

**“I could be dead for two weeks and my boss would never know!”:  
The rhetoric and reality of flexible work**

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**Stream: Flexibility**

This paper explores how discourses of flexible working are produced and sustained. I draw on ethnographic data from a study of IT consultants employed by a UK telecommunications firm. FlexiTeam sold flexible working consulting services to private and public sector clients. FlexiTeam present a particularly interesting case for exploring discourses of flexible working because they not only sold the idea but also embodied the concept: the consultants were themselves flexible workers. The relationship between what they preached and what they practiced is in fact the main theme of the paper.

A short note on the title of the paper may be useful here. By using the terms ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’ I do not wish to imply that the discourses produced for clients represented mere talk, unrelated to the experience of flexible work. Consulting interventions were in fact active in the social construction of organizational reality for client organizations. Likewise, I do not wish to imply that the back-stage actions and interactions of the consultants were somehow more ‘real’. These were also informed by a reflexive awareness of context. Both front-stage and back-stage were performances in this sense. The terms ‘rhetoric’ and ‘reality’ are therefore used as heuristic devices for purposes of argumentation only.

The paper is structured as follows. First I outline some of the popular discourses of flexible work, paying particular attention to the version produced by the FlexiTeam consultants. These discourses are important because they attempt to shape the meaning of the term, that is, what flexible working ‘is’ and can ‘do’ for individuals and organizations alike. Following a short introduction to the empirical study, I move on to present some of the data from my ethnography. I focus on the sales pitch delivered by Barry to a prospective client. This is taken to represent a front-stage performance where a particular version of flexible working is constructed for the benefit of clients. This presents flexible working as a seamless, connected and collaborative solution to organizational and individual problems.

This front-stage performance is then contrasted with data from the back-stage actions and interactions I observed when the consultants were not client-facing. I highlight the ‘hidden’ labour of flexible working and the silent voices ‘deleted’ from the front-stage discourse (cf Schwartz, Nardi & Whittaker, 1999). I highlight in particular how the difference between what FlexiTeam practice and preach is achieved and sustained. I conclude by suggesting that the heady visions of flexible work involve a certain politics of representation, where certain narratives are voiced and others silenced or sidelined. While some of the consultants seemed to recognise this, leaving them with a somewhat cynical taste in their mouth, they also appeared

complicit in reproducing this promotional narrative. Career motives seemed to facilitate this ability to manage the ambiguity and ambivalence involved in experiencing the (less than rosy) reality of flexible work and their role as experts, embodiments and exemplars of flexible working.

#### Discourses of flexible working

The term flexible working is just one of a long list of fashionable terms for the restructuring of work to enable flexibility in time and/or space. Terms such as telecommuting, mobile work, road warriors, telecottages and e-work have also been popular in the past. Information and Communication Technology has often played an important role in these discourses. A discourse is here taken to mean a set of texts, ideas and practices that attempt to shape the way we understand, relate to and act upon a particular phenomenon (Knights & Morgan, 1991), in this case the time/space dimensions of work. In these discourses, technology is heralded as the key 'enabler' of these new flexible work practices. Technology is also particularly relevant in this paper because FlexiTeam, the consultants at the centre of the discussion, work for a UK telecommunications firm. As such, they represent a key actor in promoting these new discourses of flexible work because of their own interest in the sale of telecommunications and IT products and services.

What discourse does FlexiTeam produce and promote? What claims about flexible working do the consultants present? These claims are important because they help to shape the terms of debate about flexible working, at the least in the UK. Through speeches, presentations, articles and newspaper stories, FlexiTeam attempt to construct a particular version of what flexible working 'is' and can 'do', a version that undoubtedly aims to promote their consulting services.

The following is a list of 'benefits' of flexible working taken from a FlexiTeam presentation.

- **Improve productivity** – by between 10 and 20%
- **Cut unnecessary travel** – by using technology enabled communications to avoid routine commuting
- **Flexibility** – by using virtual teams to manage peaks and troughs
- **Employer of choice** – by opening employment opportunities to those restricted by traditional working practices
- **Encourage mobility** – by freeing work from the constraints of time and location
- **Reduce costs** – by rationalising the way we use our office space, retaining people and reducing absenteeism
- **Recruitment & retention** – by not restructuring our workforce to a specific location
- **Time management** – by empowerment of our people and effective information provision
- **Delight customers** – by spending more time in productive dialogue either face-to-face or over the telephone
- **Support carers** – by supporting family friendly working practices and eliminating presenteeism

This is what you could call the front-stage or public discourse of flexible work produced and promoted by FlexiTeam. It is not dissimilar to the heady visions and confident proclamations produced by other advocates of flexible

work, virtual teams and telework, many of whom also make their living from selling related consulting services (eg. Haywood, 1998; Fisher & Fisher, 2001; Gordon, 2001; Lipnack & Stamps, 2000).

The aim of this paper is to offer a critique of this front-stage discourse. I will show how this discourse presents a very one-sided story of flexible work. I will contrast this front-stage discourse with my ethnographic experience of how the consultants themselves negotiated their flexible working lives. My aim is to reveal what was hidden, deleted or silenced in this heady promotional vision.

Before I move on to show how this promotional discourse of flexible working was used in practice to market their consulting services, a brief introduction to the empirical study seems appropriate.

### The study

FlexiTeam were a team of around ten consultants who are employed by a large UK-based telecommunications firm called 'TechnoCo' (a pseudonym). The ethnographic study of FlexiTeam consisted of non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews over a period of around nine months between 2000 and 2001, followed by several follow-up visits. A holistic approach was taken, seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of FlexiTeam's work experiences through observation and limited participation in their daily working lives, including client visits, team meetings, performance reviews, email and audio-conference interaction and social activities, as well as semi-structured interviews.

FlexiTeam sold their 'flexible working' management consultancy services to external clients, both private and public sector organisations. The term 'flexible working' was used to encompass all forms of organisational change associated with enabling staff to work flexibly with regard to time and space. FlexiTeam accordingly helped and advised clients about many broad change management issues, such as moving from an office-based workforce towards implementing working from home, hot-desking, mobile working, virtual teams and wider facilities management and real estate issues. FlexiTeam did not advise clients on the technology they might employ during these changes – such queries are passed on to the account managers within TechnoCo. Rather, FlexiTeam explicitly regard themselves as engendering "culture change": guiding the client through the difficult change in 'mentality' required for them to implement an effective flexible working strategy.

FlexiTeam's methodology involved questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, geographical mapping technology and space utilisation surveys. The consultancy aimed to build a bespoke 'business case' for flexible working to be presented to senior management in the client organisation. It was hoped that this would then trigger the implementation of a pilot flexible working scheme, followed by a large-scale flexible working transformation, guided of course by FlexiTeam's consultancy advice and hopefully also involving a large order of TeleCo's products and services.

### FlexiTeam: An Interesting Site?

It is clear from this brief description that FlexiTeam are involved in the *production* and *promotion* of a discourse about flexible working for their clients. Yet what makes FlexiTeam particularly interesting is that they also

*consume* discourses of flexible work in their capacity as practicing flexible workers. Team members had no fixed office location but were instead based at home, often working 'on the road', from client sites or from the hot-desking/meeting facilities available at company offices across the country. The marketing potential of this reflexive relationship to flexible working, that is, their role in selling it and practicing it, is not missed by the consultants. They explicitly draw on their own embodied experience of flexible work, using personal testimonies to convince clients. As we shall see below, Barry uses exactly this tactic with potential clients by recounting the joys of mowing your lawn in your lunch break. Hesitation and uncertainty arising from clients can also be quelled with reference to their own 'best practice'. FlexiTeam are therefore interesting because they claim to be *embodiments* and *exemplars* of the discourse they sell.

What was also interesting about FlexiTeam was that, in its earlier incarnation as an internal change management team, it was credited with the implementation of the flexible working program in TeleCo. This program is one the largest in the UK, with over five thousand registered home-based workers. In fact, it was the 'success' and prominence of this program that led to their evolution into a consulting team, as clients approached them for their 'expert' advice. The consultants also do not miss this marketing tool. As consultant Darren put it, they "are not talking about it, they've done it. They were explicit about 'using the fact that they had "been there, done that, got the T-shirt." FlexiTeam are therefore also interesting because they claim to be *experts* on the changes associated with flexible working.

To sum up, FlexiTeam provide a particularly interesting case for exploring discourses of flexible work because of their particularly intimate, personal and reflexive relationship with the discourse as:

- Producers
- Promoters
- Consumers
- Experts
- Embodiments
- Exemplars

In order to explore the contrast between the front-stage rhetoric and back-stage reality of flexible working and the disjuncture between what is preached and what is practiced, I first present a brief extract from a client interaction. This front-stage performance will be used to contrast with the back-stage data and show what is hidden, deleted and silenced.

#### Discourse in practice: The front-stage performance

The following extract is taken from ethnographic fieldnotes of a meeting between consultant Barry and two managers of a prospective client in the advertising industry, Steve and Claire<sup>1</sup>. Barry had been invited to have a preliminary chat about the possibility of implementing flexible working and the possibility of enlisting consultants to advise on implementation and change management.

##### *The cast*

Steve: Client manager

Claire: Client manager

Barry: FlexiTeam consultant/business development manager

Steve: Well, the reason why we've got you in here today was because, well, I suppose we've been forced to think seriously about it recently. I guess there's sort of a carrot and a stick going on here. There's the government legislation coming up as we all know, so we know we might have to change a few things round here because of that. But also we have lots of people who, if they have kids or something, the commute is quite long. We wanna keep people when they have kids, and our workforce is mainly women after all.

Claire: But, I'll that's true of course, but we aren't totally sure about the whole thing though, I mean, it would be a big change. And we are, we're a very creative company, it's the industry we're in, and we need our staff to work together. Like the amount of ideas that come up when people bump into each other in the kitchen here. We do a lot of spontaneous brainstorming. People rush into my office to ask me things. We don't want all the knowledge to be lost, people to take it home. We want them to work as a team. So, I don't know, maybe if we did do it we could limit it to no more than three days a week at home?

Barry: Absolutely, I mean you're right to be concerned but really there's no barrier. There's no blocker. There's ways around everything. Like, in our team, we have processes for all of that. I hate that term, it's so 'processy' if you know what I mean, but it works. Like we have a database that you can access from anywhere, where you can upload information, to keep that knowledge sharing going. I think we've disproved the myth that if people don't see each other every day they don't collaborate. We've got over five thousand people officially registered home-workers. You know it's a complete myth that people in an office [pauses]. Collaboration decreases by factor of 10 when someone is sat 10 feet away or if a filing cabinet is in the way, and collaboration is almost nil if you're on a different floor.

Steve: You're right you know, we've got two floors here and they are practically like two teams. They email each other rather than go upstairs!

Barry: That's not to say that face-to-face contact isn't important, in fact it's more important than ever, so, like, we make sure we meet up every month for a team meeting. But we also have audiocalls every week and we email a lot too. ... But it's not right for everyone, so what we did in TeleCo was do the whole thing on a voluntary basis. You can't force people to work from home. But for those who, like you said about kids, for them it's great. I mean, when I'm not with clients I'd be mowing my lawn at lunchtime [looks at watch], about now in fact! [laughter]

Steve: Wow! [laughs] That does sound better than being here!  
[laughter]

Several themes are present in the discourse of flexibility being constructed here. Barry highlights the role of technology in knowledge sharing, the myth

of collaboration requiring physical proximity, the importance of face-to-face team meetings and the work-life balance benefits of flexible working. Here I will focus in more detail on two of these, namely knowledge sharing and team meetings. My aim is to present data about the back-stage interactions I observed, which reveal a hidden story that is deleted from these front-stage performances with clients.

### Technology and Knowledge Sharing: The Hidden Story

Above we saw how Barry highlighted the way in which technology enabled his team to share knowledge while separated in time and space. FlexiTeam used a database system known as 'ClientInfo' to update information about prospective clients. The database could be updated from anywhere, anytime using an Internet connection. Or at least that was the promise. At the time of my study, FlexiTeam seemed to constantly struggle to achieve this seamless, easy, connected vision. Practical problems surrounding how to connect to the database were a constant source of discussion. Take, for example, the discussion that arose during the first team meeting I observed (and tape recorded). Georgina, the consultant in charge of ensuring the database was kept up to date, was asked to provide an update on the current state of affairs:

#### *The cast*

Nigel: Business development manager (chairperson)

Georgina: Consultant (also responsible for ClientInfo database)

Eric: Team leader

Carol: Marketing developer

Terry: Consultant/business development manager

Barry: Consultant/business development manager

Kevin: Consultant

?: Unable to identify voice

- 1 Nigel: ClientInfo database. Georgina said don't touch it until she's emailed the team to say it's safe.
- 2 Georgina: I did, and then you broke it! [laughs]
- 3 Nigel: Who broke it? Is there one person responsible?
- 4 Georgina: [clears her throat] Right.
- 5 Eric: Go on, name and shame!
- 6 Georgina: The evil one! [laughs] Erm, no I'm not going to. It's now set up again but on the G drive. I sent an email out saying how you can download a local copy and synchronise it. You can't do it [looking around table], you can't do it, Kevin physically can't, but you can.
- 7 Carol: I can't get onto G drive.
- 8 Eric: I'm sure you can get access to the G drive.
- 9 Georgina: You can.
- 10 Terry: Have you got Novell Netware?
- 11 Nigel: I haven't got Novell Netware.
- 12 Terry: Are you on Windows 2000 or 98?
- 13 Georgina: You need briefcase
- 14 [inaudible overlapping talk]
- 15 Carol: I got as far as 3 quarters of the way with your instructions, but it wouldn't come up with the option to copy.
- 16 Georgina: But you just said you couldn't get access to the G drive but if you/
- 17 Carol: /no, it wouldn't let me in.
- 18 Georgina: So how did you get half way through?
- 19 Carol: I don't know.

20 Eric: Can't it go onto the FlexiTeam account?  
21 Georgina: No, it can't. The problem with it being on outlook/  
22 Eric: /if it was on FlexiTeam yeah, [pause] if I open it, can I open it as a FlexiTeam account owner?  
23 Georgina: You say on the FlexiTeam, the FlexiTeam what?  
24 Eric: The email account.  
25 Barry: The email account.  
26 Georgina: Well then there's no point, there's no difference it being on FlexiTeam email account to being on the shared folders.  
27 Eric: It's not, cos at the moment the problem with it being on share folders is that if Terry opens it and doesn't close it/  
28 Terry: Excuse me, I do! Hypothetically! [laughter]  
29 Georgina: Somebody opens it and doesn't close it. OK. Somebody opens it then turns their machine off. OK. That's what they do [glares at Eric] [laughs]  
30 Eric: Whereas if FlexiTeam opens it [pause]  
31 Georgina: And then it's sitting on the. Oh, I don't know.  
32 Eric: I don't know, but it's the fact that it's the email account opening it, or whether it's the local access opening. [others are talking in background]  
33 Georgina: I think if you open it even if it's, WHEREVER [raises her voice to be heard above others talking] it is I think opening it on outlook wherever it is it will open it to a temp file  
34 Barry: yeah, that's right, it will open it to a temp file so that only one person can access it at a time.  
35 Georgina: I can put it back on outlook and make it so that only one person can actually physically open it at a time. But it will still be slow to open, it will still be slow to close. So if you're gonna turn off your machine before it's downloaded back into the system, you'll kill it! Cos you won't let anybody in.  
36 Kevin: I think that's a retrograde definitely. Where it is at the moment on the LAN/  
37 Martin: /for Nigel or those of us who can access it at the moment it's fine.  
38 Kevin: I have a problem with the fact that, being in a building - when I was at the Birmingham Office I made sure that one of the things I do when I'm in the building is to access the ClientInfo database.  
39 Georgina: If you like, I can work on a version where you can work on a local copy and you can/  
40 Eric: /It means coming to a building.  
41 Terry: You can still open it on your G drive can't you?  
42 Eric: I haven't got G drive access at the moment cos I've got windows 2000 because we haven't got briefcase.  
43 Terry: Which means you can't synchronise, but you can still open it, which is no slower than opening it on outlook.  
44 Georgina: No, it's a bit faster  
45 Terry: It's faster probably from G drive.  
46 Barry: We could still do the reports off the G drive.  
47 Terry: Yes, you should work on it just as if you were in outlook. All your not getting on it is the synchronising.  
48 Georgina: You don't get to keep a local copy which you can just ping open.  
49 Terry: It's a pain, cos you have to be on a network.  
50 Georgina: Do you want me to do a session on this? When we've done the action points?  
51 Eric: Do we think this is the right strategy? Cos I thought we were trying to get everything onto that one source. That's what we started off

- as doing in the first place.
- 52 Georgina: Yes, but there are limitations with what happens with outlook
- 53 Eric: Closing intranet sites, closing G drives, going onto shared folders.  
[pause] OK, we'll do that.
- 54 Terry: A pragmatic way if we were stuck, I know it's not ideal and it goes against the way we opened them, we could literally send round a voicemail saying can someone online mail me a copy of the database, you'd get it in 10 minutes. I know you couldn't send me one at 10 o'clock at night, but if you had an inkling at 5 o'clock.
- 55 Georgina: I wouldn't dwell on this anymore
- 56 Terry: It was certainly good to get shot of the web stuff that was gonna cost us.
- 57 ? Oh, yeah.
- 58 Eric: It's great, I mean, in terms of having one place where you can update your ClientInfo, your timesheet, give you a list of accounts, all that type of stuff. It was brilliant.
- 59 Terry: It's still there, it's just you getting access to it!
- 60 Martin: It is quite good actually
- 61 Eric: It's alright I can update it anyway.
- 62 Terry: [over others talking] But you could open it anyway and work on it on the G drive
- 63 Eric: I can, I just need to go into a building
- 64 Georgina: So who needs to get access to the g drive?
- 65 Eric: I do.
- 66 Nigel: I do.
- 67 [more discussion about getting access and the software they use]
- 68 Eric: There was no reason for me to get onto a LAN ever, until now!  
[laughter]
- 69 [more discussion about getting onto LAN]
- 70 Martin: The short term solution, if you want to see it, just get someone online to send you a copy of it, and you'll get it in an email and you'll have the latest copy.
- 71 Terry: And once a week post a copy on the shared folders for those that need access and then synchronise.
- 72 Nigel: We all know we need to do that? Is everyone happy with that?
- 73 ? Yep.
- 74 Nigel: Right, next item then ...

The discussion lasted over 15 minutes. It is clear that not everyone could access the ClientInfo database easily. The two solutions put forward – updating ClientInfo while at an office (turns 38, 40, 49, 63) or asking a colleague to email a copy (turns 54, 70, 71) – fail to meet their standard of supporting 'working anywhere'. Kevin (turn 38) admits he travels to a company office to update the database, Eric makes an ironic comment about how he was free to 'work anywhere' until the database required him to be in a company office (turn 68) and Terry also concedes that "it's a pain" (turn 49). Far from the technology enabling work to be conducted anywhere, anytime, it became a reason (among many) to return to an office. Getting colleagues to email the database was hardly ideal either. These attempts at 'muddling through' and 'getting by' given the 'failings' of the technology reveal a different side to the seamless vision flexible work the consultants themselves promoted.

The problem did not seem to be resolved at the end of the conversation either. In fact, months later the issue was still ongoing. The consultants described futile calls to the IT helpdesk during the following

audioconference, finally resorting to meeting face-to-face at a subsequent team meeting with the laptops in question, staying late into the evening to resolve the problem.

To be clear, my argument is not that the technology 'failed' or that these are 'teething problems' expected from any system integration. I am not calling for better technology to support flexible working, a sort of technocratic solution. Indeed, the very definition of what is 'working', what constitutes a 'problem', what a technology can and should 'do' are constructed outcomes as opposed to the effects of inherent technical capacities. My argument is also not that this case is unique to flexible working. This kind of conversation probably goes on in workplaces everywhere, not simply between flexible workers. In this sense the discussion may well reflect the experience of technological change in other contemporary workplaces. Rather my point is that the data is important because it stands in contrast with the promotional discourse of flexible working constructed by FlexiTeam. Here technology is heralded as the key enabler of flexible working, the solution to the 'problems' posed by working anywhere, anytime, enabling seamless interconnection and knowledge exchange. As Barry told the prospective clients above:

“...we have a database that you can access from anywhere, where you can upload information, to keep that knowledge sharing going”

In front of these prospective clients, Barry did not mention the problems they had recently experienced with uploading information. The difficulties, struggles and forms of taken-for-granted expertise and effort displayed at this team meeting were *hidden* or *deleted* from this promotional discourse. This is of course understandable. A story about the difficulties they had experienced with knowledge sharing would hardly be likely to encourage the clients to implement flexible working, let alone enlist the advice of FlexiTeam. By reflexively adapting the story to the context, Barry was simply doing his job. Yet the point is that these discourses of flexible working produced, promoted and promulgated by FlexiTeam keep certain stories hidden. This is not simply a case of client disillusionment, where the heady visions of consultants are not realised. It was the consultants themselves who perfected the art of storytelling such that particular stories were reproduced while others were hidden. This does not seem a neutral or accidental omission. This seems to me a political act, informed by, among other things, the career motives of the consultants and the profit motives of their employers. More on this later.

### Dispersed Teamwork: The Hidden Story

We have already seen the 'hidden' story of technology. Here I will tell a second 'hidden' story, a story told by Carole and Duncan, both relatively junior members of the team. The discussion occurred at the end of the day when Carole and Duncan were packing up their laptops after a day working at company hot-desk facilities.

Andrea: Researcher  
Carol: Marketing developer  
Duncan: Junior consultant

Andrea: So, how do you guys find the whole working from home

- thing?
- Carol: Well, to be honest with you, it can get a bit lonely at times. And I'm glad you asked because this could be something you could feed back from your research. Because the job I do is different from everyone else in the team, it's more office based, less time seeing clients, so it can get a bit lonely. Like the other week when I mentioned at the team meeting about social isolation, like we could have a T/T club or something, where everyone goes to the same office on a Tuesday and Thursday, when you know there's gonna be someone to talk to, and I just got shot down in flames. I was just trying to be proactive, not just talk about it but do something about it.
- Duncan: It's true you know, they all talk about meeting regularly to avoid social isolation, but they don't follow through. It pisses me off a bit actually, they just don't practice what they preach.
- Carol: The team meetings are supposed to be every month, but they always get cancelled. And when we do meet up, there's too much to cram in, you can't get a word in edgeways. And everyone 'clams up' because they don't know each other, we're all practically strangers. They're all lovely people of course, but these should be my team-mates, people I can bounce ideas with, have a laugh with.
- Duncan: I agree. It's not the same as being in an office, where you can just wander up and have a chat. I actually miss being in an office, I really miss the beers after work on a Friday. That's what we should have, a non-work meeting in a pub, but I suppose everyone is so far away and they've got kids too. But especially when you're new to a team and just developing, then it's really important. I mean, I could be dead for two weeks and my boss would never know!

Compare, if you will, this story with the front-stage performance given by Barry above. Barry reassured the clients by stressing that there was no barrier to flexible working, it simply involved following their best practice example of using technology and meeting regularly. As he put it:

“...face-to-face contact [is] ... more important than ever, so, like, we make sure we meet up every month for a team meeting.”

This front-stage discourse stands in stark contrast to what Carole and Duncan told me. They paint a picture of social isolation, cancelled team meetings and a lack of teamwork. The point is not to try to delineate the 'true' story. Both were performances constructed with particular audiences and particular objectives in mind. Yet the point is that this dissatisfied, disillusioned and cynical story is noticeably absent from the public, front-stage discourses produced by FlexiTeam. It seems that being a consultant involves a game where certain stories and voices are heard and others are silenced, or at least back-grounded. Carole was discouraged, or, as she put it, 'shot down in flames' when she tried to suggest a solution to the problem of social isolation.

These findings are surprising because Carole and Duncan still managed to maintain their role in a team that produced the heady visions and proclamations about flexible work. Flexible working was not imposed from above and they were not resisting it as such. They were in fact working in a team whose role involved the promotion and dissemination of the idea. This seems to be a somewhat ambivalent and ambiguous position to be in. Carole and Duncan were clearly very critical of their flexible working arrangement, yet also keen on keeping their job and being seen to be doing a good job. The ability to maintain this ambivalent and ambiguous stance between selling and practicing flexible working seemed to be at the heart of their role as flexible working consultants.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have compared and contrasted the public or front-stage discourse produced and promoted by a group of flexible working consultants with the private or back-stage actions and interactions they produced as practicing flexible workers. I first revealed how the labour involved in using technology for knowledge sharing is 'hidden' or 'deleted' (cf Schwartz, Nardi & Whittaker, 1999) from the vision of a seamless, effective and connected social and informational network that was presented to clients.

Second I revealed how the idea of a cohesive, synergistic dispersed team presented to clients contrasted with another very different story told by consultants Carole and Duncan. They expressed a deep dissatisfaction, discontent and cynicism about the effectiveness of their dispersed teamwork arrangement. FlexiTeam, they suggested, did not practice what they preached. Yet this did not lead to any significant public voicing of disaffection or any rethinking and reconstruction of the discourse of flexible working presented to clients. Voices were silenced, dissent was hidden and public commitment was even displayed. The ambivalence and cynicism they experienced – selling a promotional vision to clients they did not feel was practiced in reality – seemed to be assuaged by their more general commitment to their job and their career.

In conclusion, the discourse of flexible working produced by FlexiTeam was constructed through a politics of representation whereby certain stories and voices are selectively deleted or hidden. The point is that, following Schwartz, Nardi and Whittaker (1999), this deletion served a purpose and involved social consequences. Representations of flexible work were not 'free' but instead served corporate functions, in this case representing the interests of a UK telecommunications firm. Voices were not free to be heard and were not all equal, with power relations serving to shape who was heard and what was heard in particular ways. Importantly, this power worked through, rather than against, those very people who produced the alternative tales. They were relegated to back-stage discussions with the researcher rather than used to critically interrogate and reconstruct the discourse they sold to clients. Where this study departs from Nardi et al is by showing how this deletion occurs in the work of the very people producing and promoting the heady visions of the future. Prophets and preachers of the new vision, it seems, are complicit in reproducing discourses that delete their own experience of flexible working.

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<sup>i</sup> The data extracts in this paper that are based upon ethnographic fieldnotes are constructed following Watson's (2000) 'ethnographic fiction science'. They are based upon real-life encounters in the field but use creative licence in lieu of the accuracy of tape-recorded conversation. One advantage of this approach is the ability to present themes and issues that are readily discussed in informal settings and less readily discussed when tape-recorders are present.