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Workfulness: governing the disobedient brain

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ABSTRACT

The Scandinavian telecommunication company Telenor recently introduced the notion of Workfulness by adapting digital detox to the workplace. Workfulness is a management program aimed at technology-intensive companies that rely strongly on digital media. The program encompasses strategies of disconnection for employees, including mobile and email-free work hours and technology-free meetings, in order to enhance focus and efficiency. This article investigates Workfulness as one prominent example of managerial approaches that are based on neuroscientific assumptions about human decision-making. Drawing on textual materials and interviews, the analysis shows that Workfulness manages digital distractions in the workplace by establishing a form of stimulus-control rather than appealing to rational self-control. Workfulness alludes to the necessity of making choices, but it considers unconscious behavior, which is explained with reference to preconscious workings of the brain. The human brain becomes a battleground between rational and impulsive decisions, and it is the disobedient brain that needs to be governed in order to become an efficient employee. We situate the Workfulness program as part of and at the same time extending the biopolitical economy by incorporating advances in neurosciences into modes of governance.

Introduction

Digital communication technologies have generally been heralded as facilitating new ways of working and of ultimately helping us with tedious tasks in the workplace. However, critical scholars of technology have noted that digital communication technologies do not necessarily unburden us or allow us to work less. On the contrary, they add new tasks and challenges (Rosa 2003, Levy 2007, Wajcman 2015). In this context, discussions on how to make smart choices in relation to digital communication technologies have emerged. Time-management programs, such as Getting Things Done, have in the last few decades become an integral part of managerial discourses with tangible to-do lists (Mackenzie 2008, Gregg 2015). The premise has been that in a fast-changing world with information overload, permanent interruptions, and multitasking, it might be difficult to prioritize and finish a project. Disregarding external distractions and focusing on the goal will lead to a ‘state of flow’ that is deemed to be highly rewarding (Allen 2001, Csikszentmihályi 2008).

In order to explore these discussions on countering the perils of digital communication technologies in the workplace, this article focuses on one particular management program, Workfulness, that was developed by the Scandinavian telecommunication company Telenor in 2015. Workfulness is a...
program to ‘create a healthy digital working environment,’ mainly by reducing digital distractions in the workplace (Telenor and Gospic 2015, p. 5). This is in line with widespread experiences with digital detox, i.e. attempts to cleanse the body and mind from an overuse of digital devices (Fish 2017, Sutton 2017). The guidelines to restrict the use of technology suggested in the program are intended to help employees maintain focus in a hyper-connected working environment.

We situate the Workfulness program within current trends of digital detox and the Getting Things Done movements because it combines ideas of healthy detoxification with time-management practices. Workfulness, however, extends these methods by including recent findings from cognitive psychology and neurosciences. The program is based on the belief that human behavior is steered by emotions and preconscious processes in the brain. By emphasizing control of the neural processes that cause an unhealthy use of ubiquitous communication technologies, Workfulness reinforces at the same time as it extends the current biopolitical economy. The biopolitics of today stresses individual responsibility in re-engineering not only our minds but also our bodies. Biology is no longer seen as fixed, as destiny, but can constantly be improved and optimized through self-regulating interventions that are increasingly based on neuroscientific knowledge and somatic expertise (Pitts-Taylor 2010, Rose 2013). A growing body of popular literature discusses findings from the neurosciences and speculates about the implications for our capacity to understand and control our bodily and cognitive capacities, triggering the emergence of a body of critical social research on neuroscience. These literatures engage with the question of how neuroscientific knowledge is adopted and appropriated in all kinds of social spheres and what the implications of this adaptation are (Pitts-Taylor 2010, 2016, Callard and Margulies 2011, Choudhury and Slaby 2012, Rose 2013). Many studies within the critical neurosciences emphasize aspects of governmentality and self-regulation practices. Binkley (2014), for example, examines the expanding influence of positive psychology as a new technique of emotional self-optimization, and Pitts-Taylor (2010) investigates how popular discourse on brain plasticity situates the subject in a neoliberal ethic of personal enhancement and risk-avoidance.

In contrast to this research, we critically engage with the limited adaptation of neuroscientific knowledge in managerial discourses that focus on certain techniques and aspects of the literature such as behavioristic training, while excluding others such as brain plasticity. We argue that the strategies proposed in brain management programs such as Workfulness have a slightly different approach than the self-regulating dimensions of the biopolitical economy that have been investigated previously. Workfulness emphasizes preconscious brain functions as causing behavioral problems, thereby questioning rational self-discipline. It is suggested that self-governing techniques for improving the self should be replaced with repeated actions striving to change uncontrolled, irrational behavior, a move that is informed by insights from cognitive psychology and neurobiology (Fiske and Taylor 2008, Carr 2010, Greenfield 2014, Hopper 2014). Retraining the brain through repeated ‘healthy’ behaviors is the preferred method for treating unwanted behavior. The aim of this article is to disentangle the underlying ideas of the Workfulness program as one prominent example of managerial approaches that are based on neuroscientific assumptions about human decision-making. The article, hence, links up to ongoing discussions in critical neuroscience that engage with questions on how brain research is appropriated and applied by diverse societal institutions, discourses and practices (Choudhury and Slaby 2012, Pitts-Taylor 2016), by focusing on how brain-based techniques are applied to regulate the unfocused and digitally connected brain.

In the following sections, we first introduce the Workfulness program and its different elements, situating the program within a wider context of biopolitical practices of governance in the workplace and elucidating its neuroscientific background. We analyze how a discourse of preconscious brain processes is used to explain unwanted behavior in relation to digital technologies and the techniques recommended to gain control. We conclude the article with an attempt to update the discussion of biopolitics in the context of workplace management by focusing on the emergence of a brain-based governmentality which no longer considers the individual as capable of reasonable decisions in relation to irresistible digital devices. Therefore, even self-governance is obsolete and behavioral training and play is introduced instead.
Workfulness: against the perils of digital communication technologies

We have become slaves to technologies and check our mobile phones on average 150 times a day. We have to change this now and start working smarter. (Andreas Kristensson, Innovation and Business Manager at Telenor)¹

Andreas Kristensson, one of the strategists behind the Workfulness program, captures the perils of digital communication technologies today. He urges us to free ourselves from technology and take the lead again. Through conversations with its biggest clients, the telecom company Telenor identified stress and inefficiency caused by unhealthy ways of using digital technology as urgent problems.² Therefore Telenor, together with the brain researcher and entrepreneur Katarina Gospic, developed the program Workfulness as a potentially smarter way of using digital communication technologies in the workplace.

As a central document, the Workfulness guidebook captures various scenarios in the work context that require disconnecting strategies (Figure 1). With the help of accessible language and design, the reader is presented with discussions of digital technology used in meeting contexts, with the problem of constant availability, with specific challenges of open-plan offices, with techniques of smart technology use, and finally with advice for both managers and employees on how to successfully implement Workfulness. The specific suggestions for achieving Workfulness are summarized as:

- Disable pop-up windows and push notifications on the mobile phone and computer
- Have technology-free meetings
- Introduce muted phones as a standard at the office
- Avoid phone calls in open-plan offices
- Define clear time frames and expectations at the workplace for communication via email, text messages, and phone calls
- Introduce focus time, adapted to the personal energy curve
- Use technological solutions available at the workplace, for example, autoreply, which allows employees to steer their availability.

Figure 1. Cover page of the Workfulness Handbook (English version).
Beyond the free guidebook, Telenor offers a set of materials and training sessions to implement Workfulness, primarily in technology-intensive open-plan offices. Involved staff members from Telenor are invited to companies and events to present the program. The visit encompasses inspirational lectures, workshops, and a several weeks long testing period with Telenor staff to try out Workfulness. Hence, Workfulness is a flexible concept that can be transformed according to the needs of specific companies. In addition, YouTube clips document different kinds of experiments as part of the promotion of the program. Additionally, Katarina Gospic, the neuroscientific advisor, has published a number of self-help books that form the background to the program.

**Studying workfulness**

Telenor is one of the world’s major mobile operators with 214 million subscriptions across Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Asia. Their main business is mobile communication services, but in the Scandinavian countries Telenor is also a key player when it comes to broadband and television provision. Since 2015, the Swedish division of the company has developed the concept of Workfulness, and approximately 15–20 employees in the Sales and Innovation, Marketing, and Human Relations departments are working part-time with Workfulness. In 2017, Telenor won a prestigious Swedish communication award for the program.

The study presented here builds on a diverse set of materials tracing the fluid character of the Workfulness program. The primary sources of data consist of an in-depth textual analysis of the Workfulness guidebook and interviews with two managers at Telenor as well as a manager at KliKKi, a middle-size, online marketing company that tested Workfulness as soon as the program was launched in 2015. At Telenor, we interviewed Andreas Kristensson (Sales and Innovation) and Tomas Flodin (Marketing). Andreas Kristensson in particular was central in developing the program together with Katarina Gospic. He is comparatively visible externally, representing the Workfulness program at different events and towards the press. At KliKKi, we interviewed Tobias Wallén (Paid Search Marketing). The interviews were carried out, recorded, and transcribed verbatim during 2016. The quotations used in the article were translated into English by the authors.

The number of interviews was largely defined by access to Telenor managers and the limited number of companies that hitherto have engaged with Workfulness beyond mere inspirational lectures. Interviewing managers and consultants comes, of course, with certain challenges. For example, there is the inclination to assume the role of a ‘spokesperson’ (Delaney 2007) for the company, and in this case the program. In line with that, our interviewees emphasized the positive outcomes as well as the reach of Workfulness. Monitoring media reports covering the program and mapping companies working with Telenor and Workfulness was therefore a necessary approach to balance the potentially overstated importance of the program.

Other materials that are part of the analysis are press releases and articles about the program, YouTube clips promoting Workfulness, and field notes from a public seminar (Reclaim the Brain) that discussed work-related digital stress and mainly addressed managers and CEOs. As background material to the neuroscientific framing of the program, we have included earlier publications of Katarina Gospic. These contextualizing materials, as well as transcripts of the interviews, were analyzed following thematic coding through which we identified core tropes of Workfulness and linked them to larger arguments made within the neuroscientific literature that is linked to the program. Hence, the material collection and analysis grapples with the fluidity of Workfulness, but it relates to and traces emerging brain discourses within the biopolitical economy. Because the program is rather fluid and is constantly being adapted to the needs of the industry and trends in consulting, we have also continued to follow the evolution and implementation of the program beyond the timeframe of this study.

To gather material, we have thus primarily interviewed those who developed the program as well as a manager who implemented Workfulness in the work flows of his company. We did not include
employees’ experiences of Workfulness for two reasons. First, we aimed to engage with the rationality of developing and introducing such a management program rather than the lived experience of it. We were interested in how Telenor and managers motivate and execute the implementation of Workfulness. Second, and related to this, we think that managerial discourses more clearly incorporate and produce a certain ideology, and interviewing employees would have led to questions of agency and resistance that might have diverted the analysis from the ideology of the biopolitical economy.

**Disconnection in the digital age: from individual non-use to management strategy**

While notions of the digitalized information society in the early days of the Internet were largely enthusiastic about digital technologies that would improve participation, enlightenment, and democracy (Robins and Webster 1983, Selwyn 2003, van Dijk 2006, Levy 2007, Syvertsen 2017), current perceptions are slightly different. Workfulness is part of a larger trend that engages with discussions about ‘healthy’ use and a retreat from excessive digital connectivity, which is reflected in a growing body of self-help literature and experiments with disconnecting from the digital world (see, for example, Young 1998, Hallowell 2005, Maushart 2011).

Disconnecting or not using media technologies has previously been examined as a ‘problem’ that needs to be solved. The underlying assumption has been that access to, and the ability to use, media technologies are prerequisites in modern societies, and thus non-use has been perceived as a deficit, even as something abnormal (Selwyn 2003, van Dijk 2006, Kaun and Schwarzenegger 2014). Non-usage of digital technologies has thus primarily been conceptualized as an involuntary exclusion, i.e. cases where individuals might want to use a technology but out of social, economic, or infrastructural reasons are excluded from access, as research on the digital divide suggests (Selwyn 2003, Baumer et al. 2015). However, technology non-use is today increasingly examined as a voluntary avoidance of technology. With digital always-on devices facilitating constant connectivity and availability, concerns about the technologically tethered individual without control over his or her own time have been raised (Turkle 2008, Klingberg 2009, Davis 2013). Some individuals therefore deliberately seek to reduce their technology use by, for instance, resisting certain social media platforms, avoiding certain content, or using media only at specific times. While total avoidance of communication technology is almost impossible due to the transition into a media-saturated society (Ribak and Rosenthal 2015), selected and/or temporary disconnection has become a common phenomenon.

This form of voluntary non-use of technology has by some researchers been examined as a performance, i.e. non-usage as an act of constructing a certain identity. Non-users might, for instance, engage in what Portwood-Stacer (2013) calls ‘conspicuous non-consumption,’ meaning that resistance to social media is an expression of dissatisfaction with the consumer media culture. Similarly, Casemajor et al. (2015) explore digital non-participation as a political action rather than mere passive avoidance. Avoiding certain platforms or practices might be seen as a protest against, for instance, surveillance or disempowering forms of interaction.

While performing a certain identity is considered when examining voluntary non-usage, countering addiction is another way to explain digital disconnection (Baumer et al. 2015). Perceived dependence of technology is, according to Morrison and Gomez (2014), the most urgent motivation for ‘pushback.’ In this context, non-use becomes the ability to resist the temptation of using technology and to regain self-control. As a response, a more balanced and healthy technology use is encouraged. For instance, the concept of Slow Media entered the public discourse in 2009/2010. The guiding principles of Slow Media are, among other things, using media in a more attentive mode and stressing quality over quantity (Rauch 2011). In line with this, digital fasting or detoxing has become a major trend. Detoxing is different from the politically or ideologically motivated technology refusal. The proponents of digital detox are not Luddites, i.e. opposed to technology, but propose a cleansing of the polluting elements of technology. The current proliferation of digital detox literature and boot
camps provides – similar to mindfulness methods in work life – a moment of recalibration, thereby assuring a continued (healthier) use of digital technologies (Fish 2017, Sutton 2017, Syvertsen 2017).

In contrast to these earlier studies, that focused mainly on user practices in everyday life, we consider disconnection as a management technique that is aimed at governing the employee rather than being a self-chosen practice of abstention. We are thus focusing the discussion of digital disconnection on management programs that have been particularly developed for the workplace to increase efficiency and productivity. The importance of the analysis of managerial discourses to understand existing iterations of capitalism has been powerfully demonstrated by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005). In their seminal work in detecting the ‘new spirit of capitalism,’ they identify a shift from a hierarchical organization of work according to the Fordist model to the networked organization that largely relies on employees’ motivation and engagement through studying management texts. In order to succeed, capitalism is obliged to mobilize a large number of people to contribute to processes of accumulation. Because the benefits of working are not always self-evident for the wage earners, the capitalistic system needs to convey a vision of excitement and attractiveness to motivate people to work.

To make commitment to it [working life] worthwhile, to be attractive, capitalism must be capable of being presented to them in the form of activities which, by comparison with alternative opportunities, can be characterized as ‘stimulating’ – that is to say, very generally, and albeit in different ways in different periods, as containing possibilities for self-realization and room for freedom of action. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 16)

According to them, management literature is one of the key sites in which the spirit of capitalism is inscribed. Likewise, Paul du Gay argues that management discourses have always played ‘an active role in attempts to ‘govern’ economic life through creating new ways for people to be at work’ (1996, p. 54).

**Neuroeconomics: from human capital to neuro capital**

In economic theory, human efficiency has earlier been addressed in terms of human capital. The concept of human capital was popularized after the Second World War and inspired numerous subsequent human resource management approaches. According to Bröckling (2011), human capital theory conceptualizes human beings as benefit-maximizing self-entrepreneurs who treat their biological condition and their knowledge, skills, health, and appearance (including prestige and work ethos) as assets that can be invested on the market. With this principle of utility maximization, the theory of human capital turns political economy into biopolitical economy. Human capital theory thus forms the basis for the investment in human minds and bodies in order to enhance their productive capacities. The starting point is that human beings are considered as economic beings (homo oeconomicus) who arrange their actions and social cooperation according to rational principles for maximizing their individual benefits. Bröckling explains the implication of the idea of the homo oeconomicus with Foucault’s understanding of neoliberalism that marks a shift from exchanges on a market to competition that is centered on the individual. The individual becomes an ‘[e]ntrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings’ (Foucault 2008, p. 226). In that context, the ability to make rational choices between different options becomes paramount. The individual, in human capital theory, is someone who needs to constantly decide. Through rational decision-making, individuals allocate their scarce means while pursuing sometimes competing goals.

Bröckling argues further that ‘if individuals constantly try to maximize their benefits, their actions can be guided by raising or lowering their costs and thus altering the calculation. As someone who constantly decides, homo oeconomicus is also “someone who is eminently governable”’ (2011, p. 258). Management approaches are thus implemented to develop human capital by governing the decision-making process towards optimal outcomes. Studies of governmentalities investigate these kinds of strategies for managing the conduct of people as individuals or as groups (Rose 1999, Bröckling et al. 2011). Governmental practices rarely operate by direct command; rather,
people are guided by their freedom – ‘in other words to prompt them to govern themselves, to give them positive incentives to act in a certain way and understand themselves as free subjects’ (Bröckling et al. 2011, p. 13). The ethics of freedom have come to guide our conceptions of how our behavior should be organized and how we should discipline ourselves (Du Gay 1996, Rose 1999).

However, the assumption of rational choices as the basis for the decision-making of individuals has been increasingly questioned. The emerging field of neuroeconomics, integrating economic theories of decision-making with findings from neurosciences and cognitive psychology, aims to provide an understanding of how the brain coordinates neural processes to perform the rather complex tasks involved in decision-making. By locating the problem of choices in the biological substrate of the human brain, decision-making is not seen as a conscious act of reason but, rather, as preconscious processes. The neuroeconomic perspective thus modifies the principle of utility maximization by incorporating the role of emotions and impulses as causes for human behavior (Fiske and Taylor 2008, Dow Schüll and Zaloom 2011). The prominent neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has specifically argued that decision-making depends on biological drives and emotions (2006). Currently, most scientists interested in cognition agree that ‘people typically do not consciously choose between automatic and controlled processes, and that automatic processes influence both motivations that trigger social cognition and behavior that results from it’ (Fiske and Taylor 2008, p. 25). Policy-makers and economists therefore increasingly argue that viable economic models must take human irrationality into account (Dow Schüll and Zaloom 2011).

Because decision-making is central for understanding economic progress, strategies for the optimization of decision-making processes are an integral part of economic theory. Within government studies, the notion of technologies of optimization has been proposed to capture an emerging discourse within the biopolitical economy that aims to maximize the functions and outcomes of the human mind (Rose 2007, Pitts-Taylor 2010, Binkley 2014). Technologies of optimization are constituted by an assemblage of practices, knowledge, equipment, expertise, and medication. They are seeking to cure not only damaged bodies and minds, as in previous health regimes, but to improve first and foremost productive human bodies. ‘Almost any capacity of the human body or soul – strength, endurance, attention, intelligence and the lifespan itself – seems potentially open to improvement by technological intervention’ (Rose 2007, p. 20). In acknowledging the importance of the workings of the brain for the development of human capital, these approaches illuminate the biological foundation of the contemporary biopolitical economy.

In the following, we disentangle the assumptions about human beings that underpin the Workfulness program and consider the different techniques and governmental practices proposed in the program. Unlike other current attempts to integrate neurosciences with social sciences and humanities, for example, by scholars interested in the brain’s ‘resting state’ (Callard and Margulies 2011), we do not seek to support critical cultural inquiries with findings from the neurosciences but aim to deconstruct the ways in which brain research is mobilized in managerial discourses on human efficiency. We conceptualize Workfulness as an assemblage of technologies of optimization seeking to promote productivity and efficiency. ‘Workfulness’ is attained, firstly, through neuroscientific knowledge of how our unconscious mind steers human behavior and, secondly, individual and collective strategies to gain control of unwanted behavior.

**Understanding the brain**

The main intention of the Workfulness program is to identify problems with digital communication technology in the workplace and to provide hands-on solutions. While previous economic models treat employees as entrepreneurial subjects seeking self-realization and rely strongly on the rational self-governance of the employees (Bröckling 2011), the Workfulness program displays an ambivalent approach towards self-governance. The program’s starting point is certainly the rational realization of harmful behavior and the temptation that digital technologies pose. The guidebook addresses employees who are convinced that constantly checking messages on mobile phones is a problem
that needs to be handled. It frequently uses the pronoun ‘we’ to emphasize how obviously wrong our behavior is, as the following sentence illustrates: ‘We sit checking our phones when we really ought to be listening to our colleague’s important presentation’ (Telenor and Gospic 2015, p. 5). At the seminar Reclaim the Brain, with managers and consultants discussing ubiquitous media and the stress that this generates, the panel and the audience clearly shared the opinion that most people use their mobile phones in an unhealthy way. Similarly, Tobias Wallén at KliKKi stated that everyone — including their clients — agree that people’s obsession with mobile phones is ‘sick’ and that it is necessary to do something about it. The nature of the problem is thus assumed to be a common-sense knowledge shared by everyone, including the employees.

Despite this acknowledgement of the problem, it seems impossible to deal with it in a rational manner. According to the guidebook, our phones have become like an irresistible ‘bowl of tasty treats.’ The short-term gratification from checking the mobile phone is compared to having a good meal or sex (Telenor and Gospic 2015, p. 9–10). During the interview at Telenor, Kristensson and Flodin argued in a similar way that it is impossible to think of the use of mobile phones in rational terms.

The paradox of knowing that one behaves wrongly while not being able to change harmful behavior is explained with reference to neuroscientific explanations of human behavior. The guidebook maintains that our brain is built around two competing systems. On the one hand, there is the oldest part of our brain, the limbic system — in the Workfulness guidebook called ‘the reptile brain’ (Telenor and Gospic 2015, p. 18) — that mainly steers quick, stimulus-driven decisions. Here, emotions and impulses are situated. On the other hand, there is the more advanced part of the frontal lobe that has developed most recently in the evolutionary process and steers long-term thinking, future planning, and rational decision-making. This ‘dual-brain hypothesis’ (Dow Schüll and Zaloom 2011) is reiterated in many contemporary theories within the fields of psychology and neuroscience (see, for example, Csíkszentmihályi and Csikszentmihalyi 2006, Klingberg 2009, Kahneman 2011). The two systems interact well most of the time, but sometimes the primitive structure of the brain interferes negatively with the rational decision-making that takes place in the more advanced system. The innate mechanism of the primary emotions located in the limbic system might take over when we are bored or stressed. This in turn, according to the Workfulness program, leads to decisions that give short-term gratification instead of long-term success, which would require rational decision-making processes. According to the guidebook, it is more rewarding (guided by the primitive part of the brain) to handle quick and easy tasks such as replying to text messages rather than to ‘help our colleagues solve a tricky problem’ (Telenor and Gospic 2015, p. 9). We are ‘wired up’ for immediate reward, which we get when we check our phones. In one of the books that form the background to the Workfulness program, Katarina Gospic (2012) explains the competitive relationship between the limbic and frontal lobe system by referring to an example from open-plan offices. Employees working in open-plan offices are exposed to constant distractions from their own and colleagues’ mobile phones, incoming email, background music, and the need to remember what to do next. This means that you waste valuable energy and working memory on ignoring such distractions instead of focusing the brain capacity on important assignments. The brain thus becomes the site of a struggle between short-term satisfaction and long-term work tasks that are relevant for the cognitive capabilities of the employee. In line with contemporary neuroscientific biopolitics, the individual is thus conceptualized as first and foremost a biological creature. As Rose stresses, today personhood ‘no longer concerns itself with the mind or the psyche. Mind is simply what the brain does’ (2007, p. 192). Accordingly, the question is how to limit the harmful behavior caused by impulses situated primarily in the limbic system. Authors within the field of neuropsychology and cognition argue that it is possible, but not easy. Because the primitive system ‘operates automatically and cannot be turned off by will,’ biases cannot always be avoided (Kahneman 2011, p. 28). The only solution is to ‘learn to recognize situations in which mistakes are likely and try harder to avoid significant mistakes’ (Kahneman 2011, p. 28).
**Training the brain**

The link to mindfulness in the name of the program is a playful hint at mindfulness, according to Katarina Gospic. According to the managers at Telenor, though, it is even more than that. Workfulness is described as ‘a state of mind,’ something you ‘achieve’ in a similar way to mindfulness: Workfulness is just so spot on. It describes so well what this is all about. It’s like a state of mind – you can reach workfulness almost like mindfulness. (Interview with Kristensson and Flodin, 2016)

Mindfulness, primarily derived from Buddhist tradition, has gained increased attention as a method to reduce stress and negative emotions (Chiesa 2013, Kabat-Zinn 2013). Being mindful and listening to the body and mind are characteristic of the contemporary health regime and its efforts to turn our lives into an exercise in wellness optimization (Cederström and Spicer 2015). In recent years, mindfulness, meditation, and yoga have been introduced in work settings to improve efficiency while contributing to the general well-being of the employees (Kelloway *et al.* 2008, Reb *et al.* 2015, Good *et al.* 2016, Whitehead *et al.* 2016). Such mindfulness-enhancing practices have been particularly popular among people who have shaped the personal computer and Internet industries, mainly based in the iconic Silicon Valley. The idea of paying attention to your mind in order to foster creativity formed a perfect fit with the ‘Californian ideology’ (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) of Silicon Valley as a cultural mixing pot of Burning Man, California communes, hippies, and an individualistic entrepreneurial value system (Gregg 2015, Fish 2017, Sutton 2017).

There are, however, strong objections of how these methods are applied in contemporary workplaces, since they focus on teaching individual resilience instead of encouraging a change of negative working environments (Gregg 2011, Sharma 2014, Gill and Donaghue 2016). Offering employees a moment of meditation during over-loaded working hours is thought to have no sustained effect besides turning the employee into a renewed subject better adapted to a work life marked by constant distractions and availability. Besides that, the Workfulness program’s nod to mindfulness is a chimera which can be explained by the urge to make the concept of ‘efficiency’ appealing to employees. Contrary to mindfulness methods invoking mindful attention, the Workfulness program maintains that awareness of one’s own and others’ problematic relation with technologies is insufficient. Since improper behavior is caused by automatic processes in the brain, awareness and self-governance are not enough. Workfulness instead suggests behavioral techniques.

While surely downsides of networked and always-on connectivity are considered, the Workfulness program does not suggest less digital technology. Tellingly, during the test period at KliKKi it was not recommended to replace technology with old-fashioned pen and paper, which, according to Mackenzie (2008), is encouraged in many other productivity management guidelines. It was, in fact, quite the opposite, and the manager Tobias Wallén argued that because mobile phones are ‘very personal’ devices, the idea to collect them from the employees or to install call blocking was never an option. Likewise, in the guidebook the trend toward ubiquitous digital technology that moves closer to our bodies in the form of wearables is not perceived as a threat to our working atmosphere and ability to concentrate (Telenor and Gospic 2015, p. 21). Gadgets that ‘discreetly’ register information about their users are considered harmless and even helpful by providing better knowledge of the world. However, devices that actively claim our attention and ‘feed us all kind of information’ create stress and should be used carefully. Apparently, the technological development is not to blame. The solution is not to avoid technology completely, but to use it in a smart way and to enable the individual to make these smart decisions.

Workfulness is based on the idea that we can train our decision-making in critical situations. Besides encouraging the use of technical solutions for managing and sorting incoming calls and messages, the training consists of learning how to resist the temptations from the phones. We replace unpreferred behaviors with preferred behaviors that we repeatedly practice until we automatically behave in the preferred way. They become automated, and we do not have to actively think about them. With simple step-by-step guidelines, Workfulness aims at refocusing the employees’ attention.
to more constructive behavior. In this respect, the Workfulness program bears similarities with behavioral therapy techniques that are increasingly employed to treat Internet addiction (Young 2007) and other kinds of obsessive-compulsive behavior (Schwartz and Beyette 1996, Hopper 2014). This approach assumes that rational reasoning is ineffective to treat behaviors caused by biochemical imbalances in the brain, and instead repeated ‘healthy’ behaviors might repair the ‘gearbox’ in the brain (Schwartz and Beyette 1996). Behavioral strategies to condition healthy reactions in relation to digital technologies are thus concrete expressions of technologies of optimization that are aimed at enhancing the human brain.

The neuroscientific explanation of human behavior as partly irrational and impulsive also surfaces in the ways the disconnection practices are controlled. The program combines a focus on trained and repeated behavior with playful managerial strategies. At KliKKi, for instance, the employees established a kind of informal rating system. When employees were caught cheating in their non-usage, they got a checkmark, and the one that received the most checks had to use ‘a really ugly’ phone case for a month. According to KliKKi’s manager Tobias Wallén, this kind of playful approach towards co- and self-monitoring was appreciated among the staff and contributed to the success of the project:

People were really ‘on the edge’. We could follow those who did the worst. It became a competition, and this was a good thing. Of course, you need to discuss this from the beginning so that people don’t get stressed because of the competition. But for us it was an easy way to follow up. (…) It just worked very, very good for us. (Interview with Wallén, 2016)

Similarly, in one of the promotional videos, the IT consulting firm Crossnet, which had implemented the Workfulness program, developed a system of accumulating sticky notes to mark violations of disconnection rules, both self-reported and those observed by colleagues. The employee who had collected the most notes when the three-week period was completed had to prepare breakfast for the whole team. The Workfulness project was thus turned into a playful competition at these companies.

Andreas Kristensson at Telenor showed great enthusiasm towards this kind of gamification, which, although not formally included in the Workfulness program, he saw as a promising strategy for coming to terms with unhealthy digital media use. For Kristensson, gamification represents a ‘carrot-rather-than-stick approach,’ which he considers very effective for achieving changes in harmful behavior. In a similar vein, Wallén at KliKKi suggested that the playful form of regulating disconnection is less about surveillance and more about ‘setting a culture’. Gamification can be considered the ultimate strategy for governing free subjects because the disciplining tendency of the control procedure is mainly concealed. While previous governmental strategies for encouraging appropriate behavior were ensured by negative feedback-techniques such as punishment, gamification allows for behavior regulation via positive – and more pleasant – feedback (Schrape 2014).

However, by removing the individual’s sense of self-conscious judging and instead focusing on the accumulation of points or badges, gamification encourages not only extrinsically motivated engagement but, more importantly, the individual is seen as lacking agency. It is possible to argue, as Conway (2014) does, that gamification approaches tend to perceive individuals as mindless zombies. The employee is encouraged towards a ‘heterotelic mindset,’ only caring for the game, rather than an ‘autotelic mindset,’ i.e. valuing the activity itself as a worthwhile endeavor (Conway 2014). Furthermore, it reflects one of the main contradictions within the program. On the one hand, employees are encouraged to control their impulses and counter ‘primitive’ gratifications. On the other hand, the implementation and control mechanism of the program is playful and seems to stimulate enjoyment and fun, thereby in fact removing rational self-governmental practice. This is the novelty of this kind of brain-based governmentality – the individual is no longer considered capable of reasonable decisions in relation to irresistible digital devices. The primitive brain system stands in the way. Therefore, even self-governance is obsolete and play is introduced instead. Gamification is not formally included in the program, but as an influential management strategy to engage
especially younger generations in working enthusiastically (Oprescu et al. 2014), it has made its entrance into Workfulness nonetheless.

**Conclusion: workfulness and the biopolitical economy**

Rather than considering Workfulness as digital pushback or Luddism, it should be seen as a corporate response to a societal development risking a backlash. As Kristensson at Telenor mentioned, there have been proposals to introduce bans on emailing outside of office hours in France and Germany. He argued against state regulation, and emphasized the intrinsic motivation of the individual to stay disconnected:

> To try to stop excessive usage has been on the policy agenda in both Germany and France. But this will only make people try to circumvent this kind of regulation. I don’t believe in this. It is much better to educate people about the advantages of, for example, not writing emails at certain times. I don’t think that regulating and shutting things down is the right way to go. (Interview with Kristensson and Flodin, 2016)

Workfulness can thus be seen as a proactive strategy potentially preventing the implementation of policies from the government by focusing on individual solutions. In our interviews, media interest in Telenor’s for the Workfulness program was stressed. Clearly, Telenor senses that they are at the forefront of a broader development and discourse. The Workfulness guidebook states that ‘as an operator we [Telenor] are part of the digitalization process, and as such we also have a responsibility to ensure that businesses and individuals have a healthy digital working environment’ (Telenor and Gospic 2015, p. 5). Eager to show responsibility for this potential backlash against technology, the industry has invented individual methods to handle the disadvantages associated with a constantly connected work environment, and our interviewees maintained that proactively supporting ‘healthy’ usage will indeed increase or maintain the importance of mobile technology in the long run. Without proclaiming a completely technology-free work environment, as suggested in some deceleration arguments (Rosa 2003, Wajcman 2015), the industry thus manages to insist on the benefits of digital communication while simultaneously warning against uncontrolled use. The program reinforces that the individual and their behavior are at the core of the problem. The answer to unhealthy use, according to the guidebook, ‘can be found in the brain.’

In the 'century of biology,' the insights arising from neurosciences and biomedicine have opened up a new way to understand ourselves as fundamentally biological (Rose 2013). In popular self-improvement literature, it is often suggested that humans are largely steered by mechanisms in the brain, particularly its intuitive and automatic systems. In line with that, Workfulness alludes to the necessity to make choices, but it considers emotional and irrational behavior, which is explained with reference to the primitive workings of the brain. The human brain becomes the battleground between rational and impulsive decisions, and guided training and conditioning of our behavior becomes an essential investment in human and neuro capital. In that sense, Workfulness is an example of how the idea of human capital is extended by acknowledging bodily needs, emotions, and irrationality. This is in line with a growing body of literature and inquiries into the irrational aspects of our behavior as well as popular-scientific accounts.10

We have analyzed the work optimization program Workfulness tracing a shift in management discourses towards integrating neurobiology with managerial modes of governance. The specific program analyzed here relies on behavioristic approaches and playful techniques to control the use of digital media. The analysis thus contributes to an understanding of digital media technologies that includes abstention from technology as a practice of self-optimization in the work context.

**Notes**

1. [https://chef.se/sponsrat/workfulness-chefens-nya-priofiga-telenor/](https://chef.se/sponsrat/workfulness-chefens-nya-priofiga-telenor/)
2. Interview with Kristensson and Flodin, 2016.
3. [https://www.telenor.com/](https://www.telenor.com/)
5. The managers have all agreed to be presented with their full names.
6. https://chef.se/almedalen/telenor/
8. If not indicated differently, all quotations have been translated from Swedish by the authors.
9. Telenor Sverige: IT-foretaget Crossnet testade Workfulness https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Vt4K1YrtbA
10. The 2017 Nobel prize in economics was awarded to Richard Thaler for his work on limited rationality and the lack of self-control (nobelprize.org, accessed 2017-12-04).

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