

Leading and Following in Digital Work: Accomplishing Leadership in the Flow of Material-discursive Practices

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Introduction

The way we perform and organise work has undeniably changed and will continue to do so in the next decades (Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017; Fayard, 2019; Forman, King, & Lyytinen, 2014). Work is becoming increasingly digital, independent, and performed outside of hierarchical organisations. These new forms of work, characterised by organisational independence, pose new challenges to management research and its theoretical conceptualisation of leadership (Winkler, 2011).

Many new forms of work are emerging as digital work practices that are conducted outside of traditional organisational boundaries (Fayard, 2019). While there is no agreed upon definition, digital work is typically conceived of as a type of work, which is fundamentally reconfigured through the use of digital technologies (Ens, Stein, & Jensen, 2018). Economics and organisational theorists argue that three technological and socio-economic shifts have led to this phenomenon: contingent work has become the fastest growing segment of the global workforce, work is increasingly organised in temporary forms of organisations, and the rapid digitalisation has brought about entirely new work practices (Barley et al., 2017; Forman et al., 2014). Although it is clear that these developments do not only affect the ways in which work activities are carried out but also the management and organisation of work, scholars have paid little attention to what this new world of work means for our traditional conceptions of leadership (Winkler, 2011).

Despite this focus on formal leadership, the traditional notion of leadership as a stable and distinct characteristic of individual managers has been challenged and largely superseded by a dynamic and relational understanding of leadership as co-constructed in practice (Bolden, Hawkins, Gosling, & Taylor, 2011). Echoing the fluid and fast-changing nature of today's society, contemporary organisational theory has brought forth a notion of leadership that denies leader-centrism and its associated glorification of individual leaders (Simpson, 2016). However, scholars have recently started to question whether the idea of leadership-as-practice goes far enough and called for processual inquiries that offer insight into how particular conditions actually produce leadership in the flow of practice (Simpson, 2016; Simpson, Buchan, & Sillince, 2018).

We address this call for theoretical reframing and the empirical puzzle of leadership accomplishment in new forms of work by proposing a performative process perspective of leadership. In particular, we subscribe to Karen Barad's notion of post-humanist performativity (2007) and a process perspective grounded in an ontology of becoming (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2016). Our aim in combining these two perspectives is to move beyond the tendency in contemporary organisational theory to focus on agential human leaders, to better understand how leadership moments are continuously emerging in the flow of human and non-human work practices.

To answer the research question of how leadership is continuously accomplished in new forms of work, we report on an ongoing ethnographic study of independent digital workers. In particular, we focus on a range of senior workers that appear as leaders in their respective fields. In adopting an inherently processual vocabulary, our study shows how leaders continuously become followers and followers become leaders. We suggest that, in the digital work context, leaders are also always already positioned as followers. This work-in-progress leads to the development of a performative process theory that understands leaders and followers as continuously emerging from within material-discursive processes.

Theoretical Background

Digital Work as a New Form of Working and Organising

One important way the nature of jobs has changed is due to the rapid digitalisation of work (Fayard, 2019). Digital work appears as the 'new normal' in many industries that have previously been, if at all, only slightly affected by digital technologies (Forman et al., 2014). Because of the flexibility that digital technologies afford, most of these new forms of digital work such as crowdwork, gig work, or remote work are situated outside of traditional organisations and hierarchical labour relationships (Barley et al., 2017).

Although IS and organisational scholars have started to research these new forms of work by looking into meaningfulness (Fayard, 2019), job insecurity (Fleming, 2017), and independent workers' identities (Barley et al., 2017) the relationship between workers and their leaders has received little attention (Winkler, 2011). Arguably, this paucity of research could be explained with the relative absence of formal leadership roles in independent work contexts. However, scholars have found that leaders are nevertheless emerging within this new world of work, even if just in the form of non-formal leadership (Winkler, 2011). Independent digital work thus presents an opportunity to study a facet of leadership that remains fairly obscure, namely the emergence of leader-follower relationships enacted outside of hierarchical organisations.

Leadership in the Flow of Practice

After a recent surge of scholarly research, the leadership literature has developed into a prominent topic in the management and IS fields. As deeply engrained in the professional

leadership industry including consultants, MBA programs, and management coaching, leadership has been originally conceptualised as a personal characteristic of an individual and often heroicised leader (Bolden et al., 2011). With the turn toward social constructivist approaches scholars have, however, started to view leadership as something dynamically co-constructed in practice; as relationally enacted in interactions between leaders and followers (Bolden et al., 2011). Despite this focus on dynamics and interactions, this literature has been criticised for paying little attention to the ways in which leadership is (re-)produced in ongoing processes of leading and following (Simpson, 2016). In this processual view, leadership is neither a characteristic of distinct human leaders nor co-constructed in interactions but rather continuously emerging from within the flow of practice (Simpson et al., 2018). In responding to these calls, we argue for a performative process perspective of leadership and show how a grounding in post-humanist performativity can help to take the material role of digital technologies seriously in the ongoing accomplishment of leadership (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2016).

Research Method

To attend to the emergence of leadership in digital work, we are conducting an ethnographic study of independent digital workers. Doing field work in various co-working spaces, we are able to observe and interview independent digital workers including freelancers, contract workers, and entrepreneurs from a range of different occupations such as software development, graphic design, digital marketing, consulting, and coaching. Subscribing to a becoming ontology (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2016) and performative perspective (Barad, 2007), our aim is to inductively develop theory grounded in qualitative field data. In particular, we focus on senior digital workers that appear as leaders in the field. In interviewing them and observing the influencing acts between leaders and followers through different channels (e.g., blogs, podcasts, YouTube videos, and conference talks), we focus on the ways performative processes produce particular relational enactments. Using grounded theory techniques for data analysis (Charmaz, 2006) and sensitising our emerging theoretical model to the performative process perspective, we provide an understanding of how leaders in independent digital work contexts continuously become followers and followers become leaders.

Leading and Following in the Flow of Material-discursive Practices

We identified three practices in which (assumed) clear-cut leader-follower relationships are breaking down and where it becomes unclear who is leading and following. In these practices, digital technologies were not only the enabler of this new form of work, but often a prime actant in the accomplishment of leadership.

As a first practice we observed how digital workers, because of their independent nature of work, did not strictly identify with a single subject position, but rather continuously performed different identities such as ‘leader’ or ‘follower’. For many this meant re-defining what work means to them, as one mobile app developer, who quit his corporate

job and became a freelancer, stated:

I never cared about job titles and so, I constantly find myself in these environments where I didn't feel valued and I didn't value that experience. Moving up some ladder to get like another desk and another title edged on a placard just didn't mean anything to me. I knew I needed to sort of break free from that. So, I had an opportunity to reconstruct what it means to work and who I am in relation to my work.

Another important aspect of digital leaders, who appear as leaders in their respective fields, was credibility. Additionally, this theme highlighted how digital technologies are part of the leadership accomplishment in that they shape practice of giving and receiving credibility. When we asked a digital marketer at a social media workshop about his key takeaways, he said:

I guess the highlight was Drew because he is a sort of a big person online now. He just passed more than a million followers on Facebook. So many people were interested about this video aspect. Basically, how to make it as, like you can call him a YouTuber or a Facebooker.

A third practice that emerged was community building. This theme of collectively lifting each other up goes hand in hand with the drive to give back to the community and teach others as soon as one has learnt something new. One worker answered the question of who some of the leaders are with:

Everyone. You can just join some group and meet people who do this. Everyone has a story and struggle they overcame to achieve this kind of lifestyle [living and working remotely]. You can learn from anyone.

Many other participants echoed this statement countering the traditional perception of individual leaders and emphasising the processual nature of leadership in that “*it is like a movement; it is definitely building up. [...] I just see that continuing to grow*”. These accounts of leadership as something fluid, open-ended, and collectively accomplished then show how leadership is not situated within individual leaders, but continuously emerging from practices of leading and following.

Toward a Performative Process Theory of Leadership

We began this work by proposing a performative process perspective of leadership in the context of independent digital work as an alternative to agential human leader focused approaches. The above findings help to shed light on our research question and provide some (at this stage, preliminary) themes toward such a theoretical perspective. Table 1 summarises our analysis, showing how leadership is accomplished in the flow of three material-discursive practices, descriptions of what leaders and followers are becoming in these practices, and the role of digital technologies in the process.

The preliminary analysis reveals that, in the context of digitally enabled independent work, leadership is less of a distinct human characteristic or not even accomplished in interactions between humans, but rather continuously emerging along moment-to-moment turns in the flow of practice. Leadership then is not a-priori negotiated that is initiated by the leader and responded to by the follower. Instead it is far more reciprocal; enacted in a dance-like interplay of continuous leading and following. In this performative process, the leader is also following the follower. Digital technologies and leaders' material presence function here as a medium of open-ended exchange. Leaders and followers respond to each other in a reciprocal reaching-toward.

Leading/following practices	Simultaneously becoming leader and follower	Role of digital technologies in leadership accomplishment
(Re-)constructing identities	No predetermined leader/follower identity, but identity is continuously emerging from practices of leading and following.	Existential dependence on digital technology performs identity in appearing not only as enabler but also as actor shaping digital work practices.
Giving and receiving credibility	The ability to lead rests on the credibility that followers have always already lent the leader.	Rating systems and algorithms are configuring the credibility given and received.
Building-up community	Mobilising a collective to act in the flow of practice that leaders and followers collectively undergo.	Platforms and social media are empowering some and at the same time marginalising others.

Table 1. Summary of Leading/Following Practices in Independent Digital Work

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