

Time in social work – the temporal clash between the organisation and the individual

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Time, or rather lack of time, is currently an issue to many involved in social work, in Sweden and elsewhere. Lack of time is a problem not only for the employee in relation to work and leisure, but also for the employer. Stress at work is presently one of the most common reasons social workers state for leaving their profession or their workplaces. This paper takes the perspective of the employee and the aim is to describe and discuss how time is perceived in relation to work and private life by employees in the social services.

The paper is built on data from two Swedish studies: one qualitative interview-study with 6 social workers and one survey-study with 65 social workers in different positions. The quantitative data is not yet analyzed (when submitting the abstract) but the paper will be built upon both studies. The following is consequently mainly based on the qualitative study.

The results of the study indicates that most people probably have their own personal approach to time. From the interviews it emerged that being hard-working was important. Arriving early and leaving late were seen as commendable. The participants also talked about women and men having different [approaches to](#) time. Women were seen to use their time to meet other people's needs, whereas men use their time for their own needs and seldom perceive 'wasting time' as a problem. Both men and women, however, can be torn between work and family, women by tradition and men because of the ambition to live up to the image of the equal and participating father. Our data show that lack of time and stress could be the normal state of affairs, and that each individual has to cope with this situation by finding their own strategy and their approaches to time and stress. Time management seems to be individualised in the same way that stress is individualised. Nevertheless, there are social conventions that normalise lack of time, while feeling unstressed is not seen as normal. The issue, in other words, is that demands on individuals and social norms do not change; all the interviewees talked about how the work organisation restricts alternative time management at work. It is thus up to the individuals to cope with demands through the way they think and act in the

organisation. The study shows that these conditions are accepted and individuals adjust to them. Organisations are relieved of their responsibility and organisational shortcomings are shifted to the individual, who in turn feels inadequate. Further we can show that social work demands of every active employee to have a personal approach to work and time. The time schedule is always tight, especially in social service offices. Managing the demands from the organisation and external actors (e.g. school, job centre, the police) requires a personal strategy. However, it is not easy to implement such strategies on your own. Social workers seem generally to need collegial assistance or professional development.

With help from the analysis of the data from the qualitative study we have found some strategies (to managing the tight time schedule) used by the interviewees at work and off duty. We conceptualise those strategies as *curbing strategies*. Such strategies used at work range from small acts of resistance in relation to the employer/work organisation, to a type of emotional coping through micro-pauses and recovery arenas to regain a sense of control. For example, being late for a meeting is an accepted phenomenon and a common strategy for winding down. In some workplaces, being late is the norm and a strategy that all are aware of and practice. Consulting with a colleague or visiting the bathroom can also allow for a breathing space and recovery, just as eating an apple or drinking coffee. The pauses are never long, but enough to slow down. Mindfulness a method to focus on self to become aware of own needs and to be in the present instead of in the future is also a type of curbing strategy. Another method, less common in the social services, is to work from home while doing chores. Significantly, exit strategies or 'putting one's foot down' seemed to be an unusual curbing strategy. Another curbing strategy used in relation to doing overtime was to take compensatory leave instead of money. One of the noteworthy features in interviewees' accounts is the strategy to be happy at work. Getting on with colleagues is crucial and happiness outbalances stress, time pressure and tough cases. Curbing strategies off duty often involve various forms of physical activities or hobbies. Several interviewees kept fit to have the energy to work. Mindfulness and yoga were among the activities mentioned, as were fitness training and jogging. Not taking work home was also important to the interviewees.

The tempo, according to our studies, is generally high in the social work profession and therefore it is important to be effective and rational. In addition, meeting clients makes it an emotionally taxing job – it is thus very different from meeting people in other service sector such as shop-keeping. Social workers have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that clients receive the help and support they need, and the decisions made often involve radical intervention in other people's lives. The control of time in social work can therefore be described as contradictory. The interviewees described how they, on the one hand, have freedom to plan client meetings, and, on the other, are obligated to document the meeting, which is easy to postpone since real people's needs must come before paperwork. When freedom to plan means that the social workers become hostage to their own planning, feelings of inadequacy are the logical effect. When the organisational demands on how employees should manage time and plan the workday become too unmanageable for employees, they will be forced to act in some way to be able to stay at work. For the monochronic, structured and planning person, an overload of tasks will make structure and planning fall apart. For the for the unstructured polychron person who likes to switch between activities, a temporary overload can be treated as a challenge and not as a problem. However, if the organisation expects the polychronic person to act as a monochronic person – i.e. to structure and plan time and tasks, keep deadlines and act in a disciplined manner that is untenable to such a person, problems will arise. This begs the

question if clashing time perceptions can explain why some employees experience fatigue syndromes, i.e. burnout.