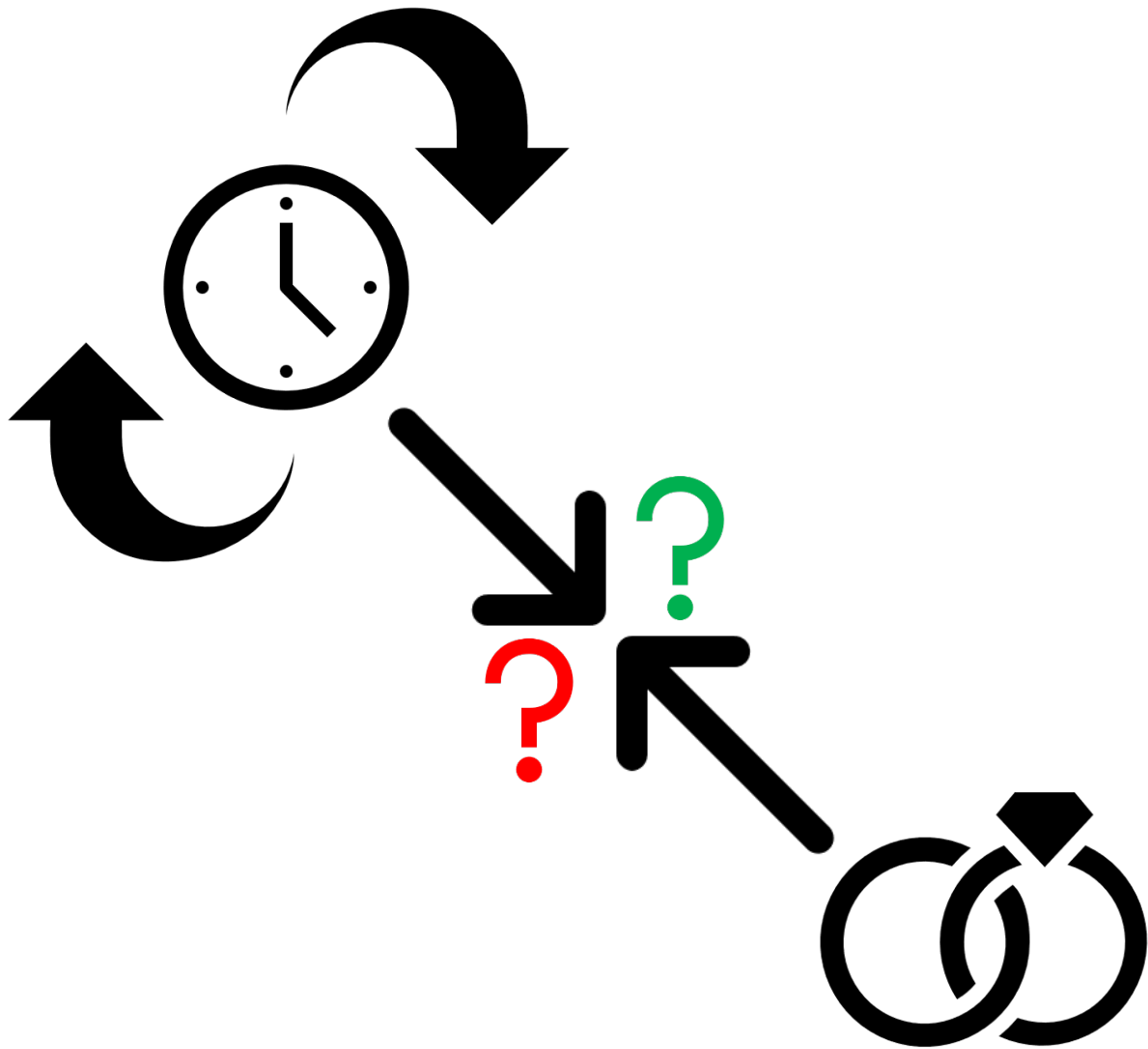


Consultancy and extreme working hours: an everlasting marriage?  
*An explanatory study on the inertia of the working time regime within a big consulting firm.*



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## Abstract

In this study the following research question has been answered: *What are the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins and their internal differences in a consulting firm, in order to explain the inertia of working time regime of that firm?* In order to answer this question a qualitative research design and specifically the template analysis technique is used. Multiple possible underlying reasons have been drawn up from the literature, while leaving room for extra reasons which could be constructed from the empirical findings. The empirical information was gathered by conducting interviews with consultants of a big consulting firm. In this way the reasons for the enactment of lock-ins were examined in-depth.

Findings suggest that this big consulting firm should at least tackle the following possible drivers for the enactment of lock-ins: ‘habitualization’, ‘reciprocal typification’ and ‘value infusion’. Strategies which tackle these reasons need to be developed in order to decrease the inertia of the working time regime and to cope with the negative consequences of working extreme hours.

Key words: Inertia of the working time regime, Enactment of lock-ins, Big consulting firm, Consultants

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# 1. Introduction

Excessive working hours is a core issue in a lot of working fields. Even though the negative effects of working excessive hours are clear and widely known, this issue persists. First of all, excessive working hours have been associated with various detrimental organizational outcomes (Pfeffer, 2018; Pfeffer and Carney, 2018; Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2017; Ten Brummelhuis and Rothbard, 2018; Toker, 2018). For instance, excessive working hours impair productivity, creativity and it can reinforce gender inequality (Michel, 2011; Perlow and Porter, 2009; Acker, 1990; Gascoigne et al., 2015; Reid, 2015). Secondly, working excessive hours put employees with a household and a family at a disadvantage. These negative effects of excessive working hours create individual as well as organizational problems. Even though this knowledge is generally accepted in organizations, the inertia of working time regimes that sustain excessive working hours is still persistent (Perlow, 1997; Perlow, 1999; D’unno, 2011; Kellogg, 2012).

One of those inflicted types of organizations are consulting firms. Consulting firms are infamously known for normalizing excessive working hours (Consultancy.nl, 2013; Financieel dagblad, 2018). The negative consequences of the normalization of excessive working hours are for instance the high percentage of employees with burn-outs and a high turnover of young professionals (Nyenrode, 2018). This is interesting because at the same time consulting firms compete with other sectors to hire those young professionals in the war on talent (Economic times, 2016; Accountant.nl, 2018). However, there is inertia among managers to change working time regimes. Furthermore, legislation addressed to reduce excessive working hours is often subject of discussion (Perlow, 1997; Perlow, 1999; D’unno, 2011; Kellogg, 2012).

Meiksins and Whalley (2018, p. 76) indicate that conservatism isn’t the only driver that determines the inertia. They name undefined “systematic difficulties” as responsible drivers. Schreyögg and Sydow (2011) suggest that lock-ins lead to inertia. A lock-in is a “situation or outcome where the trajectory of a path becomes confined to a single solution that does not need to be efficient” (Schreyögg and Sydow, 2011). However, there is no knowledge on what underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins are. Further research is essential to get an understanding on these systematic difficulties by explaining the inertia of working time regimes and what the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins within an organization are. This leads to the following research question:

*What are the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins and their internal differences in a consulting firm, in order to explain the inertia of working time regime of that firm?*

To provide an answer to the research question, a qualitative research design will be used. By means of a qualitative research design, the phenomenon inertia of working time regime within a consulting firm will be examined in-depth. Looking at the research question, a case study fits this research best. A case study permits to investigate an empirical phenomenon in its natural context and by doing so catches its specific and unique complexities (Bleijenbergh, 2013, pp. 10-11; Swanborn 2013, pp. 10-15). In this research, the aim is to get an understanding of these specific and unique complexities by examining theories about the possible underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins and interviewing consultants in order to investigate lock-ins in a

consulting firm. Resulting into an attempt to explain the inertia of the working time regime of a consulting firm.

The practical contribution of this research is explaining the inertia of the working time regime of the selected consulting firm. In this way, this firm is able to understand the inertia. This knowledge is important for the firm, so that it can develop strategies to address the inertia. This would help them to decrease the excessive working hours and therefore the number of consultants with burn-outs. Furthermore, this would help with maintaining young professionals for their company.

The scientific contribution of this research is giving insights into the inertia of the working time regime of a consulting firm. Specifically, by trying to address why a working time regime with long hours persists. As indicated, the current literature on this specific phenomenon is underdeveloped and needs further research. Progress can be made by investigating the lock-ins that together might explain the inertia of the working time regime of a consulting firm in a specific context.

The outline of this thesis is as followed: first of all, relevant literature related to working time regimes and lock-ins will be reviewed. Secondly, the methodological choices will be discussed. In this chapter, explanations will be given on why there has been chosen for a qualitative exploratory research and on what basis the specific consultants have been chosen. This chapter will be finished by discussing why semi-structured interviews are helpful in this case, how the results from the interviews will be processed and the possible explanations for the inertia of working time regimes will be operationalized. In the following chapter the empirically gathered results of the interviewed consultants will be set out per possible explanation of inertia of working time regimes. Finally, in the last chapter the results will be discussed and combined in a conclusion that answers the research question. Furthermore, practical implications will be indicated and limitations of the research and possibilities for further research will be discussed.

## **2. Theoretical background**

This chapter elaborates on literature in order to try to explain the inertia of working time regime of a consulting firm. In the first part of the chapter, an introduction is given of working time regimes in relation to consulting firms. Elements such as the effects of working excessive hours, path dependency and lock-ins are explained. In the second part, possible underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins within consulting firms are addressed.

### **2.1 Introduction Working Time Regimes**

Working time is a period of time that a human spends working while getting paid. However, there is no (clear) definition of working time regimes. When definitions of several authors are combined, the following definition comes forward (Messenger et al., 2007; Campbell, 1997, p. 201). Working time regime is a certain normalized period of hours per week in which employees work for a company.

Since World War II, 40 hours has been the normalized number of hours worked per week, while many highly qualified knowledge workers, such as consultants or bankers, are characterized by working hours of up to 60 hours per week. Highly qualified knowledge workers and the firms they work for, believe that working these hours means dedication for the job and that it leads to being successful (Campbell, 1997, p. 201; Supiot et al., 2001; Fudge and Vosko, 2001; Joanne, 2004). Consistently working these number of hours could lead to the normalization of excessive working hours and various work-time related issues (Crary, 2013; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Michel, 2011; Perlow, 2012; Snyder, 2016; Wajcman, 2014; Hewlett and Luce, 2006).

In the past few years there have been several studies that showed the adverse consequences of extreme working hours. For instance, excessive working hours have been associated with multiple destructive organizational outcomes (Pfeffer, 2018; Pfeffer and Carney, 2018; Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2017; Ten Brummelhuis and Rothbard, 2018; Toker, 2018). Excessive working hours impair productivity, creativity and durability on the short as well on the long-term (Michel, 2011; Perlow and Porter, 2009). Furthermore, working extreme hours puts employees with a family, or who have to take care of their parents, at a disadvantage. These negative effects of excessive working hours create individual problems which, in the end, also negatively influence organizations (Perlow, 1997; Perlow, 1999; D'anno, 2011; Kellogg, 2012). The consulting sector is infamously known for the tendency to normalize excessive working hours (Consultancy.nl, 2013; Financieel dagblad, 2018). The most common consequences of this working time regime in the sector of consulting firms are high percentages of employees with a burn-out and young professionals leaving the firm because of the extreme working hours (Nyenrode, 2018).

Due to knowledge on the detrimental effects of excessive working hours, organizations are more inclined to make arrangements with employees (Rubery and Grimshaw, 2003; Visser, 2003; Chung, 2009). For instance, organizations have been launching various work-life programs like: flexible working hours, working from home and more opportunities for part-timers. However, most programs fail because of bad results and projects to redesign work often backfire (Kossek et al., 2011; Moen, 2015; Putnam et al., 2014; Perlow and Kelly, 2014). This

results in organizations sticking to their original working time regime and employees which continuously keep working excessive number of hours (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Michel, 2014; Muhr et al., 2012). So despite these efforts, organizations tend not to change their working time regimes. Furthermore, legislation and other attempts to reduce excessive working hours is often a subject of discussion but usually does not lead to impactful changes too (Perlow, 1997; Perlow, 1999; D’unno, 2011; Kellogg, 2012).

Since various work-life programs on reducing the number of working hours do not seem to work in practice, research is needed to investigate which factors drive to the inertia of the working time regimes which impair working excessive hours. Meiksins and Whalley (2018, p. 76) suggest that yet unknown factors drive towards inertia. Path dependency is a model that might define those, yet undefined, drivers. Organizational path dependency searches for yet unknown organizational drivers that create (invisible) barriers to change (David, 1985; David, 1994; Schreyögg and Sydow, 2011). The path dependency process shows how patterns of “action and reflection” in organizations can possibly create a lock-in. The lock-in is a result of “self-reinforcing dynamics triggered by historically contingent events” (Koch, 2011: p. 339). A lock-in is defined as a “situation or outcome where the trajectory of a path becomes confined to a single solution that does not need to be efficient” (Schreyögg and Sydow, 2011). Lock-ins typically are a situation or an outcome where the direction of a path becomes cramped into a single outcome. This outcome does not need to be efficient (Sydow et al., 2012). In the literature there are bodies of knowledge on how lock-ins are built up in organizations, but there is no knowledge on the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins in the present. In the following, focus will be on the enactment of lock-ins in consulting firms, in order to try to explain the inertia of working time regimes.

## **2.2 Possible explanations for the inertia of working time regimes**

It has become clear in the foregoing that the consulting sector is known for the normalization of excessive working hours and that attempts to reduce these working hours do not lead to impactful changes. Even though the negative effects, working extreme hours is still seen as a necessity to achieve success and programs that should change those working time regimes do not work (Perlow, 1997; Perlow, 1999; D’unno; Kellogg, 2012; Consultancy.nl, 2013; Financieel dagblad, 2018). What does the literature say regarding reasons why employees and businesses do not change a once successful way of doing their job, even though they would need to? The following possible explanations are leading in the empirical research to understand the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins within a consulting firm. These possible explanations are specifically selected because they address how prior actions select consecutive action, as insinuated in a lock-in (David, 1985; David, 1994; Schreyögg and Sydow, 2011; Koch, 2011).

### **Habitualization**

Habitualization develops when an actor has a presumption about a certain set of actions it undertakes in the future. The actor becomes attentive of the set of actions and recognizes the actions as a separate entity. The combination of actions forms a specific pattern “which, ipso facto, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern” (Berger and Luckman, 1967, p. 53;

Schulz, 2008). For consultants this implies that they develop expectations of their own (excessive) working hours in the future. Berger and Luckman (1967, p. 53) and Schulz (2008) state that this leads to awareness of which tasks belong to certain set of actions, and which not. Resulting into an actor which likely selects consecutive actions on basis of familiar experiences in the past. So, for consultants this could mean that they make day to day choices that lead to working extreme hours and do it over and over again because they recognize the parts of that set of actions. This is backed up by Mazmanian et al. (2013), Perlow (2012) and Reid (2015). They found that highly qualified knowledge workers such as consultants, generate self-perpetuating vicious cycles which for instance could also result into regimes of excessive working hours. Furthermore, Schulz (2008) adds that the process of day to day making the same choices creates familiarity and strengthens the degree of habitualization.

The second aspect of habitualization is that the execution of actions can be enhanced by pride and this especially happens in jobs where the efforts of the actor are visible (Schulz, 2008). This connects to the idea that highly qualified knowledge workers, like consultants, believe that working a high number of hours over and over again is a sign of dedication and commitment (Campbell, 1997, p. 201; Supiot et al., 2001; Fudge and Vosko, 2001; Joanne, 2004). This implies for consultants that they are more inclined to execute a set of activities that leads to working excessive hours if they feel pride in the execution of these actions. According to the ‘flexibility stigma’ this seems to be true since highly qualified knowledge workers, like consultants, stick to paths that bring up positive feelings and do not like leaving their typical path (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014; Williams et al., 2013).

### **Reciprocal typification**

Reciprocal typification is a mechanism that represents an extension of the first possible explanations of the inertia of working time regimes: habitualization. Reciprocal typification adds the relationship between participants of a certain set of actions. Actors develop expectations about the behavior of others (Schulz, 2008). This implies that reciprocal typification is present when consultants get assumptions about the behavior of each other. One consultant recognizes a certain recurrent pattern that lead up to long working hours by another consultant or multiple consultants. So, the consultant that recognizes a recurrent pattern develops a typification of the other consultant actions that lead to recurrent long working hours. The actor with the recurrent long working hours also develops a typification of the first actor’s choice to work extreme hours. This process makes the typification reciprocal. Actions become predictable and the actions are guided by images about the expected reactions of each other (Berger and Luckman, 1967, pp. 56-59). For consulting firms this could mean that a consultant works a certain number of hours in order to fulfill the possible expectations and because they expect that their co-workers do the same. This is implied by Covalleski et al. (1998, p. 324) which state that new employees internalize the image they got about what is a common thing to do, up to the point of them acting the same as the rest of the company.

Furthermore, when a certain actor does not follow its typical path, it raises questions from other actors (Nelson and Winter, 1982). Highly qualified knowledge workers, like consultants, are troubled by a flexibility stigma when they do not follow their typical path. They fear marginalization in their work and work-relations because of what others think of their behavior (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014; Williams et al., 2013). For instance, marginalization in



their relations with co-workers. This implies that consultants rather choose to follow their typical path of performing actions that lead to working long hours because they are feared of marginalization in their work and work-relations. Besides, actors who do departure from their typical path try to seek agreements or negotiate in order to diminish the conflicts (Nelson and Winter, 1982). For consultants this could mean that when they don't work the same excessive number of hours as their colleagues do, they get inflicted and try to seek agreements, like working extra in weekends to make up for the lost hours during the conventional working week.

### **Institutionalization**

Institutionalization is related to the joint long-term history between actors that affects each other's actions on a collective level. The first aspect of institutionalization occurs when actions are handed down to the new generation of workers in the organization. The new generation of workers does not know anything about the history of actions in the firm. As a result, the new workers accept the actions because they believe that is the way how things work (Schulz, 2008). For consultants who just started working at a firm this could mean that they only have experience with the actions that lead to working excessive number of hours, which are passed down by their colleagues with a longer history of working in the firm. The new generation is unknown of the actions which lie in the past. Due to the lack of the origin of the actions, the new generation accepts them as "That's how these things are done" and see them as historical and objectively facts (Schulz, 2008). Covalleski et al. (1998, p. 324) confirms this by stating that new employees incorporate what the rest of the company tells them is usual. This leads to new employees which act as the rest of the company within a short period of time.

Furthermore, when new generations take over this behavior of executing certain actions it thickens these actions can turn them into coercive norms (Berger and Luckman, 1967, pp. 59-60). For consulting firms this implies that consultants work excessive number of hours because they were taught to do so, and they pass this on to new colleagues. This results in working excessive number of hours, which is seen as a norm for consultants. This is backed-up by Covalleski et al. (1998, p. 324) which state that new employees internalize the "ideal working image" and "hyper-identify" with that image up to the state of employees becoming "corporate clones" which fulfill the task as it has been done as long as they can remember.

### **Value Infusion**

Value infusion is related to actions that have symbolic or sentimental attachments for actors. The symbolic or sentimental attachments are shared among the actors and are taken for granted by them. The selection of actions is guided by the values that each actor holds for the actions (Selznick, 1957, p. 17). This implies for consultants that they choose to work long hours because they attach feelings to it and furthermore they share these feelings with each other. This is supported by Williams et al. (2016, p. 526) which state that identities and beliefs that reward working long hours are seen as being loyal and fuel extreme working hours.

Furthermore, value infusion is likely to deepen with recurrent actions, as actors expand their symbolic or sentimental attachments to these actions (Selznick, 1957, p.17). This implies for consulting firms that consultants attach feelings to working long hours and that these feelings get stronger each time they work these number of hours. Covalleski et al. (1998, p. 324) back this up by stating that new employees internalize themselves fast, fulfill the task as is has

been as long as they can remember and therefore take over the identity that rewards working long hours.

Now the possible explanations are set out and their importance is clear, but their internal differences are of importance too. In the foregoing is being made clear that these possible explanations can explain the enactment of lock-in(s) that lead to the inertia of working time regimes. These possible explanations have an influence on a certain set of activities that individual actors as well as groups and entire organizations perform. However, the degree that a certain set of activities stays on track due to one or more possible explanations can vary (Schulz, 2008). Some might have stronger effects than others. Furthermore, multiple possible explanations combined may increase the degree of a certain set of activities staying on track (Luhmann, 1995). This implies for consulting firms that each possible explanation and each combination of possible explanations influences the degree of keeping the excessive working hours in place differently. Finally, the differences between the possible explanations are of importance because they are the basis of the strategy that can try to change the working time regime (Schulz, 2008).

The goal of this theoretical background was to gain insights in the possible explanations that lead to the inertia of a working time regime of a consulting firm. Furthermore, it is stated that the internal differences of these possible explanations are of importance for the strategy to change the working time regime. The end results of this framework can extend and complement the existing stream of literature, and the results are of practical use for the consulting firm which is part of this research and wants to change their working time regime. The corresponding research question for this study is: What are the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins and their internal differences in a consulting firm, in order to explain the inertia of working time regime of that firm?

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter elaborates on the methodological choices made in this study. First of all, the qualitative exploratory research design will be discussed. Second, a case description about the investigated consulting firm is given. Third, the operationalization of the possible explanations of the inertia of working time regimes is given. Fourth, the choice for semi-structured interviews is discussed in the data collection paragraph. Fifth, in the paragraph data analysis the coding of the gathered material is discussed. Last, the research ethics is discussed.

#### **3.1 Research design**

To get a better understanding of the inertia of the working time regime of a consulting firms, a qualitative exploratory research design is chosen for this study. By means of a qualitative exploratory research design a not entirely known phenomenon is examined in-depth. In order to make statements about the inertia of the working time regime of a consulting firm, information is collected and interpreted (Bleijenbergh, 2013, pp. 10-11; Swanborn 2013, pp. 10-15). In order to gather material, consultants were interviewed. In these interviews the possible explanations of the inertia of working time regimes, that were discussed in the second chapter, were examined in practice. However, the interview consisted out of open questions to leave room for other insights.

In order to understand the inertia of the working time regime of a consulting firm, there has been chosen to conduct a case study. The literature speaks of a case study when a number of observational units are examined in relation to the entire population. A case study is a study of one or more observational units in their natural environment. The process of conducting a case study takes place during a certain period in time, in order to make pronouncements about the object of research (Bleijenbergh, 2013, pp. 32-38; Vennix, 2011, p. 103). In this case, the information needed for answering the research question is collected by conducting interviews with consultants of a consulting firm. Specific information about the case is discussed in paragraph 3.2.

#### **3.2 Case description**

Within this research consultants were interviewed at a consulting firm. This firm is chosen as a research unit because the consultants in the firm work extensive hours and the firm is trying to improve the work-life balance of their employees. However, they do not know exactly how to improve the work-life balance and what the underlying problems are. Let alone how to solve these problems. This firm is one of the biggest consulting firms over the world and has over 5000 consultants in the Netherlands. The consultants that were interviewed are based in the Netherlands and work for the advisory branch of the company. Specifically, the advisory branch has been chosen because the managers want to know more about the inertia of working time regimes.

Before the process of gathering information started, three consultants partook in test-interviews to make sure that the consultants understood what was meant with each question and the researcher understood the terminology of the consultants. After that preparatory step, twelve

consultants were selected by the researcher and agreed to be interviewed. In order to make sure that all consultants are familiar with the working time regime in this firm, and thus can answer the questions, only consultants were accepted that at least worked a year for this firm. Besides, a distinction has been made between the two function-levels of consultants in the advisory branch because, according the possible explanation ‘institutionalization’, this can have an impact. The two function-levels are (senior) consultant and (senior) manager. Furthermore, it has been made sure that respondents were evenly distributed among the functions.

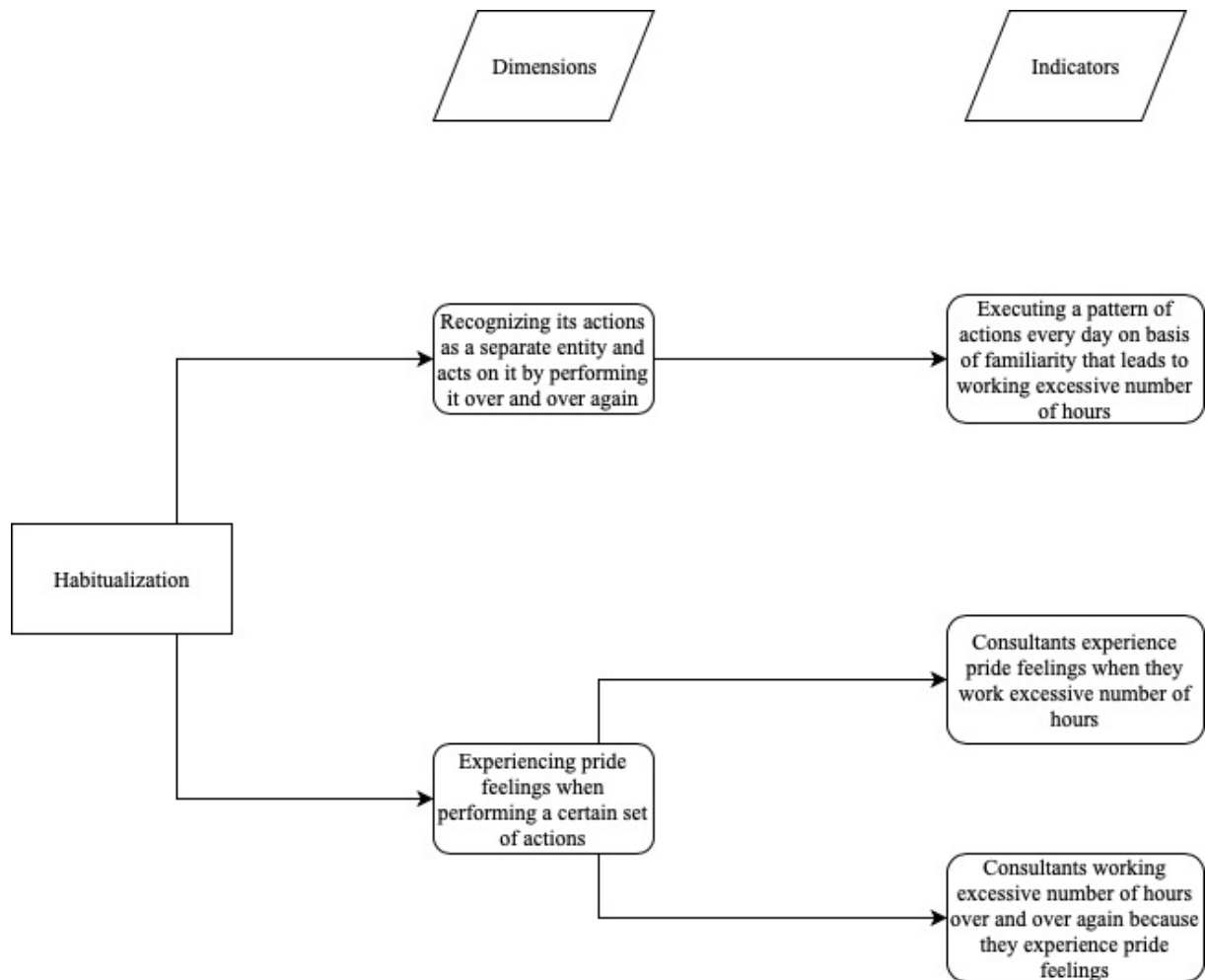
### **3.3 Operationalization**

In this section the operationalization of the four possible explanations is explained. This paragraph is useful for the data collection and the data analysis that follow in 3.4 and 3.5. The possible explanations will be discussed in the following order: habitualization, reciprocal typification, institutionalization and value infusion.

#### **Habitualization**

Habitualization is the possible explanation that according to Berger, Luckman (1967, pp. 56-59) and Schulz (2008) is about actors becoming attentive of a certain set of actions they undertake and having presumptions about the selection of actions in the future. Furthermore, the actor itself raises awareness that the execution of specific actions together form a pattern. The moment an actor recognizes his or her actions as a separate entity and specifically acts on it by doing it again and again on basis of familiarity, it can be seen as a dimension of habitualization. The indicator of this dimension is consultants executing a pattern of decisions every single day on basis of familiarity with those decisions and that leads to working extreme number of hours (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Perlow, 2012; Reid, 2015).

The second dimension is about actors feeling pride when they perform a certain set of actions. According to Schulz (2008) actors feel pride when they perform certain actions and this increases the chances of them performing these actions again. Schulz (2008) adds that this behavior is specifically prominent when these actors perform jobs which are visibly to their customers. The first indicator of this dimension is that consultant experience pride feelings when they work extreme number of hours. The second indicator of this dimension is that consultants perform actions that lead to working extreme number of hours because they experience pride feelings when performing them and that feeling is the reason they perform them over and over again. Consultants think that doing this is them showing dedication and commitment (Campbell, 1997, p. 201; Supiot et al., 2001; Fudge and Vosko, 2001; Joanne, 2004).



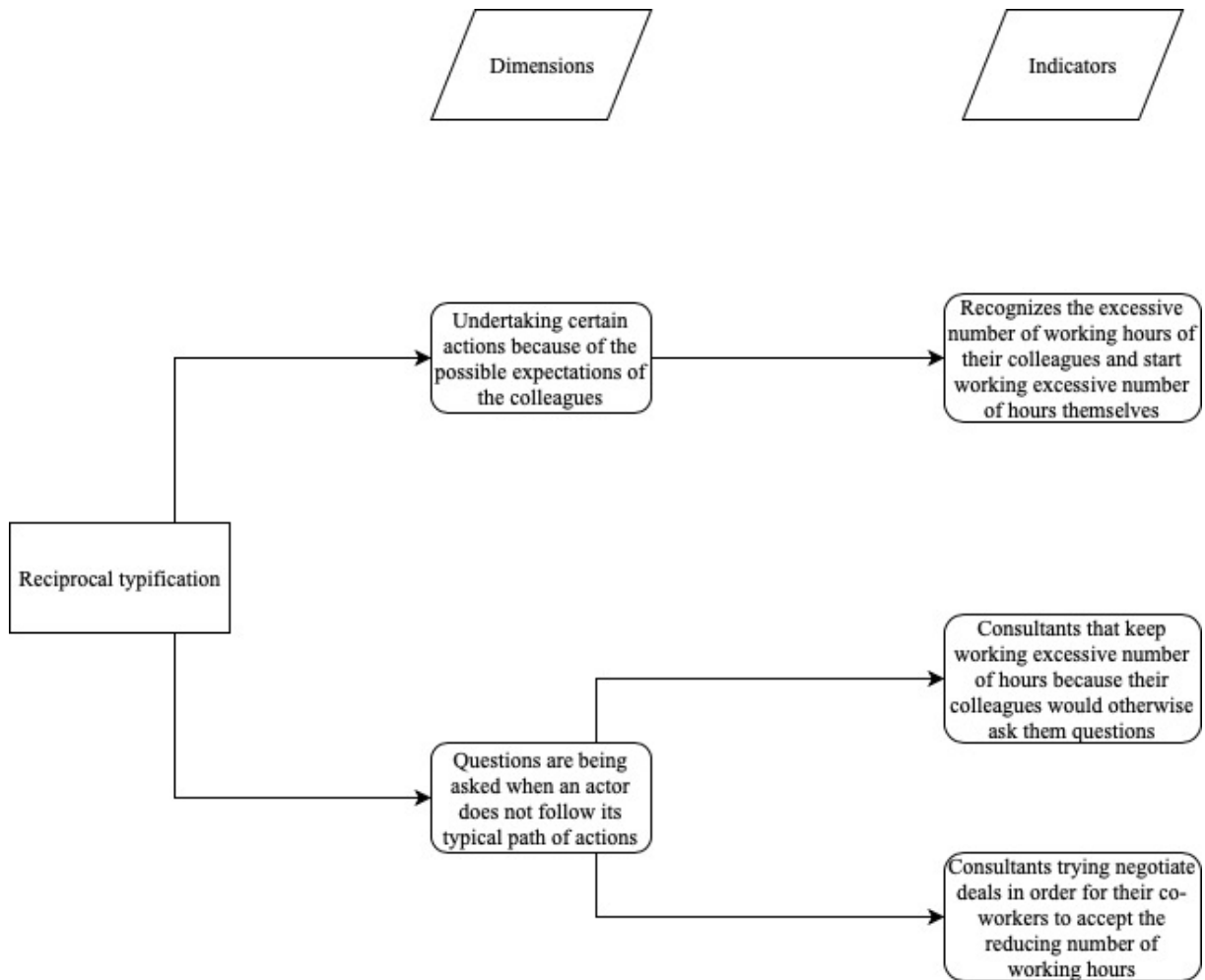
*Figure 1: operationalization of habitualization*

### **Reciprocal typification**

Reciprocal typification is a possible explanation that according to Berger, Luckman (1967, pp. 56-59) and Schulz (2008) is about actors developing expectations about the behavior of other actors. This leads to a situation where the outcomes of the behaviors becomes predictable and a division of behaviors can be established. The dimension is that actors undertake a certain action because of expectations of their colleagues. The indicator of this dimension is that consultant A recognizes the extreme number of working hours of his or her colleague consultant B and that influences consultant A to work the same number of extreme hours as consultant B for reasons of expected behavior (Covaleski et al., 1998, p. 324).

The second dimension is about actors raising questions when another actor does not follow its typical path of actions. These questions might lead to situations where path leaving actors are seeking for ways to reach an agreement or negotiate about their actions (Nelson and Winter, 1982). The first indicator of this dimension is that consultants keep working extreme number of hours because their colleagues would otherwise ask them why they do not work those number of hours anymore (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014; Williams et al., 2013). The second indicator is that consultants are trying to seek for options and negotiate deals in order that their colleagues accept him or her working less number of hours (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014;

Williams et al., 2013). The above discussion on reciprocal typification leads to the following operationalization:



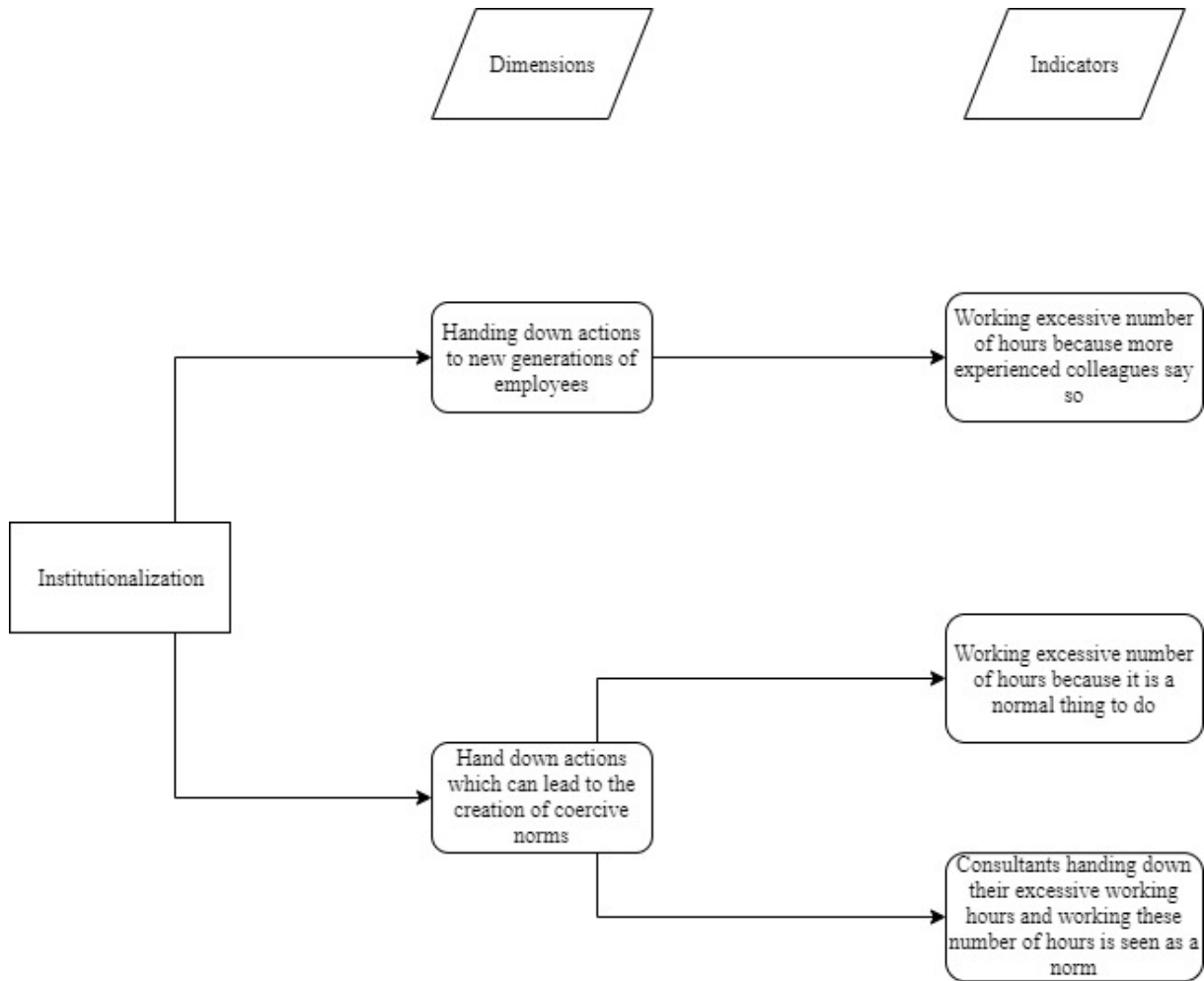
*Figure 2: Operationalization of reciprocal typification*

### **Institutionalization**

Institutionalization is a possible explanation that according to Schulz (2008) is about the joint long-term relation between actors on each other's actions. Institutionalization occurs when actions are handed down from generation to generation. New generations of employees take the actions for granted. This leads to the first dimension: actors hand down their actions to the new generation of employees in the organization. The new generation of employees accepts these actions since they see them as a normal thing to do. The indicator of the first dimension is that consultants work excessive number of hours because their colleagues told them to do so. The second indicator is that consultants work extreme hours because they see these hours as a normal thing to do and incorporate those working hours in a short period of time (Covaleski et al., 1998, p. 324).

The second dimension is that every generation keeps handing down their actions and that this can lead to coercive norms (Berger and Luckman, 1967, pp. 59-60). The indicator is

that consultants hand down their extreme working hours, from generation on generation, and that working extreme hours is seen as a norm (Covaleski et al., 1998, p. 324). The above discussion on institutionalization leads to the following operationalization:



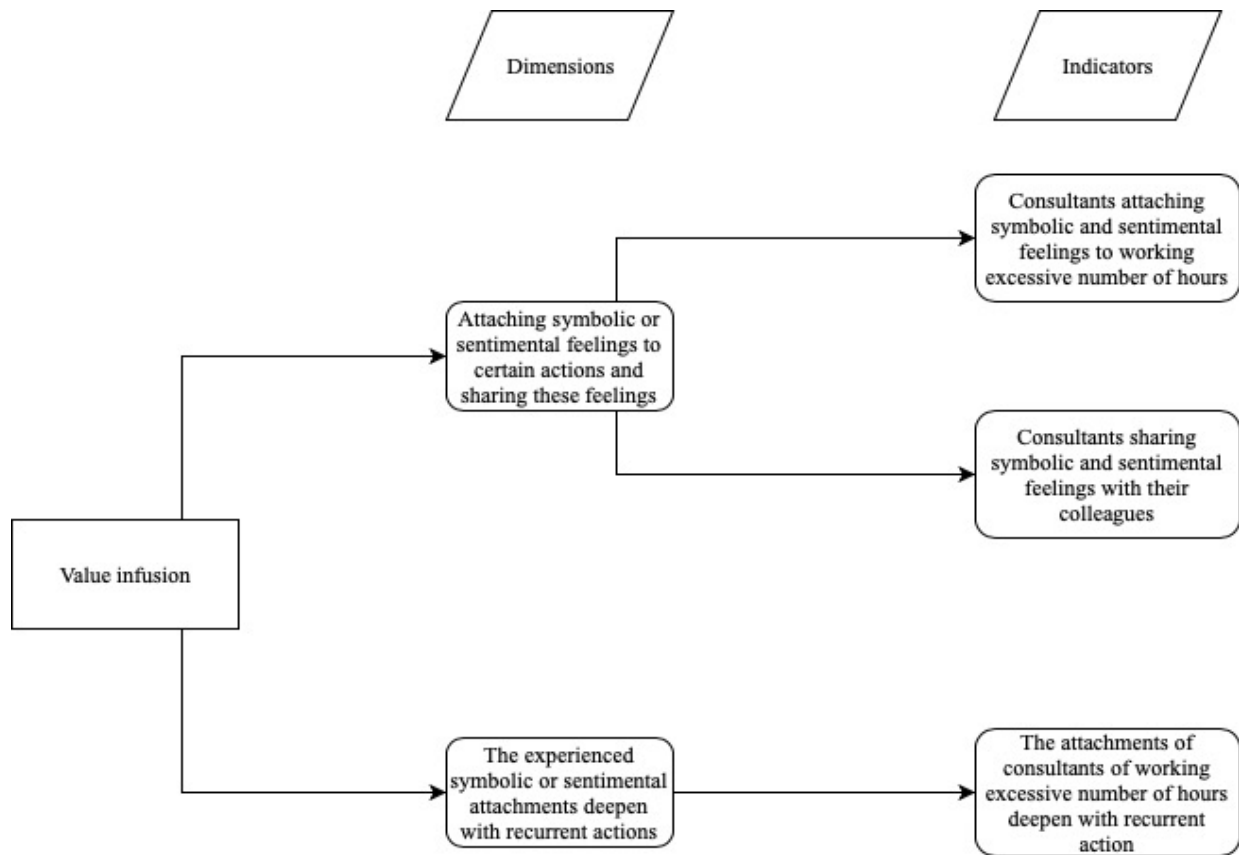
*Figure 2: Operationalization of institutionalization*

### **Value infusion**

Value infusion is a possible explanation that according to Selznick (1957, p. 17) is about actions that have emotional attachments for actors. Those attachments are taken for granted and are commonly experienced by actors. Actors selection of actions is influenced by the experienced values when performing these actions. The first dimension is that actors attach symbolic or sentimental feelings to actions and that they share these feelings with colleagues. The first indicator is that consultants attach symbolic and sentimental feelings to working extreme number of hours (Williams et al., 2016, p. 526). The second indicator is that they share these symbolic and sentimental feelings with their colleagues (Williams et al., 2016, p. 526).

The second dimension is that the symbolic or sentimental attachments that actors experience deepen with recurrent actions. Actors keep performing their specific actions because of the attachments and these attachments expand overtime (Selznick, 1957, p.17). The indicator is that the consultants attachments to working excessive number of hours deepen when they keep working these hours over and over again. For a consultant the attached sentimental and

symbolic feelings becomes stronger every time they work long hours (Covaleski et al., 1998, p. 324). The above discussion on value infusion leads to the following operationalization:



*Figure 3: Operationalization of value infusion*

### 3.4 Data collection

In this study, an attempt was made to generate knowledge about the inertia of the working time regime of a consulting firm. Conducting interviews helps generating this knowledge and provides a view on the behavior of an organization (Symon & Cassell, 2012). When carrying out a qualitative research, it is important that the collected information is detailed. This increases the quality of the research (Bruinsma & Zwanenburg, 1992, pp. 213-214; Bleijenbergh, 2013, pp. 31-32). In order to ensure that the quality remains guaranteed, it was decided in this study to conduct semi-structured interviews. Besides the open questions prepared in advance, semi-structured interviews leave room to elaborate on questions when it is relevant for the research. Furthermore, it is possible to deviate from the order of the questions, provided that this logically matches the respondents answers. In the end, this gives the respondents the opportunity to convey the information in their own words and experiences. In this way, the researcher gets a more in-depth understanding of how the respondent experiences certain processes and practices (Bleijenbergh, 2013, p. 73).

Semi-structured interviews consist out of open questions which are drawn up in advance. Scientific literature, which have been elaborated on in chapter two, formed the basis for the questions. Questions are asked about programs which are available to reduce working



hours, if they make use of these programs, what motivations they have to work these number of hours and what influence working these number of hours has on their lives. The last question of each interview was whether there was a subject or matter that was under-exposed or not discussed and that they could inform the researcher about it if they thought that it may be useful for the research. The predefined questions were asked to each respondent to ensure that every theoretical aspect out of chapter two was covered (Bleijenbergh, 2013, p. 73; Van Thiel, 2014, pp. 94-95). All questions can be found in paragraph 7.1, appendix A: interviewguide.

The interviews were conducted in a storytelling mode. In this way the interviewer does not ask for an explanation of a theoretical construct, but the interviewer guides the respondent to specific situations if a topic arises. This results in respondents telling stories. Besides the predefined questions, questions were asked to get to the core of their thoughts like: “When do you make use of ...?”, “Why do you feel like this?”, “Who was involved?” and “Can you specify ...?” (Riessman, 1993).

After conducting the interviews, the researcher had the feeling of informational saturation. No new pieces of information were observed in the last interviews. Because of the saturation, no more than twelve interviews were conducted (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). At the ending of each individual interview, the researcher asked the respondent if it would like to read through the transcript and would change something’s that weren’t heard or understood in the right way. To conclude, the respondents and the name of the consulting firm are kept anonymous. Specific information about the anonymity is discussed in paragraph 3.6.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

The preliminary step of data analysis was transcribing the collected material. Each interview is transcribed literally, which means that every spoken word was noted, but non-verbal communication like stutters or repetitions are left out to simplify the process without losing important information (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Symon & Cassell, 2012).

After collecting and transcribing, the data was analyzed. The data of the interviews has been coded in order to structure the data for the analysis process. In the coding process, the template analysis technique has been used. This technique is a form of thematic analysis of the data and in its process it balances a high degree of structure with flexibility to make a connection with the actual case. In this way, template analysis does not suggest a set sequence of coding levels and it creates the possibility of analyzing and interpreting large volumes of textual data in order to explore relations (King, 2012; Crabtree et al., 1999; Symon & Cassell, 2012). This technique allows the researcher to develop a coding template on the basis of a subset of data or specifically, a priori themes. In this study, the subset of data are the four possible explanations given in chapter two. If needed, these possible explanations can be revised and refined after each round of coding. This leads to building a template over and over again on basis of newly gathered data from conducting interviews. Furthermore, this technique allows to add open codes to data that seem to be interesting for the research. After multiple rounds of coding and template building interviews it was clear that the four possible explanations did not need to be altered (King, 2012; Crabtree et al., 1999; Symon & Cassell, 2012). The final template can be found under paragraph 3.3, the operationalization.

After the process of coding, all codes were compared via a table. This table helps with getting a clear overview and distinguishing patterns. The code-table is added in paragraph 7.2, appendix B: coding scheme. In this way it is possible to see which possible explanations make up the inertia of working time regimes.

### **3.6 Research ethics**

Research ethics is a relevant aspect when conducting a research, particularly when the researcher comes in contact with actors. Informed consent is the first aspect of research ethics. Respondents are provided with information to make their own decision on participating in the study (Ritchie et al., 2013). First of all, permission for conducting interviews with consultants of the selected firm was permitted by calling the contact person. Second, the contact person gave permission to contact the consultants via email. In the email the core idea of the research, the data collection technique, the time span and the anonymity of the respondents were discussed. Third, the respondents who agreed to cooperate to the study were provided with information about the researcher, how the data will be collected and used, what actions are expected and how much time is required from the respondent. At last, the respondents were given an opportunity to ask questions if something was unclear or to withdraw from the research.

Anonymity and confidentiality are other relevant aspects of research ethics. The researcher is responsible for taking care of the assurance of the anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents and their answers (Ritchie et al., 2013; Singer & Vinson, 2002). First of all, the collected data is kept safe on a USB-stick in order to prevent ethical issues like supervisors getting to know the confidential pronunciations of respondents. All data collected from the firm is treated as confidential, which means that no one other than the researcher and the appropriate employees of the company gets access to it. Furthermore, it is made sure that the data are made anonymous before someone gets access. After the collection of the data, the respondents were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the statements they made during the interviews. At last, the respondents will be informed about the results. The results are anonymous and ensure that no respondent can be held accountable by the company for their statements.

The third ethical aspect is the position of the researcher. The researcher uses the concept of reflexivity to be cautious of neutrality and the influence of the researcher on the research (Symon & Cassell, 2012). The researcher tried at all times to diminish his possible influence on the study by thinking before each step what bias he could have and tried to banish it out. Furthermore, in this research the relation between the researcher and the researched phenomenon is taken into account. Consultants that participate in the study aren't solely information generators. Relationships with consultants can influence the process and the outcomes of the research and should therefore stay on a professional level (Symon & Cassell, 2012). In order to meet that criteria, constant discussions on ideas and results with peer researchers contributed to keeping track of possible biases.

## 4. Analysis

In this chapter the findings on the possible explanations of the inertia of working time regimes are introduced. First, a small introduction is given that explains the case of the specific working time regime and why the firms efforts of changing it did not work so far. Next to that, each possible explanation is captured and set out in a theme. Following the same structure as in chapter two, starting with the theme habitualization and working down to value infusion.

### 4.1 Possible explanations for the inertia of working time regimes

The specific firm in this research is chosen as a research unit because the consultants in the firm work extensive number of hours and the firm is failing to reduce extensive number of working hours. Each consultant indicated to be working more than 50 hours per week on average and that it could end up by working 70 hours per week on some projects. Furthermore, the firm acknowledges the problem of their consultants working excessive number of hours and is looking for ways to change their working time regime in order to improve the work-life balance of the consultants. However, they are clueless on how to tackle the problem of consultants working excessive number of hours.

#### Habitualization

Habitualization is about consultants creating assumptions about the number of hours they work in the future. The assumptions are based on the actions they performed in the past and that led to working a certain number of hours. The consultant recognizes the pattern of systematical execution of actions that lead to working certain hours and that develops into awareness. From that point onward, the consultants select a pattern of actions that lead to a certain number of hours spent working. This pattern of actions is chosen on basis of their awareness of familiar experiences (Berger and Luckman, 1967, p. 53; Schulz, 2008). No respondent stated that they primarily work excessive number of hours just because they are used to working these hours and recognize and act on the it. However, there seems to be an upcoming trend in this firm that consultants work excessive number of hours because they rather be productive for the firm than to sit in the car during a traffic jam. Even if there is no traffic jam, these group of consultants stated to stick to their regime. Consultants indicated that they often choose to be at their workplace before the traffic jams form in the morning and usually go home after the traffic jams at the end of the working day. The respondents which followed this pattern indicated that this was a choice of their own and led to them working at least nine to ten hours a day.

“I think that traffic jams really have an impact ... . If I am ready at 5:00 PM, I prefer to work until 6:00 PM because otherwise I will be in the traffic jam for 2.5 hours. ... But the traffic jams are also a big reason to come to work early. And you can't leave earlier if you arrived earlier because of meetings and stuff. ... This also applies to others.”  
(Respondent I, manager)

Besides, habitualization is also about consultants working extreme hours because it leads to experiencing pride. In relation to the other aspects of habitualization, every consultant

declared that them experiencing pride when performing their job is one of the most important reasons to work these number of hours. Consultants like to work excessive hours because according to them it shows commitment and effort. This aspect is specifically unique for this firm. This firm is one of the biggest and one of the most widely known and respected firms in the world. When asking respondents to explain why they experience pride, they consistently responded that working for this firm is an honor. Working excessive hours is a way of repaying the firm and that leads to experiencing pride feelings. Furthermore, the feelings of respondent E (consultant) and L (consultant) go even deeper and state the following on their pride feelings when performing their job:

“Yes, I think that I am privileged that I can perform in this job for this firm. You can say that I am experiencing pride when performing my daily activities. I mean, helping the client with something they can’t do their selves, or do not want to, gives quite a good feeling. This also is part of why I love this job and I keep performing in this job. Even though there are some things that could be better but me choosing to work more than 50 hours per week is fine because of those feelings I just mentioned.”

“What I experience is hard to describe, but I certainly experience a sort of pride feelings because I show that I put effort into a certain project. And that project is something the client can’t pull off. That gives me a feeling of pride. In the end, our firm accepted us, and we are only a small percentage that got the offer to perform this job. I put effort in the projects I do, I show my commitment. Furthermore, maybe those feelings, are the reason, make me commit to perform this job each single day. This leads to dining at work because we have to work overtime. But commitment, that is something I like to show or to give.”

Besides, consultants are more likely to constantly put in extra hours of work if they experience pride in their job over and over again (Schulz, 2008). Pride is a firm-specific reason that they keep working excessive hours. Respondent G (manager) emphasizes that it works extra hours every week for all the years the respondent worked at the firm, because performing the job produces pride feelings: “Work is the reason that I get pride feelings. We work for one of the biggest firm of the world. This influences why I keep working overtime”. Respondent A agrees and says: “I find it not very difficult to work more than 50 or even 60 hours. The positive feeling, feeling pride, keeps me working these number of hours. Pride is the reason for me going to work”. Consultants in this firm working excessive hours because of experiencing pride feelings could lead to an escalating spiral of working even more hours since habitualization is strengthened when performing this behavior over and over again because it intensifies the pride feelings (Schulz, 2008).

### **Reciprocal typification**

Reciprocal typification is about the number of hours consultants spend working, while taking their relationship with colleague consultants into account. Reciprocal typification occurs when consultants develop assumptions about the number of hours their direct colleagues and supervisors work. This results in consultants which recognize a recurrent pattern about each

other work-related behavior and act on it by working excessive number of hours because of the expectations of others (Berger and Luckman, 1967, p. 53; Schulz, 2008). The respondents indicated that this is a very important aspect in this specific firm. The most recurrent explanations were that everyone expects of you to compete for a promotion. In order to compete one should at least put in the number of hours that others do. This leads to working excessive hours. Respondent A (consultant) phrased it like:

“I think I always work more than 55 hours per week, excluding the travel time. When I think about why I work these number of hours, well honestly, I do it because I am sure that colleagues expect that of me. But on the other side, I also expect that from them. Haha, this keeps the working time regime intact I think and this is what I would be expecting.”

Another recurring part of reciprocal typification in this consulting firm is that consultants keep working excessive number of hours because they want to prevent or diminish conflicts (Nelson and Winter, 1982). The respondents indicated that for them this aspect is even more important than the expectations alone. The ones that want or wanted to work part-time or less number of hours have all experienced some arguments themselves or had heard of conflicts from their colleagues. This directly impacts their feelings and makes them more cautious. This has a deeper impact than the possible expectations. A consultant stated:

“Often send messages, colleagues, that makes jokes about consultants in other firms that do not work more than 40 hours. I really want to work less number of hours, and I am looking for options to do so. But I am not sure I can do that when working for this firm. I do not want someone to be mad at me or something. But I basically knew this when I started working here. And I believe everyone here knows that or gets to know it very fast. But for me this basically means, quitting my job or working the same number of hours. That is how it works.” (Respondent F, consultant)

Next to that the more experienced managers in this firm predict that consultants that do start to work less than around 50 hours per week can expect to receive some questions within the week. “It is clear to me that the consultants feel less comfortable going home or working at home than a senior director or partner. If they do so they will receive some remarks within the first few days if they by a manager or partner” (Respondent C, manager). “But also it is like, if you start working less, I think it will not directly cause any problems. I’m not for sure. But it does raise questions. That plays a big role” (Respondent E, consultant). Furthermore, a consultant stated that in this firm you have to be confident in yourself and be able to ask for conditions like working part-time over and over again in order to withstand the questions and opinions of others. However, the majority of the consultants in this firm are not likely to do so. “The tricky thing is that if you work for someone else who works more, it's hard to say that you go home earlier” (Respondent I, manager). “There were disputes about working hours, some wanted to work less, but others remained seated. But this only happened once. After that they felt obliged to remain seated” (Respondent J, consultant). Furthermore, consultants that do work less than 50 hours only dare to do so because they have a higher function and are more experienced.

However, people that work less than 50 hours make up a small percentage of the firm. The hierarchy is very present in this firm, only the more experienced employees and employees with a higher function dare to discuss with their colleagues when they start asking questions about the number of hours they work.

Just as with habitualization, reciprocal typifications strengthens with recurrent sets of actions. Recurrent sets of actions strengthen the expectations that consultants have about each other. That influences their own behavior and keeps the excessive number of working hours in place (Schulz, 2008). In this firm this phenomenon is clearly present since the thoughts about the expectations of others and possible consequences are of importance and consultants consistently and accordingly act on it.

### **Institutionalization**

Institutionalization is based on the joint history of working hours between consultants and affects each other's choices on a collective scale throughout the organization. Institutionalization occurs when these working hours are handed down to newly signed consultants who lack knowledge on the origin of the particular working hours (Schulz, 2008). This could eventually lead to coercive norms. For instance, if consultants do not work extreme hours, they could get excluded from meetings or their contract will not get renewed (Berger and Luckman, 1967, pp. 59-60). Nonetheless, in this firm consultants declare that they do not work excessive number of hours because of what handed down by supervisors or other consultants with more experience in the company. Consultants work extreme hours because they think it is needed to reach their deadlines and because of the thoughts about the expectations of colleagues. However, in this firm, deadlines and expectations in the form of coercive norms influence if a consultant works extreme working hours. Respondent L (consultant) gave the following explanatory summary:

“I classify my work according to the average number of hours I think I need to finish a project. ... It is not very normal to schedule meetings after 5 p.m., but it is quite normal to have dinner with others and then continue working. Moreover, I also schedule my extra work-related duties after the normal Dutch meal time. But no, I do not really work the hours I do because of what other taught me or because I am afraid if I don't.”

“It differs on a day to day basis what hours I work. But I always work at least nine hours per day and next to that a few hours in the weekend. I am pretty sure that you can't find punishments or something else related to working certain hours in this firm. That would also be weird.”

At last, in general institutionalization becomes stronger by recurrent set of actions which are handed down generation on generation and performed by large number of employees (Schulz, 2008). However, in this firm consultants work excessive hours for reasons of reaching their deadlines. Not because excessive working hours were handed down by more experienced colleagues.

### **Value infusion**

Value infusion is about the symbolic or sentimental attachments consultants have to the number of hours spend working. These attachments are shared and self-evident among the consultants (Selznick, 1957, p. 17). In this firm consultants declare that they attach positive feelings to the number of hours that they work. However, the older consultants seem to attach more positive values to working extreme number of hours than the younger colleagues. This does not yet lead to consultants working less number of hours, but it does lead to increased thoughts about leaving the firm after a couple of years. According to the respondents this nuance is a specific aspect for this firm. They did not had the idea that these declining feelings occurred in any other big consulting firms. Besides, this aspect speaks against possible explanation institutionalization since it states that actions, like for instance working excessive number of hours, are handed down to newly signed consultants which see them as a normal thing to do (Schulz, 2008). Respondent A (consultant) describes it as:

“Sometimes I want to work extra hours, because I feel more emotionally comfortable about it, that I know I work on something more than any other consultant would. Even if I know that there is no time for that, but in that way I can accept it for myself, that I work extra and therefore deliver something better.”

“In the past, I experienced more happiness when working overtime and back then it was very important to me to work more and more. But now I would focus more on my work-life balance than on the project. But maybe, if that happiness comes back, I would go back to working extra hours. I still work extra hours, but no extra extra hours. For me, happiness is super important, unless I find it wrong.”

Whilst on the other hand respondent D (manager) describes it as:

“In terms of content, I think that everyone should complete their initial job. We are hired to do so. Yes, that means you have to work overtime consistently. If you believe that 40 hours is normal. Yes, the contract says so. Yes, we don’t pay you more if you work more than 40 hours. But I experience happy feelings when I work more than 50 or 60 hours per week. All of my colleagues do, but I recognize some change. The new generations doesn’t hold on.”

However, the firm still possesses several aspects that are infused with positive feelings for working excessive hours. Consultants added that in this firm, in relation to other firms they have heard of, there is an assessment structure that values and encourages to work excessive number of hours.

“Furthermore, the assessment structure is also very crooked. We are not assessed on the number of hours that we work. We are judged by the system on the percentage of hours that we are billable, so the percentage of the total amount of hours that we work and earn money for the firm. The higher the better. Certainly, if you have not been assigned

to a project. Then if you are assigned, then you write your overtime hours as billable hours instead of your not billable hours. You want that percentage to be as high as possible as well, so at that point I am inclined to work more hours.” (Respondent F, consultant)

Besides, in this firm the more experienced colleagues and supervisors tell stories about that working certain hours is needed to make it to the top of the firm. However, the managers see a change in perspective among the consultants:

“ ... But I think that the new generation is upcoming and they are much more looking for meaning and (self) development. And also want to do the fun things that they find interesting. And when they are bored, they often leave after several years. I think that there will be a lot more rotation of people. Much higher inflow and outflow of colleagues.” (Respondent D, manager)

Furthermore, value infusion strengthens when consultants attach feelings to working certain hours and perform them over and over again. The recurrent pattern of working extreme hours strengthens their symbolic and sentimental feelings to that action (Selznick, 1957, p. 17). However, the consultants indicated that they see a lot of their colleagues in other consulting firms working less than 50 hours per week, and that they want to do the same later on in their career. But, they do not feel like changing their excessive working hours right away. The respondents acknowledge that their ideas about the future is different that it might have been for consultants in this firm years or decades ago, but working excessive hours over and over again still deepens their positive feelings about working excessive hours, at least in the earlier years of their career.



## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

This chapter elaborates on the findings of this study. The findings are discussed and thereafter combined in order to formulate an answer to the research question. Furthermore, the findings are used to formulate ideas for further studies and the limitations of the study are highlighted. First, the paragraph elaborates into the conclusion of this research. In this paragraph the combination of the findings of the study result in answering the research question. Secondly, the next paragraph starts with the discussion on the relatedness of the findings to the gathered literature and which theoretical and practical implications it has. At last, the limitations of the study and possible future research topics are discussed.

### **5.1 Conclusion**

This study tried to provide an explanation for the inertia of the working time regimes of a big consulting firm. During the interviews insight has been build up on the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins. It became clear that working excessive number of hours as the way of working does not work out anymore for the employees and the organization. Negative consequences of working excessive number of hours such as burn-outs lead to an increase in young professionals who leave the organization at an early stage in their career.

In this firm, consultants like to work excessive number of hours because it is their way of showing commitment and effort. Next to that it is also a way of repaying the firm and that leads to experiencing pride feelings. These firm specific aspects indicate that habitualization is one of the possible explanations that lead to lock-ins. Furthermore, consultants in this firm have assumptions about the number of hours their co-workers work. This results in expectations about each other work-related behavior and consultants act on it by working excessive number of hours. Consultants act like this because they do not want to end up in conflicts. These firm specific aspects indicate that reciprocal typification is one of the possible explanations that lead to lock-ins. Next to these two possible explanations, in this firm consultants are influenced by deadlines and expectations in the form of coercive norms to work extreme number of hours. However, the full theoretical construct of possible explanation institutionalization does not seem to be a firm specific aspect that leads to lock-ins. In addition, in this firm consultants attach positive feelings to their working pattern. However, the more experienced consultants seem to attach more positive values to working extreme number of hours than the less experienced. This directly contradicts possible explanation institutionalization. Another firm specific aspect is the assessment structure that values and encourages consultants to work excessive number of hours. These last two firm specific aspects indicate that value infusion, next to habitualization and reciprocal typification, is one of the possible explanations that lead to lock-ins in this firm.

The possible explanations strengthen each time the underlying actions are performed again. But every possible explanation strengthens in a different way. In this firm, habitualizations strengthens with recurrent passes because it intensifies familiarity. Reciprocal typification strengthens with recurrent passes because it evolves the expectations of consultants about each other. Value infusion strengthens with recurrent passes because it intensifies the symbolic and sentimental feelings of consultants. In conclusion, the actions in this firm that are

guided by habitualization, reciprocal typification and value infusion are more likely to be the reason for lock-ins than institutionalization.

This consulting firm is on a tipping point. The younger employees are less enthusiastic about working excessive number of hours and start leaving this firm at an early stage in their career. Is this firm going to address the drivers that lead to their working time regime? Or are consulting firms and extreme working hours an everlasting marriage? If this consulting firm wants to change their working time regime, they should at least tackle these possible explanations that lead to the enactment of lock-ins.

## **5.2 Theoretical implication**

Building on the insights of the literature and the empirical findings this study tries to contribute to the literature in multiple ways. As described in chapter one, the current literature on this specific phenomenon is underdeveloped. However, out of the literature there are multiple possible underlying reasons extracted which try to explain the enactment of lock-ins (Schulz, 2008). By giving insights into the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins this study tries to contribute to the literature in the management field, specifically to the field of inertia of working time regimes within a big consulting firm.

First of all, this study makes clear which underlying reasons that have been discussed lead in the given circumstances to lock-ins within this specific consulting firm. Out of the existing literature multiple possible explanations have been constructed by Schulz (2008) and four of those were implemented in this study. The possible explanations are ‘habitualization’, ‘reciprocal typification’, ‘institutionalization’ and ‘value infusion’. ‘Habitualization’, ‘reciprocal typification’ and ‘value infusion’ seem to contribute to the enactment of lock-ins that lead to the inertia of the working time regime in this firm. However, the specific situations in where these three occur in this firm contradict the theoretical expectations of possible explanation ‘institutionalization’. This means that in these conditions at this specific firm three out of the four possible explanations contribute to lock-ins. These three possible explanations can be interesting to investigate in other circumstances in this big consulting firm. The circumstances under which the possible explanations stay reliable predictors for lock-ins are important in order to validate the influence of the circumstances on the outplay of the possible explanations. This broadens the knowledge on under which circumstances the specific possible explanations can occur in a big consulting firm.

Secondly, this study points out is that under the given circumstances at least three possible explanation, as explained by Schulz (2008), occur in this consulting firm. The outplay of the three possible explanations can be interesting for further research in other big consulting firms and the outcomes can eventually add to the existing literature on the possible explanations of lock-ins that lead to the inertia of working time regimes within big consulting firms. If these three possible explanations occur in the same circumstances in other studies on big consulting firms, they can be adopted into the established literature and become more reliable and proven explanations.

Thirdly, due to the lack of time to execute a in depth study, chapter two did only include the in advanced estimated most relevant possible underlying reasons of the enactment of lock-ins that are available in the literature combined by Schulz (2008). Furthermore, the underlying

reasons of lock-ins that lead to inertia are lately an interesting topic for researchers. On the short and long-term more possible explanations are likely to be constructed and proven reliable. Adding more yet existing and new and further developed possible explanations in different circumstances could improve the validity and quality of this study.

When taking all these points taken together, the biggest contribution to the existing literature is under which circumstances the underlying reasons that have been discussed seem to influence the enactment of lock-ins within this big consulting firm. This leads to insights on the inertia of working time regimes of a big consulting firm.

### **5.3 Practical implication**

The practical contribution of this study is explaining the inertia of the working time regime of a big consulting firm. This knowledge can be used to develop strategies that address the inertia and as a result decrease the drop-out of young professionals and the percentage of consultants with burnouts. The findings of this study have a few practical implications. As mentioned in last paragraph, in this case multiple possible explanations increase the chances of the enactment of lock-ins and therefore strengthen the inertia of the working time regime in this firm. Out of the findings two practical implications can be made.

First of all, in this firm the expectations about the thoughts of other consultants makes consultants inclined to work excessive number of hours. Furthermore, consultants are inclined to keep working excessive number of hours because they do want to stay away from conflicts, or they try to reach an agreement. An agreement could be that some consultants become part-timers or start working from their homes, but the respondents indicated that this does not work out in this firm because of the clients expectations. Part-timers cannot be placed on most projects because of the recurrent meetings or daily deadlines. Because of this, some consultants choose to leave the organization and others choose to continue working excessive number of hours. In this way, the working time regime is more inclined to remain the same since the people that do want to change do not get the opportunity and choose to neglect their wishes or leave the firm. A beginning would be that the firm communicates to clients and their consultants that they should be more flexible with scheduling meetings and that also part-timers should be accepted to all projects. Even though it is not always convenient for meetings and deadlines.

Secondly, the assessment structure in this firm is an incentive for consultants to work excessive number of hours. Consultants are assessed on the percentage of hours they are billable. The higher the percentage, the better. This is an incentive to work excessive number of hours, especially when consultants have not been assessed to a project for a while and their percentage of billable hours is low. In order to diminish this incentive, a beginning would be that the number of overtime hours does not count in the calculation. Or that the assessment structure is more of a guiding line for consultants rather than a race to prove yourselves.

### **5.4 Limitations of the research**

Conclusions cannot be valued without also indicating the limitations of the study. The first limitation is that this study is only conducted among consultants within a specific branch of a consulting firm, the advisory branch. The findings can only say something about the possible

underlying reasons of enactment of lock-ins of the investigated consulting firm. This results in a lack of insight in the inertia of working time regimes in other branches of this firm. This means that the findings provide no understanding of the inertia of working time regimes in other branches. It is possible that consultants in other branches experience a different degree of inertia of working time regimes. Respondents pointed out that consultants in each branch seem to work different number of hours, but they could not indicate why. When taking this into account, it becomes clear that no generalization can be drawn from this study. However, this case study is of value because it explores a topic about which little is known in this specific situation. In this way a first impression has been given on the topic (Van der Zwaan, 2003, p. 76).

The second limitation is that this study is conducted at only one consulting firm. This firm is one of the biggest and leading consulting firms in the Netherlands and the world, but what about boutique and small consulting firms? Is the degree of inertia of working time regimes the same as in firms of other sizes? And what about branches other than the advisory branch in firms of these sizes? This results in a lack of insight and therefore this study provides only a partial understanding of the inertia of working time regimes in consulting firms of different sizes. However, this partial understanding can be the beginning of a case study where multiple firms are investigated on this topic (Van der Zwaan, 2003, p. 76).

The third limitation is that only interviews were conducted in this study. All the findings are based on the answers that consultants gave. Observations or analyzing documents like meetings and guidelines about working time regimes could have improved the quality of the study. This means that there is no triangulation of data and this impacts the reliability of the study. Furthermore, using more data sources would decrease the risk of systematic bias (Baarda et al., 2008).

## **5.5 Further research**

In this study an explanation has been given for the existence of inertia of the working time regime of this specific consulting firm. Further research can investigate what the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins are and what the reasons for inertia of working time regimes are within other branches of consulting firms and consulting firms of different sizes. Are the underlying reasons for the enactment of lock-ins and the reasons that lead to the inertia of working time regimes the same for other branches and firms of other sizes? This research only focused on the inertia of the working time regime of consultants within an advisory branch of a big and leading consulting firm. Further research can create a more complete view about the underlying reasons of the enactment of lock-ins and the inertia of working time regimes in consulting firms.

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## 7. Appendixes

### 7.1 Appendix A - Interviewguide

Before conducting the interview

- Explaining the reason why conducting an interview is important, indicate the added value of the respondent.
  - Explaining the structure of the interview.
  - Explaining that the respondent, specific function of the respondent and the consultancy firm stays anonymous.
  - Asking if there are any questions about the interview beforehand
  - Asking if the interview can be recorded
  - Indicate that the respondent can ask at any time to stop the recording equipment, for example they want to share confidential information.
- 

1. Regarding the number of hours you spend working, what does your typical work day/week look like?
2. Can you tell me about the differences on number of working hours between projects you work on?
3. What is the reason that you work these number of hours?
4. Can you tell me about the programs the firm has implemented and is available to reduce working hours?
  - a. Can you specify which programs?
5. Who initiated the programs that should reduce working hours?
  - a. Can you specify which functions these people have?
6. When did these programs got implemented and were these available?
  - a. Can you specify this per program?
7. To whom did these programs get available?
  - a. Can you specify which functions these people have?
8. In what degree do you make use of these programs?
  - a. When do you make use of these programs?
  - b. (when they name a certain catch-all term) Can you specify what you mean with that?
9. Why do you make use of these programs?
  - a. (when they name a certain catch-all term) Can you specify what you mean with that?
10. What are your experiences with these programs?
  - a. (when they name a certain catch-all term) Can you specify what you mean with that?

11. Can you tell me why these programs have or haven't have an effect on reducing working hours?
  - a. (when they name a certain catch-all term) Can you specify what you mean with that?
12. Where did that have an impact on your working life?
  - a. (when they name a certain catch-all term) Can you specify what you mean with that?
13. Can you tell me about the differences on number of working hours between projects you work on?
14. Have I so far under-exposed or not discussed a number of topics that you think may be useful for my research? If so, which topics and can you explain those topics?
  - a. (when they name a certain catch-all term) Can you specify what you mean with that?

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-Thanking the respondent for their time and efforts

-Asking if the respondent has any questions or comments after the interview

-Telling the respondent that they receive a copy of the transcription

## 7.2 Appendix B - Coding scheme

<b>ID</b>	<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Quotation Content</b>	<b>Codes</b>
1:6	A	En voor ... de klant.	Habitualization
1:7	A	Ik vind ... gaan werken.	Habitualization
1:18	A	Ik zie ... ervoor voelt	Habitualization
2:2	B	Moet ook ... te komen.	Habitualization
3:2	C	(senior) Associates ... het toewijding.	Habitualization
3:6	C	Nou, wat ... voorbeeld geven.	Habitualization
4:3	D	En goed ... zijn he!	Habitualization
4:4	D	Ik zie ... uren maken.	Habitualization
5:2	E	Ja, ik ... zojuist benoemd.	Habitualization
6:4	F	Verwacht dat ... uit gewoonte.	Habitualization
7:1	G	Werk is ... werk extra.	Habitualization
8:1	H	Bij lagere ... te tonen.	Habitualization
9:1	I	Dat heb ... goed doet.	Habitualization
10:4	J	Zichtbaarheid is ... betrokken bent.	Habitualization

11:4	K	Ja, ik ... je project.	Habitualization
11:3	K	Naast wat ... mij toewijding.	Habitualization
12:3	L	Wat ik ... te geven.	Habitualization
1:2	A	Alles wat ... wordt verwacht.	Reciprocal typification
1:3	A	Ik denk ... dan anders.	Reciprocal typification
1:10	A	Ik denk ... invloed is.	Reciprocal typification
1:12	A	En op ... niet fijn.	Reciprocal typification
2:1	B	Voor mij ... ook doen.	Reciprocal typification
3:1	C	Het is ... of partner.	Reciprocal typification
3:11	C	Dus ze ... bepaalde projecten.	Reciprocal typification
4:5	D	En als ... vragen op.	Reciprocal typification
5:1	E	Maar ook ... erg meespelen.	Reciprocal typification
6:1	F	Als er ... wel vreemd.	Reciprocal typification
6:3	F	Vaak gestuurd ... manier werkt.	Reciprocal typification
7:3	G	Nou, moet ... bewuster op.	Reciprocal typification
8:2	H	Bij lagere ... moet zijn.	Reciprocal typification
9:3	I	Het lastige ... huis gaat.	Reciprocal typification
10:1	J	Wel geschillen ... blijven zitten.	Reciprocal typification
11:2	K	In hoeverre ... zeker invloed.	Reciprocal typification

12:2	L	Maar als ... wel geld.	Reciprocal typification
1:1	A	Hoelang je ... begeleider af.	Institutionalization
3:17	C	Met name, ... moet maken.	Institutionalization
4:1	D	Dat weet ... grondslag ligt.	Institutionalization
6:2	F	Je kan ... horen klagen.	Institutionalization
10:3	J	Ik heb ... de klanten.	Institutionalization
12:1	L	Ik deel ... hollandse etenstijd.	Institutionalization
12:5	L	Het verschilt ... is raar.	Institutionalization
1:4	A	Ik wil ... beters oplevert.	Value infusion
1:5	A	Vroeger was ... onterecht vind.	Value infusion
1:9	A	Alles wat ... leuk vind.	Value infusion
1:11	A	De mensen ... dagen werken.	Value infusion
2:3	B	Er is ... goed gevoel.	Value infusion
3:3	C	Als je ... goed bij.	Value infusion
3:4	C	Zou je ... extra werken	Value infusion
3:5	C	Plus ik ... niet lukt.	Value infusion
3:7	C	Aan de ... leuk vind.	Value infusion



3:8	C	Mijn inschatting ... Geen idee.	Value infusion
4:2	D	Inhoudelijk, vind ... niet volhouden.	Value infusion
4:6	D	Dat is ... van collega's.	Value infusion
5:3	E	Voor mij ... energie van.	Value infusion
5:4	E	Interessant, maar ... te gaan	Value infusion
6:4	F	Wat zijn ... sneller door.	Value infusion
7:2	G	Ik werk ... anderen.	Value infusion
8:3	H	Als je ... daarbij past.	Value infusion
8:4	H	Tuurlijk blijft ... ook gezond.	Value infusion
9:2	I	De dominante ... gewaardeerd wordt.	Value infusion
10:2	J	Maar ik ... zulke uren.	Value infusion
11:1	K	Ik denk ... te zetten.	Value infusion
12:4	L	Zelf vind ... kan regelen.	Value infusion