Time Regimes—Power and Synchronization in Organizations

Ida Sabelis

VU University of Amsterdam
Faculty of Social Sciences,
Department of Culture, Organization and Management
NL-1081 HV Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Ibj.sabelis@gmail.com

Keywords
time management, time regimes, diversity in organizations

The summer of 2005 in The Netherlands was a mixed blessing. Nice weather in June triggered expectations for the holidays. However, July and August were mainly wet—or rather pouring rain. There were soaked campsites on TV and a rush on last minute opportunities to get some sun via the travel agencies. After the holidays, after all the shifting time slots for all regional holidays had ended, the weather improved. In one of the national newspapers, a famous columnist devoted some lines to both weather and work:

the late summer weather brings about a holiday feeling that is not quite welcome, because we have to start working again. Everything generates the urge to go out and enjoy, leaving work muttering in a corner of one’s desk. Holiday during working time is far more satisfying than holiday during holiday time. (Remco Campert, De Volkskrant, Sept 7, 2005—front page—trans. Sabelis)

And from there, the author goes on about everyday escape routes from work and the ongoing struggle of getting oneself to work—in my terms: subordinating oneself to the temporal regimes of everyday organizational life.

1) An earlier version of this paper was presented as a column at the XVIIth International Symposium on Shiftwork and Working Time in Hoofddorp, organized by Ben Jansen and Christine Baaijens, Déhora Consultancy Group—Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2005. The reference made here (to the weather) was also valid for the years after 2005.
Thoughts about the weather and the familiar picture of getting oneself into the discipline of work inspired me to reflect upon our contemporary working culture/s and the difficulties in balancing the different times of our daily lives. Work once used to be what people did to earn a living, to meet the conditions for survival. Currently, apart from earning a living, we work for status, for virtual growth, for globalization, for earning still more money to pay for quality time in our scarce leisure time (Thooft 2002). The context of our working life has been invaded by pressure and fear: fear of being swept out of the accelerating pace of organizational life, fear of others threatening our life standard, pressure to meet the standards of the widely experienced acceleration in our pace of life.

Not so long ago, the dominance of clock time thinking largely prevented a deeper look at different, contradictory and paradoxical interests involved in forecasts, policy and organizational planning. The clock time paradigm can be seen as both cause and effect for the phenomenon of a too narrow economical, rationalized view of working hours and organizational planning schemes. Clock time has enabled organization and modern planning (Thompson 1967, and elsewhere in this special issue). But, where rational planning emerges, the non-rational seems to be neglected. Emotion, pacing, cultural differences, varieties of tempo, bodily needs and diverging time perceptions are rendered unimportant when schemes and graphs emerge. Money makes the world go around—now, does it? In my view money tries to make the world go straight—and that is where the tensions begin.

In the timescapes of organizational life (Adam et. al. 2002), the act of balancing times is obscured by the postulation of control. Control systems imply bureaucratization, bureaucratization leads to rules and regulations. Rules and regulations form regimes. Regimes are the tools of organizational politics. And organizational politics put in force temporal regimes that can be, and often are, out of sync with our daily temporal needs. On a different level, organizational temporal regimes collide with the effects of our way of organizing: in terms of sustainability and long-term organization this is important for life on our planet.

One paradox in the field of time and organization is that we hardly apply knowledge about “other times” when it comes to the time use and time perception in organizations. We are increasingly forced to comply with the rigid and the foreign, the temporal regimes that are presented as fair and important for output and production—for instance, by the developments of “new public management”. Sometimes, doom scenarios are used to keep us from reacting otherwise (Urien 2003): increasingly the idea of a global