

FREEDOM OF CHOICE: THE IDEOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT OF THE TEMPORARY AGENCY WORKER

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INTRODUCTION

Freedom, choice and individuality are common key words used by temporary help agencies to describe temporary agency employment. Many scholars have argued that atypical forms of employment, for instance temporary agency employment, embody a shift towards a free agent nation (Pink 2001) in an enterprising society, offering greater control to workers, even an escape from the burdens of organisational involvement. Agency employment is also purported to offer liberty, higher salaries, and multifaceted possibilities (Barley & al. 2004; Purcell & al. 2004; Kirkpatrick & al. 2006). Equally, temporary agency work is endorsed as liberty in survey results gauging the industry (HPL 2008; CIETT 2007), in leaflets handed out in job fairs, in advertisements in the newspapers, and on the agencies web pages. Freedom in the realm of temporary agency work consists especially of an opportunity to choose the time, the place and the content of one's work assignments, creating new possibilities to prosper for brave and bold independent contractors.

While freedom, liberty and choice may come true for some professional experts or "Gurus" in the temporary help industry, there is still a vast group of workers who only abide by the circumstances and rules dictated by the agencies. Views of liberating and rewarding temporary work are strongly contradicted by researchers pointing to agency work as a mere buffer, as a means of cost-cutting or as an expression of a risk society (e.g. Vosko 2000; Forde & al. 2005). This paper sets out to take a closer look at employer activities in hiring and screening temporary workers for skilled manual work in Finland. The paper presents examples of the persistent ideological management the temporary help industry applies in aiming at defining, constructing and regulating both the realm of temporary agency work and the individuals it employs. Results from agency managers' interviews report of conventional, illiberal and gendered ideological governance intended to educate employees for a neo-liberal enterprise/competition society while securing an obedient and compliant labour force. The case of Finland further confirms the profound inconsistency between the official, rhetorical legitimacy project the temporary help industry has engaged in, and the every day processes the actual employing agencies apply (Vosko 2000).

BACKGROUND: ENTERPRISE CULTURE

Enterprise culture refers to Britain and especially to a "Thatcherite" programme of radical economic and institutional reform, with emphasis on the efficiency of the free markets, the liberty of individuals, and a non-interventionist state. For instance, Keat (1991) and Heelas & al. (1992) identify the enterprise society by the elements of economic change, including transfer of state-owned industries or public services to the private sector, and the removal of non-market restrictions. To understand what is actually implied by such governmental changes, it is necessary to introduce the second meaning of enterprise society and a simultaneous project of cultural change. This cultural change is aimed at the minds and hearts of the citizens, its goal being a new, individualistic order in society. This order requires from individuals a set of characteristics such as initiative, energy, independence, and self-reliance. Commercial enterprise and its processes also become highly valued and overtly praised as a way of leading one's life, as well (Keat 1991; Heelas & al. 1992).

According to Keat (1991), enterprise culture is a moral crusade aimed at convincing people of the power of individual effort. What matters in landing a job, creating wealth and prosperity, attaining degrees in education, a career in business life, succeeding in life in general, or providing for the family is individual attitude, willingness to enterprise, the ability to take risks, and self-reliantly making ones' own decisions and taking responsibility for ones' actions. Individuals should not rely on the state or other public organs in providing services or wellbeing, but rather boldly draw on their own resources and act as sovereign consumers to provide for their lives. Moreover, these efforts are represented as the safeguard of individual freedom and liberty, leading to a more prosperous, generous and better society (Keat 1991). Enterprise culture, thus, is also a form of identity creation, or governance. This identification links enterprise culture further to the ideas of, for instance, Foucault (1982) Dean (1995) or Rose (1992). In Finland, enterprise culture and its values have been encouraged by the government with, for instance, labour law liberalisation, proposals of enterprise education in schools as well as with increased governmental control and far more rigid terms concerning entitlement to allowances

Thatcher's government saw the welfare state and its "culture of dependency" as the prime reasons for the disgrace and the degradation of both the British nation state and Britons themselves. While Finland has historically stood amongst Nordic welfare states, albeit not fully-fledged, already in the 1980s it adopted a new orthodox of criticism towards the welfare state. Moreover, during the recession at the beginning of 1990s Finland assumed a strict policy of retrenchments, public sector downsizing, and transferral of previously state-funded services to the private market sector. According to several Finnish studies, this trend has continued to date (Alasuutari 1996; Kantola 2002; Julkunen 2008). The Finnish temporary help industry in turn experienced liberalisation as state regulation, and stipulations for qualifications and warranty were waived in 1994. These changes were justified by referring to the need to retrench the public sector, allowing free competition in employment services, and by denouncing regulation as unnecessary and non-functional bureaucracy.

METHODS: A CLOSER LOOK AT PROMOTIONAL TALK AND MANAGERIAL REASONING

As a means to gauge the enterprise culture in the contemporary labour markets, I first gathered key words from the temporary help agencies' Internet pages and from information and leaflets the agencies and the employers' organization, HPL, deal out. I sorted and analysed the recurrent and repeated themes appearing in the industry's promotional talk. I label these themes as discourses since I understand them to form statements made in order to sculpt and create a certain kind of knowledge about agency employment and its rules. Industry PR often takes advantage of survey results commissioned by the employer organisations (e.g. OETT). These surveys represent one facet of a project of legitimacy the industry has engaged in. In addition, at least in Finland, governmental actors, such as the Ministry of Labour, merely repeat these statements in their official discourses, further intensifying conceptions advocated by the industry, creating a mutually reinforcing effect of a legitimate and acceptable way to organise the labour markets. The recurrent themes depicting the advantages of temporary employment include terms and formulations such as freedom, choice, flexibility, opportunity, and individual situation in life.

Secondly, I conducted face-to-face interviews with 10 temporary agency managers in Turku, Finland during autumn 2007 and spring 2008. The City of Turku is the fifth largest city in Finland with a population of 175 000. The managers represented both national and international players from service and accommodation industries to construction, and from the shipbuilding industry to clerical work. These temporary agencies place approximately 2000 persons to differing positions in the Turku area daily, albeit the majority of them in the lower level of the organizational hierarchy, as is common in temporary agency employment in Finland. The semi-structured interviews dealt with the everyday of managing temporary employees, including recruiting and selecting practices, the factors of employability, and the overall process of handling applications and candidates. In addition, since Finland has very gender-segregated labour markets, I asked specifically about

men's and women's possibilities to choose the assignments in temporary agency employment.

I analysed the interviews qualitatively using critical discourse analysis in order to arrange the interview results into three thematic groups of discourses: firstly, the requirements of a "good temp", secondly, the freedom of choice in assignments, and thirdly, the enterprise education of employees manifested in the manager discourses.

RESULTS: FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND OTHER VALUES

The good temp and freedom of choice

While freedom, choice, and individuality seem prime contours of the brave, new working life in promotional talk and rhetoric, these attributes seem to diminish in weight when the hard and fast terms of employability, and the valued attributes of an eligible candidate for temporary agency work are concerned. I asked the managers about the factors in the process of selecting and screening the employees. I wondered whether the freedom talk materialises in the selection process.

For candidates to be employed in the temporary help industry they need not a sense of adventure, autonomy or a desire for freedom, but skill, attitude, commitment, and motivation. Skill is the only factor that can be measured with, for instance, school reports, certificates, work experience, or diplomas whereas attitude, commitment, and motivation form a very interesting qualifier-mix that leaves great space and latitude for interpretation. Interestingly, the majority of the managers regarded education and formal qualifications as secondary to the right kind of attitude and appropriate experience.

The right kind of attitude is the most wanted qualification in a temporary agency employee. This became ever clearer when the managers were asked to consider the content of this attribute. The concept of the right kind of attitude is then broken down into the ability to adapt, the desire to commit to the employer, and a willingness to accept differing assignments even though they are not that desirable. Attitude is also described as a capability to ignore the probable negative side effects of constantly changing work communities, the ability to self-sufficiently perform and function in the manner expected, and suppress the need for any long-term collegiality or social relations. Some of the managers sum this up with references to the employee's ability to disregard conflicts and disagreements in the work organization, assume responsibility for adaptation, and just resiliently keep trying to make the best out of it:

"Of course you (the temp) are an easy target.
They might even pick on you, but if you
just shake it off, laugh or don't let it bother,
you'll manage...." (Manager 4)

"A good temp is one that agrees to do any job.
If you come in from the street and say, naa, I won't do
that and won't do this, it's hard as hell to find work.
But if you jump up and go whenever you get a call, you'll
find your place, eventually..." (Manager 3)

The significance of the ability to adapt is further intensified by the idea that the most important criterion for conversion from a temporary worker to a permanent employee is the individual's ability to conform to the work community. Since, according to national surveys in Finland (HPL 2008), most agency employees are working through such agencies because they have had difficulties in landing a job otherwise, this alleged linkage between appropriate behaviour and future permanent employment effectively serves to cement the acceptance of vague and even irrational terms and conditions of employment. It is again on your own responsibility to succeed:

"Recruitment to the client firm happens
through the temporary agency employment.

When you do your stuff and you adapt,
you'll get the (permanent) job." (Manager 6)

"We talk through the nature of temping.
That you may have a chance for permanent job,
that it is always worth to show your very best,
there's always the chance..." (Manager 7).

Motivation is described as a will to work very hard and accept differing tasks without any struggle. Temporary workers are expected to be ready to hop into differing work sites, into varying work assignments and to embrace this as positive and liberating. Some of the managers see this willingness to hop around different organizations as an initiation rite that all newcomers have to go through in order to find their own place. This actually means that when a newcomer starts with a temporary help firm they often are offered very short assignments, lasting only hours or days, to test their flexibility and motivation. This seems distant to the idea of multiple opportunities or freedom of choice in assignments. Nevertheless, many of the interviewed temporary agency managers interpret the situation as liberty. They are not coercing anyone to work through the agencies, thus, working as a temporary employee is voluntary and an individual choice:

"The candidate can always choose whether he
takes the assignment or not. We are not twisting
anyone's arm, they have all chosen this voluntarily." (Manager 4)

"In my opinion, during my career, I have met a
lot of people who have chosen this voluntarily.
They see temp agency work as liberating." (Manager 1)

The gender factor

In the interviews, gender was also discussed as a factor in labour market outcomes. I asked the managers what the role of gender is, in addition of education or experience, when sending employees to assignments. At first, the answer in every case was a hasty "gender does not matter". All the managers assured me that attitude and experience are the most important criterions, but when discussing the expectations the recruiters have more broadly, it became quite clear that gender is implicitly a major factor in the selection process. However, the reasoning that it is the client firm who makes the ultimate decision downplayed this fact:

"The work community ultimately decides. If we
send a man to a work place that is dominated by
women, they will reject him..." (Manager 7)

"If we send a man to a work place that
has 10 women - it is not going to work.
He can't take the cackle for long..." (Manager 3)

"It is not that we could convince the client...
they are looking for the right kind of character
for the organization, that's what matters..." (Manager 7)

"The right kind of character" is sculpted differently according to gendered practices and expectations in working life. The assignments predominantly occupied by women are service and clerical work. The expected right kind of character, then, is a decent appearance and a smile, a willingness to engage in empathy and interaction, an ability to be of service, and certain certificates, such as a permit to serve alcoholic beverages. Adaptation is equally expected of both men and women. However, while the assignments dominated by men require in addition vocational skills and certificates, such as an industrial safety license, there is no reference to personality or external attributes like appearance, cleanliness, or attire. Soberness is mentioned, but there is

always the back gate:

“I remember a case when a man showed up drunk as a skunk at the shipyard. He was sent back home, fired. But we had to ask him back since there was no one else to do the job.” (Manager 2)

The agencies seem hardly seem to be breakers of gendered prejudice. They have no vested interest in developmental work in employment relations, and in addition, their lot is the swift delivery of the workers to a particular need, not the development of skills or the advancement of the temporary workers. The agencies are mainly seeking profit. There are, however, some thoughts about breaking the mould. One manager talked about the possibilities of trying to persuade the client firms that usually seek young men to take on more women:

“It depends on the conversations we have with the client firm. But often we try to encourage the client that hey, think about it, why not take your chances and hire a woman?” (Manager 9)

Another manager, from the clerical sector, sees breaking the barriers as something of “livening up” the work community:

“We would like more men. Someone says every now and then, that it would be fun to get a young hunk amongst us old grannies. But we have men in the IT- sector; it’s yet a man’s world somewhat automatically.” (Manager 4)

Educating the employees to the freedom of the markets

Regulation and intervention from the unions or legislators is not wanted or needed from the point of view of the agencies. The agencies strongly advocate individual freedom of choice as the hallmark or added value of temporary agency employment. All the managers emphasized the point that individuals are voluntarily, at their own will engaging in temporary work, that many employees find temporary agency employment rewarding in terms of multifaceted opportunities, greater flexibility in schedules, ability to spend holidays when it is most convenient, and that many enjoy the possibility to tour differing work communities and enterprises. Appreciation and sheltering of individuality also became evident when the managers were describing the allocation of the responsibilities in the temporary agency employment relationship. Again, the individual’s own contribution in staying employable is of paramount importance:

“We can’t do anything else but open doors
The rest is totally up to the individual...
It (converting to permanency) takes
quite a lot of effort, one must be ready to
invest to it...” (Manager 1)

“Everyone has equal chances to
obtain permanency...if one is willing
to accept all sorts of assignments,
I don’t see why not, it’s totally up to the employee....” (Manager 3)

The managers also use legitimacy or formal status as a guarantee or a presupposition of fair and equal treatment of the employees. Many managers made clear the fact that their CEOs are in close relations with employer organisations, that the agency they represent is frequently used in the media as an example of a temporary agency with good reputation, or that they co-operate with the unions. All this is interpreted as upholding the legitimate operation of the temporary agencies.

Thus, the formal ties inside employers' organisations, co-operation with authorities such as the Ministry of Labour and ties between the employers' organisations and the unions are the safeguard of equal treatment of all employees

"Those firms that are members in the employers' organization, follow the ethical rules and guidelines. And our CEO acts and operates closely with the organization, so that often makes us a prime example..." (Manager 10)

"I argue, that all the members of the employers' organization take care of things as they are supposed to be taken care of. In addition, we have direct linkage to the unions and we are usually an example of best practices..." (Manager 4)

Individual effort, an enterprising heart and the right attitude are not only appreciated as the contours of a good employee but also as a way of leading one's life. The future thriving of temporary agency employee is solely in their own hands, and what the agencies are offering is opportunities. It is up to the individual to take advantage of these opportunities and shape one's own faith. Nothing is certain and no one can count on permanent employment. What the agencies are ensuring is a paycheck every other week. Some managers referred somewhat paradoxically, when considering the lengths of the assignments, the certainty of the paycheck as analogous to permanent employment. The agencies are, thus, strongly advocating the idea that the employment relation is merely a matter of paying wages. This actually means educating especially the young, inexperienced employees to a new kind of employment relationship with lesser employer duties and more employee responsibility:

"... (temporary agency employment) is just about the name of the company in your paycheck. That's what this is about. I mean, our role is to pay the wages. We don't have any other role." (Manager 9)

"Of course we talk through the terms of employment. There are three main issues: 1) whether the work is inside or out, 2) how long the job is going to last and 3) at least try to tell what the wage is." (Manager 6)

DISCUSSION

The virtues and the values of both the enterprise culture and temporary agency employment, that is freedom, choice, and individual responsibility, seem to diminish, as the reality of temping is unveiled. The terms of employment are a far cry from liberty and freedom of choice. Possibilities to choose the time and the place of work, or the alleged freedom in choosing assignments seem to shrink to a mere choice to either work or stay unemployed. Temporary agency employment is not about choice or freedom for the employees, rather they are evaluated and ranked according to their ability to conform. The candidates are specifically expected and presumed to agree to take on even those assignments that do not fulfil the expectations or the dreams of the job seeker. These requirements are warped in the employer discourses as to a test of motivation and attitude, leaving the candidate solely responsible in tackling the probable negative experiences in the work communities. In addition, in order to stay a sought-after candidate one needs to abide to a type of commitment and resilience that do not delineate any form of individuality or freedom of choice. Candidates cannot choose their own working time or place since they have to be available and in service when the client firm needs them. Nevertheless, the managers see individual enterprise as the main reason for success in the temporary help industry. This responsibility becomes further

debatable when considering the statistics, which reveal that only approximately 10 percent of the temporary employees advance to permanency (Ministry of Labour Finland, 2006).

Temporary agency managers and the advocates of the industry frequently justify temporary work with the claim that the employees willingly choose this precarious form of employment. Choice and free will are used to express both the sentiments of the workers as well as the legitimacy of the industry. This research does not support these claims, but rather reveals the hollow promises of the agencies as mere rhetoric and lip service. Since the agencies are primarily dependent on the client firms for their profit, they do not act to benefit the candidates or to fulfil their needs, but are forced to operate a middle ground of supplying both good enough workers to the client firms and good enough assignments to the candidates. Also, industry justifications based on freedom of choice or liberty to work when it is most convenient to the employee are highly contradicted by the managers mention of initiation rites and adaptation to employer needs as a precondition to employment in the first place.

CONCLUSION

Above I have illustrated three examples of ideologically embedded management a temporary help worker may encounter. Managers use discourses of the enterprise culture that emphasize individualism, freedom, responsibility, as well as traditional gender identities to shape and limit the possible field of action of employee behaviour. Managers also try to build legitimacy through authority and, if not by taking advantage of, at least utilising the situation where young, inexperienced jobseekers in particular try to make a good impression on the gatekeepers of employment.

Individualism and individual responsibility actually denote willingness to abide by the rules and the regulations dictated by the agencies, and ultimately by the client firms. To emphasize adaptation and to bundle it up with chances of converting to permanency is to state that temporary agency workers are not supposed to be active, intelligent, or innovative members of the organization, but should perform adequately and function properly. This highly contradicts the idea of free and individual temporary work in a knowledge economy. In light of this research, freedom is just a pseudonym for obligation.

Attitude, commitment, and motivation are virtues of an enterprising individual that underscore the significance of engagement in the activities of the free market economy. By accentuating these qualities, agencies are making particular segregations and distinctions that are based on the influence of the neo-liberal enterprise culture which stresses industriousness, marketability, self-reliance, and productivity as the contours of a valued member of the society. This identity construction serves governmental restructuring towards individual accountability, encouraging individuals to pursue goals imposed by the employers. Instead of the truly liberating ethos of individual choice or free agency (which could even entail disengagement from the world of paid work altogether), it seems that one needs to accept a curious mix of resilience and acquiescence to make it in the world of contingent employment. I suggest that since temporary agencies mainly supply lower and entry-level assignments in the labour markets, they are actually educating young recruits in particular to a subordinate and acquiescent, yet industrious, committed, and competitive mould. This trend becomes further problematic when considering the growing nature of temporary agency employment as a way to move workers over national borders.

Acknowledgements: I am extremely grateful to M. Soc. Sc. Marja Andersson and MA David Bergen for their valuable input on earlier versions of the manuscript. All remaining errors are solely the responsibility of the author.

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