohesion - be considered in the design of future work-processes.

2. Video Conferencing

The pandemic transfer of professional interaction from direct to video mediated interaction has affected the general working culture and led to an increasing focus on work-life balance. If "the work gets done, it shouldn't matter whether an employee is at their desk from 9 to 5 or not" (Malinoff, 2023). Many office workers prefer hybrid work models, where they are required to attend the office preferably no more than three days per week (Lund et al., 2020; Strack et al., 2021; Barrero et al., 2021; Aksoy et al., 2023; Bloom et al., 2023). The reasons for preferring to work from home (WFH) are predominantly practical. Saving time and money are the most important reasons (Aksoy et al., 2023, p. 8).

Since shortages of time and financial resources are a significant source of stress, these are important reasons.

In the aftermath of the pandemic the frequency of WHF has been subject of negotiations between employers and office workers. Additionally, statistics over preferences have been supplemented with research on the productivity of home workers. Initially, pandemic WFH did not reduce productivity, only research on post-pandemic WHF has shown a productivity reduction for remote workers (Emanuel and Harrington, 2023). Working from home can also reduce career opportunities. Accordingly, remote workers are ceteris paribus less likely to be promoted and less likely to receive pay rises (Christie, 2022; McKendrick, 2023,).

The benefits of attending the office are of more existential nature, with "socializing with co-workers", "face-to-face collaboration" and "facetime with managers" amongst the most important reasons for attending the office (Aksoy et al., 2023). The surveys therefore indicate that office workers value direct interaction, and they appreciate the practical advantages remote work (Microsoft, 2022). In this context, it is important to add that video conferencing has vastly improved communication between workers who would otherwise turn to emails and phone conversations. Seeing each other's faces on the monitor enriches communication compared to exchanges of emails or phone calls. It is the comparison of the working experience of workers who used to attend the office and where the technological development now enables them to work from home, which is relevant when rethinking workplace dynamics. For organizations the collaboration between workers online and offline is relevant.

The shift alters the dynamics of communication and the manifestation of professional competence in competitive working environments. Direct and online interaction enables different kinds of efficiency and different manners in which participants can bond, collaborate and exercise power and influence in processes of professional interaction. As Thejls Ziegler and Lütge (2024) has demonstrated in detailed qualitative study, video conferencing allows for formalized communication processes where contributions can be controlled by a host, and where participants take turns to speak by raising their hand. It also enables participants to render themselves invisible by not participating in discussions. Direct face-to-face interaction fosters more spontaneous, emotional and competitive and unpredictable dimensions of collective productivity. It is more difficult to hide in an onsite meeting.

Digital mediation of professional interaction removes layers of communication, which are present in direct interaction. The non-verbal cues of body language and face expressions enable participants to exchange unspoken information. Bodies can thus subtly communicate, for example, support or rejection of a verbal contribution. This allows participants to adjust to each other while minimizing the risk of public loss of face. This nuanced mutual adjustment can support collective agency. It can strengthen the feeling of "we-ness", but it can, of course, also strengthen the feeling of being excluded. The transfer of professional interaction to the realm of digital representations reduces the embodiment of natural authority, and it reduces the body language which reveals insecurity (Thejls Ziegler and Lütge, 2024).

This embodied communication of accept and rejection, inclusion and exclusion manifests in formalized professional interaction, i.e., where the workers are collaborating to obtain a specific objective tied to the aim of the organization. But the bonding is also conveyed in the informal interaction which takes place on the sideline of professional interaction, the coincidental chatting by the coffee machine (Saladino et al., 2020). These encounters are lost as well in WFH.

This increasing prevalence of remote work and the shift from direct to video mediated meetings touch upon existential dimensions of human lives and values, which prescribe ideals of professional interaction. The priorities connect to deeply personal and moral questions. They reflect personal ambitions and interests in engaging with society and fellow citizens beyond the private sphere.

Public discussions on future hybrid work models are therefore challenged, because the questions intersect with moral and political aspects of work ethics and meritocracy, and questions concerning the obligation to engage oneself in public life, or whether each should enjoy the liberty to withdraw to the realm of privacy.

The research described here shows that advantages and disadvantages of WFH not only influence potentially conflicting interests between employers and workers. The question of attending or not attending the office also manifest an inner conflict between on the one hand convenience, obligations towards family members etc., and, on the other hand, the desire to interact directly with fellow office workers and the level of professional ambition (Saladino 2020).

3. The Launch of ChatGPT

The launch of ChatGPT-3.5 in November 2022 will probably have even more radical effects. As OpenAI was cofounded in 2015 by a group of six people, counting Sam Altman and Elon Musk amongst the most prominent, the prospects of building an AI were unclear. In November 2022 Open AI launched ChatGPT, a chatbot powered by a large language model (LLM). Within five days of its launch, it had one million users. In spring 2024 that number had risen to 180 million users (Mortensen 2024). The new abilities of the AI to produce text comparable in quality to that of highly qualified knowledge workers has caused an explosive increase in the professional usage. The GPT-4, released in March 2023 is drawing on a language model with more than a trillion parameters (the-decoder.com). It can process and generate images and solve scientific problems (OpenAI: "What is the difference between GPT-3 and GPT4?" June 9, 2024). It reacts in ways that seem more natural to users. In May 2024, Open AI released the next model GPT-4o, which has voice-to-voice capabilities.

A recent field experiment with over 700 strategy consultants from Boston Consulting Group using ChatGPT showed, that use of the tool required an understanding of which tasks the chatbot can perform. The authors refer to this as a "jagged technological frontier". The application of AI within the jagged frontier "significantly increased performance and quality for every model specification, increasing speed by more than 25%, performance as rated by humans by more than 40%, and task completion by more than 12%" (Dell'Acqua et al., 2023 p. 17).

Open AI with its unusual governance structure of a non-profit owning a capped profit organization build the chat with the awareness of the responsibility, which follows from developing a public internet tool as powerful as this chatbot. By applying reinforcement learning with human feedback, they have mitigated some of the risks like, hallucinations (The chat inventing facts), factual distortions, biased answers, honest answers to unethical questions, fake news and discrimination (Coltri 2024).

There are, however, also risk, which cannot be mitigated within the chatbot, namely the risks posed by its very excellence.

The first risk is job replacement, with opinions ranging from optimistic predictions of the positive effects (Atkinson, 2018, p.103) to warnings that technological development will only on a long term-basis, create economic growth, and that the transformation will likely have negative side effects, because not all citizens are prepared (Floridi, 2017; Baldwin, 2018; Arnold et al., 2019; Frey, 2019). The second risk, which is relevant for this paper, is the consequences of extensive use of LLM powered chatbots as replacement for professional interaction. This is the risk de-personification of work and human interaction in general. Presuming that the workforce can be applied effectively elsewhere, using AI to assist or perform lonely routine tasks is ethically unproblematic. The ethical dimension of AI decision making systems, however, is still ambiguous in so far as it intervenes with professional agency.

The issues raised by the immense popularity of ChatGPT are contextual. Different applications generate different issues depending on how it is used, i.e. assisting workers skill or as replacing decision making.

The transfer of decision making from the worker to the AI poses specific ethical issues. (Lindenbaum et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2023). Since data driven decision making systems have been in use for over a decade (Parra et al., 2023), some of the consequences of replacing human decision making with that of IT systems have already been researched (Ashman et al., 2015, and many others). An employee in a bank would, for example, previously have decided to whom credits are to be granted based on a finite list of criteria, the application of which is left to the discretion of the bank employee. After replacing employee decisions with digital decisions derived from statistical data, the employee only executes the decisions taken by the IT system. Such applications of algorithmic decision making considerably reduces the agency of the employee (Strich et al., 2021).

The use of AI in decision making systems generates a second issue, the consequences of which are hard to foresee. Text generating artificial intelligence works based on predefined rules, through logical and mathematical procedures (Lindebaum, 2020, pp.247-248), and through statistical proximity to a large dataset of written language (Mortensen 2024).

The general decrease in the required practical and intellectual skills has been confirmed in recent research. Based on detailed analysis of data from i.a. the International Federation of Robotics (IFR) and European Working Conditions Surveys (EWCS), Nikolova et al. demonstrate that "robotization shifts workers' activities, making their jobs more routine and less abstract and social, but less physically demanding" (2023: 22).

Individual and collective decision making has an element which cannot be reduced to such procedures. This theme is addressed in a centuries old debate on epistemology. In the context of this scholarly debate the difference between theoretical and practical reasoning has continued to challenge academics. Practical reasoning, which includes moral judgements,

manifests as a human capacity, which cannot be explained in terms of logical and mathematical procedures. It is an unanalyzable competence of subjects, which is applied in the specific contextuality of executive decision making (Thomas 2011). This competence is exercised individually and with fellow human beings as collective decision making. Though LLM powered chatbots can assist decision making with information on which conclusion would follow from a given dataset, and though the text generating AI can predict statistically which decision is correct with reference to a vast number of examples of past human decision making there are elements of human agency which cannot be reproduced by an LLM powered chatbot. Due to the epistemic differences between chatbots and human beings, the ubiquitous use of chatbots in decision making processes will change the outcomes of decision making.

Though access to infinitely more data enables LLM powered chatbots to generate propositions on a substantially stronger basis of data, there still seem to be a human component of lived experience and socially embedded responsibility, which the chatbot cannot replicate. One practical manifestation of this difference is the issues of accountability (Dell'Acqua et al. 2023, p. 2). Another potential issue is that of deskilling of the workforce (Grossman, 2023). The qualifications of, for example, M&A consultants to evaluate potential risks and understand complex business models of an investment require in-depth understanding and long experience of the mechanisms which drive businesses. If consultants and other financial experts are never forced to spend hours analyzing numbers in a spread sheet and exchange opinions with colleagues on their significance, they will not develop the ability to instinctively understand what to look out for in a business plan. This professional experience differs from the ability to process large amounts of information. The long-term effects on office workers professional qualifications should therefore also be followed closely.

A third issue of increasing use of generative AI affects the intensity and the volume of professional interaction, in so far as it can potentially transfer the exchange of knowledge to human-computer interaction (Noi and Zhang, 2023). Knowledge transfer and between professionals is challenged due to temporal limitations of communication, and due to competitive hierarchies and defensive routines (Argyris 1987). Thus, being proved wrong by a generative AI may be less humiliating than a verbal defeat in a competitive group discussion.

A generative AI can therefore serve to create a more leveled playing field because low ability workers benefit more from the help of MML powered chatbot (Noi and Zhang 2023). It can affect professional interaction in a manner which shares certain features with the increasing use of video conferencing by diminishing the kind of interaction which is prone to potential conflicts. Just as video conferences weakens communication by replacing physical presence with a digital representation (Thejls Ziegler and Lütge 2024), so can widespread use of generative AI weaken interaction by reducing autonomy and the necessity of knowledge exchange (Tang et al., 2023). These risks are contextual. In some organizational settings manpower is liberated from lonely routine tasks and set free to engage in collective agency. In other setting the consequences are opposite. It will make a substantial difference to the individual worker whether they are required to execute decisions taken by an AI, or whether they have the autonomy to take these decisions themselves. It is therefore especially less powerful workers who are at risk of losing autonomy (Kellogg, 2022).

We encourage managers to pay attention to the consequences on the agency of office workers. The collective exercise of both theoretical and of practical reasoning and decision making is essential to professional agency (Parra et al., 2023).

4. Collective Agency and Identity

So far, we have focused on the ethical dimensions of the two waves of technological development. In the following, these dimensions will be discussed through the lens of concepts from philosophy of human interaction and work.

We have argued above that the two waves of technological development caused by pandemic transfer of professional interaction to video conferencing and the launch of ChatGPT is reducing the intensity and the volume of professional interaction. Though these technological developments increase flexibility, productivity, and even levels the playing field for low ability workers, there are valuable dimensions of professional interaction, which are weakened.

Both technologies thereby have the potential to reduce competitive dimensions of professional interaction. The richness, spontaneity and the unpredictability of collective decision making is reduced when communication is forced into the stifling corset of video conferences. Such a structure will tend to reproduce existing power structures and stifle the dynamics of productive enthusiasm (Thejls Ziegler and Lütge 2024).

Correspondingly, when people communicate and exchange ideas, the mutual inspiration, which is conveyed in spontaneous conversations and the

motivation, which arises from collective agency, are stifled when we turn to chatbots instead of turning to each other.

Accordingly, both technologies have the potential to reduce the productive combination of collaboration and competition between employees, which can connect people and fertilize innovative solutions.

In the following we will present theoretical conceptualizations of interaction, work and of basic human needs. The aim of taking this road is to show that collective agency is basic to human identity, and that it has elements of bonding as well as elements of competition, which are diminished in the two technologies. We will show that professional work provides people with fields of interaction in which citizens can come together in collective agency. The fields of interaction serve as an irreplaceable source of identity. They also serve as key to participation in society. These are the very fields of interaction which are reduced by video conferencing and by the replacement of fellow human beings with chatbots.

WFH differs from work in the office even when tasks require no cooperation between more persons. This is because human "subjects owe their identity to the experience of intersubjective recognition" (Honneth 1995: 71). Even our experience of reality is influenced by the presence of fellow human beings. A beautiful view of a forest dressed in autumns colors is experienced differently in the company of a friend or a loved one. In the words of Hannah Arendt, private passions "lead a shadowy kind of existence (Arend 2018, p.50). It is for this reason that the presence of co-workers, who are mutually aware of each other as performing organizational tasks, strengthens one's experience of oneself in this role as contributing to collective agency of the organization. This dimension of professional agency can perhaps be alleviated in video conferencing (compared to written communication), but it cannot replace the physical presence of fellow employees.

Existentialist and phenomenological philosophy has emphasized the embeddedness of the self in its social context. Maurice Merleau-Ponty even goes as far as saying that human beings in physical proximity are intuitively aware of each other, "as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). According to Hannah Arendt, no "human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature's wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings" (Arendt, 2018, p. 22). The amount of time that workers spend in the office in the presence of colleagues who are aware of their agency therefore has a direct impact on the identity constitution of worker as professional agent.

These articulations of the social embeddedness of the self also apply the replacement of conversational partners with a chatbot. The less human exchange, the less identity, the weaker the experience of oneself.

5. Work Ethics and Competition

I do not think that ordinary human beings can be happy without competition, for competition has been, ever since the origin of Man, the spur to most serious activities. We should not, therefore, attempt to abolish competition, but only to see to it that it takes forms that are not injurious (Russell 1964: 18).

We have indicated above that professional interaction is both cooperative and competitive. This means that they are morally ambivalent. It is driven by opposing intentionalities (Bauman 1993, p. 89). Workers who cherish direct, onsite interaction are driven by this ambivalence, i.e. by the urge to interact with fellow workers in relations characterized by ambivalence.

The first intentionality is the urge to connect with fellow human beings. This urge is often associated with moral virtues and with ethics in general, as normatively underpinned. It the intentionality which is emphasized in literature on the ethics of human flourishing (Conill 2013).

The second intentionality manifests in the pursuit of identity, that is, in competition, in the pursuit of success and influence and in the dynamic power struggles. There are valid reasons for claiming that a reduction in the level of competition and influence is always to be endorsed. Accordingly, competition and the exercise of influence are portrayed as polarizing people in winners and losers, as undermining rationality and as the contrary of ethical professional interaction (for example Arora-Jonsson 2020). Critiques of the liberal market-based economy often emphasize the devastating effects of competition on social equality.

The application of very high moral standards to professional interaction subjects agents to requirements, which cannot be fulfilled within professional frameworks (Heath 2023). To understand what is potentially lost by transferring professional interaction to video conferencing and chatbots, it is therefore crucial to present a conceptualization of professional competition which is not io ipso negatively underpinned by an assumption of competition as contrary to ethical interaction (Lütge 2019).

Competition differs from war in so far as it takes place within frameworks of established and mutually recognized rules (Lütge 2019). In

professional competitive interaction the framework is partly established by the purpose of the organizations, which each worker should be committed to, and partly by codes of corporate conduct and formal legislation. The commitment to an organizational purpose is controversial because critics of competitions would claim that competitiveness redirects the commitment to the organization in opportunistic energy.

Examples of successful organizations with a competitive culture are, however, plentiful, which shows that competitiveness does not necessarily lead to the kind of opportunism, which undermines the success of the organization.

Competitive organizations demonstrate that it is indeed possible for human beings to collaborate within the moral ambiguity of opposing intentionalities. It is possible to combine "the impulse to stay and the impulse to escape" and to cooperate despite the coexistence of an "innate moral impulse and the endemic nature of aggression" (Bauman, 1993, p. 89). The moral ambivalence of human cooperation therefore seems to be of a fundamental nature.

The idea is reflected in theories of work ethics. From the seeds of Benedictine Christian monks' *ora et labora* and the protestant idea of work as a sign of God's grace, traditional work ethic has been transformed and adjusted over centuries of continuous industrialization. The idea of work as essential for personal identity has persevered through radical cultural and political changes, from rising bourgeoisie and industrial revolutions up to the present day (Arendt 2018). The very core idea of work as overcoming of resistance has inherent criteria, which qualifies performance in the distinction between success and failure. In professional collective agency, this distinction is ubiquitous.

Competition, in its civilized form, is this inherent to collective agency because group members who agree to combine their forces in performing a task will be required to agree on a standard, which determines when the task can be considered done. Presuming that participants intend to contribute to the performance of the given task they will implicitly accept these standards, and that their contributions can be measured relative to the aim of the collective agency. The mutual visibility of individual contributions in collective agency makes impossible to eliminate the comparison of performance, and thus, the competitive dimension (Heath 2023).

Insisting on the competitive nature of human beings has often been associated with less prosocial attitudes (Ryan and Deci 2017, p.612). The view that competition is a morally legitimate kind of human interaction is associated with philosophical and economic liberalism, i.e. with right wing and libertarian values. These values seem to endorse interaction which creates not only winners, but also in the nature of competition, people who lose out. Engaging in collective agency therefore inherently entails the risk of being made responsible for lack of performance.

We believe that the categorization of competitions as necessarily anti-social has unwanted consequences. Examples of cronyism in countries with large public corporations (Martins 2020) indicate that replacing meritocratic performance criteria with more centrally controlled and apparently more just structures, creates other incentive structures, which manifest as equally unjust (Flyvbjerg 1998, Heath 2023). The critique of competition as inherently unethical pretends that it can eliminate incentives and draw on an endless pool of moral surplus (Lütge 2016).

This outline of basic aspects of competition is presented for the purpose of illustrating the difficulty of including the dimension of performance in debates on work dynamics and collective agency. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt suggests an approach, which is different from the one of ethics. He compares groups of humans to groups of chimpanzees, and emphasizes our ability to cooperate, as the achievement which has made humanity successful (2013). Human beings are successful because we are capable of cooperating and organizing collective agency, despite bring competitive. Traditional ethical concepts are incapable of capturing the nature of collective agency as characterized by both collaboration and competition (Heath 2023). An understanding of this dimension of professionality is paramount to solving future challenges of working environments.

The Bertrand Russell quotation, which opened this outline on the ambivalence of human relations, work ethics and competition sees competition as the spur to the most serious activities. Designing organizational structures and workflows which allow for productive collective agency that is not *injurious* will be the challenge of future managers.

6. Autonomous, Competent and Related

The idea of work is intrinsically valuable for the persons is also reflected in surveys conducted in in the United States and Korea, Sheldon et al. examine and compare ten different needs, "each of which has been proposed by prominent psychological theories, in order to determine which candidate needs can best be supported by data" (Sheldon et al. 2001: 325). Based on these surveys, the researchers identify the needs to experience oneself as *autonomous*, *competent* and

related as basic to human nature (Sheldon et al. 2001, p.363). The findings support research of self-determination theory which aims at identifying the conditions for intrinsic motivation, social development and wellbeing (Deci and Ryan 1985).

If the need to experience oneself as autonomous, competent and related are indeed basic to human nature, it can explain why work is seen as valuable, not only for the purpose of enjoying the fruits of labor, but also for its contribution to human flourishing. The need for experiencing autonomy, competence and relatedness can also clarify why certain kinds of work are more satisfying than others (Nikolova and Cnossen 2020). Humans seek "moral experiences that are part of the structure of social interaction because human subjects encounter one another with expectations for recognition, expectations on which their psychological integrity turns" (Honneth, 1995, p.165). The kind of jobs that are performed in cooperation with fellow citizens, and where the challenges are adjusted to individual abilities, enable the intersubjective recognition required for human subjects to obtain a sense of identity. Work therefore enables human flourishing in so far as it provides citizens with fields of interaction in which they can experience themselves as autonomous, in which they receive recognition for their competence, and where they can relate to their fellow citizens.

Autonomy, competence and relatedness in professional interaction are all at risk of bring weakened by the technological developments discussed in this paper. Autonomy is an expression of agency, competence reflects decision making and performance, and relatedness if the autonomous and competent agency in cooperation with fellow human beings. Performing work well and being recognized for this performance by fellow human beings is of decisive importance.

These theoretical conceptualizations of human work and on the basic needs of human beings in terms of autonomy, competence and relatedness cast light on the potential consequences of ubiquitous use of video conferences and LLM chatbots. If the theoretical conceptualizations of work are descriptive of our culture, the need to be recognized, not only for the qualities of one's moral character but also for aspects of competence is fundamental. If "human subjects owe their identity to the experience of intersubjective recognition" (Honneth, 1995, p.71), then the experience of oneself as competent requires visibility towards others and their corresponding recognition. It requires that agents are given a framework within which they can perform professionally in a manner which is visible to and recognized by their fellow human beings.

This identification of autonomy, competence and relatedness as basic needs are in line with our call to accept civilized competition as an inherent dimension of professional interaction. The recognition of a fellow human being as competent presumes the existence of its negation, i.e. of lack of competence and lack of performance. Dismissing competition as unethical therefore rejects a kind of human interaction, which serves as source for satisfaction of basic needs. Identifying the "forms that are not injurious" (Russell 1964: 18) is therefore more coherent with human basic needs than seeking its abolition.

7. Conclusion: Rating of Organizations and Workplaces

The technological developments discussed in this paper are bound to influence workplace dynamics in ways which can have severe effects on the possibilities of workers to feel autonomous, competent and related. The missing layers of tacit communication and replacement of sparring partners with LLM powered chatbots weakens human connectivity and thus the very social fabric of society.

The limitation of this paper is its exclusive theoretical focus, and thus future research should conduct empirical investigations as foundation for a better understanding of the significance of professional interaction for a meaningful life and the effects of AI on professional interaction. Such research is exemplified in the recent article by Nikolova et al. (2023) mentioned above. It is nevertheless important to consider that analysis of current developments cannot predict the kinds of jobs that robots and AI can create. The technological development may therefore mitigate its own side effects.

We recommend using existing tools, such as the Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction Scale (BPNSS) (Deci and Ryan 2000), as foundation for future evaluations of the kind of working environment corporations are offering their employees.

Rating workplaces according to the extent to which they enable workers to experience themselves as autonomous, competent and related, should, however, be supplemented with rating tools according to which a specific working context enables people to participate in interaction with fellow employees. This interaction should convey the opportunity to exercise and reciprocally demonstrate professional competence in collective agency. The rating system should therefore measure the extent to which employees are able to solve intellectually and practically challenging tasks in cooperative processes.

This kind of professional interaction is both cooperative and competitive.

The rating could either serve as extension of existing feedback systems, such as the Gallup Q12 Employee Engagement Survey or the BPNSS, or in a separate rating. It is, however, important that the self-evaluation of employees is supplemented with objective criteria for the extent to which tasks are solved in processes of collective agency. The social embeddedness of the self makes the amount of time, i.e. the volume of interaction and the number of hours spent in collaboration with fellow workers count as separate criterion for the quality of the work independently of subjective experiences.

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