

## **“LA PERRUQUE” IN THE AMERICAN DIGITAL WORKPLACE: STEALING COMPANY TIME**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This agile ethnography is the exploration of “la perruque” (French term meaning “wig”) upon a 21<sup>st</sup> century digital United States workplace. Coined by De Certeau (1984), to colloquially describe the diversionary practice of pilfering an employer’s time for personal use, this construct evolved from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century studies of French manufacturing environments. Our study explored how “la perruque” influenced the social-cultural environment of an Information Age American company, and specifically how and why non-productive time (personal business) was spent disguised as productive work time. Findings indicated that the manifestation of “la perruque” in the U.S. workplace resulted in the erosion of trust, loyalty, and linear monochronic behavior that was exacerbated by American workers’ reliance upon and obsession with mobile digital technology. Field notes recorded workplace cultural changes signifying disintegrating relationships between employees and employers and the increased level of risk employees were willing to take fostered by a digital environment that mandated its employees to be “always on” 24/7/364.” Unique to this study are the applications of the Robin Hood (Nadistic, 2008) and Churchill effects (Folger & Pugh, 2002), and other invisible management remedies to workplace social injustices.*

**Keywords:** La Perruque, Information Ethics, Mobile Tech Devices, Social Injustice, Organizational Culture

### **INTRODUCTION**

The implementation of corporate codes of conduct, ethics/compliance programs, webcams, ID card-readers, biotechnologies, random spot checks of employees’ personal items, and felonious pursuit of criminal theft in the workplace have successfully resulted in a decline of white- and blue-collar larceny in recent years. But what about the misappropriation of an employer’s time? This study focused on the 21<sup>st</sup> century exploration of de Certeau’s metaphoric construct of “la perruque” (French term meaning “wig”), a diversionary practice of using an employer’s resources for personal use. Following his research of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century blue-collar French factory workers by theorizing that a worker’s nonproductive time was often disguised as on-the-job tasks for the employer, De Certeau (1984, pp. 24-25) coined his construct with: “The worker who indulges in ‘la perruque’ actually diverts time for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit.” The purpose of our research was to apply the construct of “la perruque” to a knowledge-based Information Age American workplace where time was the premium resource and the use of mobile technology devices was mandated and prolific.

Our study explored how American workers in a digital environment managed their personal time during the workday to justify their non-work-related activities as essential and appropriate. This paper describes how the constructs of low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) symbolized and influenced the time management practices of corporate America by comparing the hierarchical aesthetic distance between employees and employers to the acceptable measures of risk that workers are willing to take while on the job. We also delved into the multi-tasking practices of employees while they overtly and covertly implemented mobile devices in the workplace by contrasting this current phenomenon to a common prior generalization of monochronic linear American workers (Hall, 1959). Unique to this study was the implementation of agile ethnography, a flexible, iterative, course-correcting approach to qualitative inquiry deploying an embedded researcher. Advanced from Larman’s (2004) agile approach to iterative software development, agile ethnography

enables the researcher to quickly develop a facile working rapport with the organization and Informants because the role of participant-observer is embedded, allowing for immediate acceptance and indistinguishable identity. Our research synthesized various perspectives to present how American employees managed their personal time during the workday to justify their non-work-related activities as essential and appropriate. We argue that American workers' reliance upon and obsession with the implementation of 21<sup>st</sup> century mobile digital technology clearly plays a role in the manifestation of "la perruque" in the white-collar workplace and that these factors influence and convince many employees that "la perruque" is an acceptable practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational time management studies of manufacturing- and service-based environments confirmed that employees spend a certain amount of daily time on what is commonly referred to as personal business (Claessens, Wendelien van Eerde, Rutte, & Roe, 2007; Hollinger, 1986). As early as the 1920-1930s, the benchmark ethnographic study of Western Electric clearly documented the famous "Hawthorne effect" depicting that workers behaved differently when known to be observed (Schwartzman, 1993). However, prior research of "la perruque" in the workplace was generally limited to blue-collar mischief in manufacturing environments (Horning, 1970; Zeitlin, 1971; Altheide, Adler, & Adler, 1978), that indicated employees were comfortable with this deceptive practice on the analog factory floor, long before the introduction of digital technology and the establishment of a knowledge-based service-oriented workplace. Monikers, in the United States such as "homers" (Haraszi, 1978; Anteby, 2003; Deuze, 2006) and "doing Government jobs" (Gouldner, 1954; Dalton, 1959); in France known as "bricoles and pinailles" (Hissard & Hissard, 1978), "bousilles and pindilles" (Gerome, 1998) and "perruques" (de Certeau, 1984; 1990); and in Great Britain referred to as "idling and pilfering" (Ditton, 1977; Mars, 1994; Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999) were commonly assigned to purveyors of poaching resources in the workplace.

Eastin, Glynn, and Griffiths (2007) examined how an employee's psychological state at work influenced the inappropriate use of IT resources. Employees that are bored or stressed were shown to have a tendency to view IT resources as a means of relief. The authors identified that individuals inherently seek psychological equilibrium, and when an employee experiences a negative balance, he tends to turn away from his work duties and rely on non-work related opportunities to achieve psychological balance. Further, when this resolution occurs the employee is unable to self-regulate his use of technology for an escape and is victim to the draw of the technology for continued relief (Griffin & O'Leary-Kelly, 2004). Findings showed that 82% of surveyed individuals surfed the Internet for personal reasons in the workplace. Consequently, stress-based use of IT resources for relief was found to increase stress as the Internet served as a mental stimulant to the individuals instead of relieving them. This research offered perspective on how differing IT resource usage in the workplace occurs and how difficult it is for IT management professionals to understand yet alone curtail this behavior.

Garret and Danziger (2008) explored the notion of cyberslacking as a conception of work-avoidance-strategy that employees undertake to rebel in the workplace as a source of personal satisfaction. The authors studied whether cyberslacking was a result of low-skilled and low-wage deviance or higher status and valued employee downtime in the workplace. While higher status employees have less downtime, they have the tendency to pursue personal activities in the workplace more to compensate for this change. Tabarsa, et al. (2013) discovered that four measures of status were used to identify these higher status employees. These actions included: occupational classification, autonomy, household income, and education. The higher the combination of these measures the more likely an individual is to use the Internet for personal reasons in the workplace. Further, male high-status users are more inclined to exhibit this behavior than females. What makes both studies significant is the finding that an organization's most valued employees are more likely to engage in the personal use of IT resources in the workplace. Therefore, IT management professionals seeking to control cyberslacking discovered the reduction of job satisfaction and the hindrance of productivity occurred among those that the organization values the most.

Sprague (2015) contrasted the volumes of information that individuals create themselves against the amounts of digital information that is ubiquitously generated about them daily. It was found that the scales tipped overwhelmingly towards an overabundance of data that alarmingly consists of a wealth of data points that are

personalized and intimate to an individual. Sprague was unique in that he discovered whenever predictive analytics are used in an adverse employment decision, the burden was placed on the employer to show causation and disclosure instead of directly associating probable outcomes with the conclusions of the analytics. This study showed that potential employee privacy threats arose from the ubiquitous tracking of employee actions and overall patterns of both personal and work-related digital behavior in the workplace.

Studies further showed that a veil of silence surrounded “la perruque,” evidencing that employees and labor unions rarely discussed the construct and that management, regardless of hierarchy, was generally complicit, unless “la perruque” was incorporated as a rationale to dismiss an employee (Anteby, 2008; 2013). Not viewed as fraudulent behavior or illegal activity due to the complicity and silence of management, examples of “la perruque” in a manufacturing environment were cited as: using or taking scrap materials; making or repairing objects for the home; borrowing tools and returning them; creating objects for other employees, such as retirement or service gifts; and basically diverting product and time from the employer for personal use or gain. These clandestine activities were performed “by a worker in the workspace, during work hours, to manufacture or transform artifacts outside of the organization’s [authorized] production” (Kosmann, 1999). Although social and behavioral research has been performed on 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace culture (Anteby, 2008; Jordan, 2013; Kunda, 2006; Rousseau, 2004; Schein, 2010), we were not able to identify an ethnographic study devoted to the application of “la perruque” in a white-collar digital knowledge-based corporate environment that related to the mandated use of mobile tech devices.

## METHODOLOGY

Our research had a two-fold purpose: 1). How was non-productive time spent in the workplace? - and - 2). Why did employees disguise personal business as productive work time? This agile ethnography was accomplished by participant-observation and in-depth Informant conversations of a sample size of fifty-six professional employees and mid-level managers (n=56) within an American Fortune 100 subsidiary company (facility population=282) over a period of three consecutive months. The examination of artifacts included a variety of mobile technology devices.

We purposefully selected our sample size of fifty-six by identifying those employees that were salaried, representative of every department in this facility, and whose performance of their respective roles were designated as essential and integral not only to each professional discipline, department, or customer deliverable, but to the success of the overall corporate mission. Table 1 illustrates the overall composition of the study.

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**Table 1.** Corporate Composition of the Agile Ethnography

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Subject	Gotham Inc. (Subsidiary of a Fortune 100 Global American Co.)
Facility	Mid-Atlantic Location
Population	282 Employees (100%)
Sample Size	n = 56 Employees (20%)
Groups	16 Formal Meetings; 28 Informal (ad hoc) Meetings
Informants	8
Research Period	120 Calendar Days

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Ethnographic data were collected via participant observation of the sample size via sixteen formally scheduled and twenty-eight informal ad hoc meetings. Routine day-to-day observations of an additional thirty-three professional employees were made as they performed their duties within a milieu of offices and cubes. Workplace artifacts, such as mobile digital technology devices, were discussed and examined as eight Informants willingly and eagerly opened up about their systemic use. During the Informant conversations, we asked only one identical question to solicit opinions: *“From your perspective of fairness, is one justified to take back time [steal] from the employer some [or all] of that extra time one gave to the company?”* Table 2 reflects the sample size demographics.

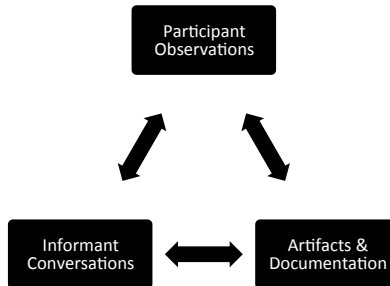
**Table 2.** Corporate Composition of the Sample Size

Demographics	Sample Size	Total	Percentage
		56	100%
Gender	Male	36	64%
	Female	20	36%
Age		56	100%
	35 Yrs. +	48	85%
	Under 35 Yrs.	08	15%
Job Category		56	100%
	Management	34	60%
	Professional	22	40%
Informants		08	100%
	Male	04	50%
	Female	04	50%

We analyzed the observations and conversations in accordance with the iterative agility perspective of Agile Ethnography (Skovira, 2012; Borkovich, 2012; Spangler, Skovira, & Borkovich, 2016) essential to a fast-paced, course-correcting, and ever scope-changing corporate environment. The term “agile” emanates from Larman’s (2004) software development process meaning rapid and flexible response to change, maneuverability, and iteration designed to meet the needs of the end-user. When referring to organizations’ information systems, agility provides the path for constant, incremental and iterative improvement, including course correction and adaptation. The role of agile ethnographer was performed by this paper’s principle author, since a working relationship as a fixed researcher over the prior six-year period had already been firmly established within the subject organization.

Agile ethnography enables the researcher to quickly develop a facile working rapport as an integral participant-observer with the Informants and the sample size. The agile ethnographer easily gains access and group acceptance because the role of the researcher is already developed and embedded as participant-observer, allowing for immediate acceptance and indistinguishable identity. Agile ethnography permits the researcher to inductively spiral a helix through observations and field notes into thick descriptions to find key meanings. Further nexus through descriptive artifacts resulted in independent themes with common threads. The common threads were then linked iteratively back to make overall cultural connections to the group’s learned and accepted meanings through a system similar to Spradley’s (1980) methodology of understanding qualitative observations. Additionally, our examination of mobile electronic devices (i.e., smartphones, tablets, laptops, hot spots, etc.) were consistent with the relationships of artifacts as informing objects (Skovira, 2008) integral to the understanding of the application of “la perruque” to a digital knowledge-based workplace environment.

To increase the credibility and quality of the data, we triangulated our findings by cross-comparing the elements of participant observations, Informant conversations, and examination of artifacts; and then ensured further validity by employing member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with Informants and meeting participants to actively engage them in the process and to corroborate the field notes. Figure 1 depicts our iterative triangulation process.



**Figure 1.** Iterative Triangulation Process. Copyright by D. J. Borkovich (2012, p.17). Reprinted with permission.

## RESULTS

The results of this agile ethnography indicated that stealing company time by employees is one of the most prevalent and potentially costly problems confronted by today's organizations. Given the considerable scope of the scenario, our research evidenced that the problem is also systemic at all levels of management, as well.

Our findings were not at all surprising and depicted that American workers' reliance upon and obsession with the implementation of 21<sup>st</sup> century digital technology clearly played a role in the manifestation of "la perruque" in the workplace. Within the context of pilfering time, results showed that being "always on" proved that American employees were successful polychronic multi-taskers (albeit often surreptitiously) whose actions were fully removed from Hall's (1959) prior research that argued monochronic Americans were most comfortable at pursuing and completing one task at a time before moving onto the next one. Furthermore, our study showed that Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov's (2010) theories of low American power distance and uncertainty avoidance were further degraded and exacerbated by social-cultural changes signifying disintegrating relationships between employer and employee, *formerly based upon mutual trust and loyalty*, now supplanted with the real-time demands of corporate life that employees be technologically tethered and available 24/7/365. These factors influenced and convinced this sample group of U.S. employees that "la perruque" was an acceptable practice in the digital workplace.

## INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

The interpretation of our analysis indicated that "la perruque" had a profound influence upon this American digital workplace. Specifically, we identified three core themes that represented how the professional employees and mid-level managers were affected: Robin Hood Effect; Churchill Effect; and Invisible Workplace Remedies. We present these themes and provide Informant quotes to illustrate the participants' experiences.

### **The Robin Hood Effect**

The erosion of trust and loyalty between employer and employee was evident by the overt implementation of personal mobile tech devices within conference rooms and cubes in full view of the managers and supervisors during meetings and throughout the workday. These explicit observations, along with Informants' corroborations based upon our universal query, "*From your perspective of fairness, is one justified to take back time [steal] from*

*the employer some [or all] of that extra time one gave to the company?"* confirmed our suspicions that the Robin Hood effect (Nadistic, 2008) was alive and well in the corporate white-collar digital environment.

The name Robin Hood almost immediately conjures up the image of the noble robber who steals from the rich to give to the poor, but in a deeper sense the Robin Hood effect is intended as a man of the common people who will stand up to injustice and tyranny (Essays, 2015). Philosophically speaking, the Robin Hood effect in the corporate world can be considered a utilitarian approach (Mill, 1863), since his stealing is for the greater good of many as opposed to the individual.

Therefore, *how was non-productive time spent in the workplace?* Participant observations and Informant conversations provided the following information:

- Frequent systemic use of both company and personal mobile electronic devices (Smartphones, PDAs, Tablets, Laptops, Hot Spots, etc.)
- Prolific transmissions of emails, texts, web surfing for shopping, news, sports scores, games, homework research, and keeping tabs on children and family members
- Personal Calls made to family members, friends, personal business associates, job interviews, doctor and car appointments
- Paying e-bills online or with paper checks; E-Commerce shopping
- Multi-tasking between business vs. personal actions on two or more identical or similar mobile devices
- Those 35+ years of age preferred emails and calls on multiple accounts
- Those under 35 years of age preferred texting

### **The Churchill Effect**

Management was found to be complicit in turning a blind eye to employees' stealing company time as they shared in the same scenario. All employees in the sample size agreed that they considered it "fair" to re-capture lost personal time in the workplace. Implementing the Churchill effect (Folger & Pugh, 2002), management mandated policies against using company digital tech devices for personal use; however, the policies were not enforced to anyone's knowledge. Thus the Churchill effect of ignoring undesirable information was most likely to occur when the situation was not only negative for the salaried employees but judged fundamentally unjust by the managers, as well. Employees were cognizant that if management was interested in firing an employee, this excuse could be used as a justification, but since bosses and supervisors were overtly seen and heard to use digital work devices for personal business, the employees felt free to do the same. Additionally, the loss of loyalty and trust between employer and employee clearly abetted the risk-taking of using work and personal devices in plain sight.

As a result of the Robin Hood and Churchill effects, mobile digital technology successfully blurred the line between a work life and a personal life. A male Informant with 30 years seniority expressed this opinion:

"Work used to be fun and challenging. I enjoyed coming in every morning, and I loved going home to spend time with my family. Now I have lots of stress, trouble sleeping, worried about missing a call, email, text, or meeting. I dread taking vacation because the emails and calls are endless while I am away, and the work is overwhelming when I return. I never wanted to retire, but I just can't imagine starting a 30-year career in this new environment. I feel bad for these kids starting out. They are excited about being here, but it is only going to get worse instead of better for them. They will never know what it is like NOT to be at Big Brother's beck and call every minute of every day."

### **Invisible Workplace Remedies**

Employees expressed that company-mandated mobile technology devices required multi-tasking, particularly by those employees that followed the company rules to utilize work devices only for work purposes. Some employees recognized and accepted a form of company normative control (Kunda, 2006) and opted to use only personal

devices for personal business. Therefore, those rule-bound employees also carried personal smart phones, laptops, tablets, and hot spots for non-work-related purposes requiring a more focused propensity for multi-tasking (polychronicity). Management further understood this practice and again looked the other way, recognizing the demands of 24/7/365 availability placed on the employees, and at times, offered off-the-book incentives as invisible workplace remedies. These incentives consisted of occasional compensatory time off, awards, plaques, small gift cards, and luncheon recognitions.

Therefore, *why did generally honest employees disguise personal business as productive work time?* Participant observations and Informant conversations with professionals and management provided the following comments to our query:

- “They gave us these devices, so if I have to carry them around all the time, I’m going to use them for everything I need.”
- “I’m expected to be available anytime someone wants me, so I’m not going to use my personal cell phone. Let the company pay for my calls and texts.”
- “I really resent being on-call and tied to these devices on my own time like vacation, sick, personal, weekend, and holiday days. This is not what I signed up for.”
- “Yeah, I take a little comfort – small pleasure in doing some personal tasks while I’m here. I work such long hours, there really isn’t time to do these things when I get home.”
- “Of course they are aware of what we are doing. They are doing it, too!”
- “They must be turning a blind eye, or maybe they don’t care what I do.”
- “I think that doing some personal business is the lesser of two evils. We could be calling in sick to take care of these things.”
- “I guess I could be fired, but then the company would have to hire at least 2 people to replace me. I’m here all the time.”
- “As long as I have to keep this thing on me and my boss can track me down day and night, I am using my mobile for everything.”
- “Plaques and gift cards are nice, but I’d rather be appreciated and valued for all the time I put in with a promotion or a raise!”

Our results suggested that employees are willing to take substantial risks (termination, probation, poor performance reviews, demotion of responsibilities, loss of income, and humiliation) to salvage perceived lost or cheated personal time taken by the employer. And those in lesser positions of power and control resented receiving segments of perceived lost wages “invisibly” as if they were “tips” or “perks” from their employers, such as permission to leave work a couple hours early (unrecorded time-off) or on-the-job time devoted to personal business. The crucial common element in these forms of invisible wages was the added power that accrued to the employers. We argue that invisible workplace remedies are meaningful to management as solutions to problems that could be construed as disciplinary or fireable offenses, but are rarely resolved by the recognition that compensation, recognition, or appreciation would bring (Ditton, 1977).

Our study indicated that the theft of time serves as a safety valve for professional employee and managerial frustration. It permits management to avoid the responsibility of job enrichment or salary increases at a relatively low amount of cost per person. This is a practicable assessment since prior quantitative studies have estimated at least 75% of blue- and white-collar employee theft of things occurred at an average of \$1000 per person per year (Greenberg, 1997; Zeitlin, 1971). A conceptualization of employee theft in the workplace can be deeply grounded in the social psychology of group dynamics and the lack of management treating employees with dignity and respect. Our intent was to expose “la perruque” as an important factor in a knowledge-based digital environment where stealing time may prove more critical than stealing things.

Employee theft is generally regarded as a serious offense not only by those responsible for assuring organizations operate as efficiently as possible, but by social scientists studying this phenomenon. However, can stealing company time be defined as criminal and subject to punishment? Theft of time or things may be also a reaction to what employees consider is deviant behavior on the part of their employer, as well. Consequently, one may surmise that our paper suggests that theft of time is most likely among employees who occupy marginal positions in organizations, including those at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy, or new employees with little tenure. But

quite the opposite was found to be true. In this study, everyone observed was stealing company time, overtly and/or covertly, regardless of their position in the organization. We concluded that this type of time theft by employed members of organizations is inevitable and, given the nature of modern social life in concert with constant technological advancements, is very likely to increase in the future.

It became apparent that management clearly recognized the unfairness of 21<sup>st</sup> century corporate culture's reliance upon digital mobile technology and the mandated requirement of employees to be "always on" and available. This mandate imposed upon professionals and managers was generally considered an infringement upon personal lives, health, welfare, and happiness of employees during off-work hours. Furthermore, our interpretations suggested that management is not yet sure how to handle this cultural paradigm shift.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY**

This particular research study had a number of limitations that we wish to address. Our study was centered in a single facility of a large business private sector organization within the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States; and although at one time or another, the entire population was under a visual type of surveillance, only fifty-six professional and managerial employees were integral. Future research would benefit from a larger sample size in other regional locations of the US, as well as a comparison to smaller businesses and entrepreneurial firms. Additionally, the findings of our exploratory study, as well as the data collected from prior manufacturing era research, indicate that future qualitative studies warrant a larger data pool. Other challenges associated with time management studies in a digital knowledge-based workplace environment included obtaining the cooperation, willingness, and honesty of participants to reveal opinions on a sensitive workplace topic; however, future large-scale quantitative research could implement anonymous methodologies toward a potential generalization of the data. Despite these limitations, we purport that this study does make a nascent and valuable contribution to our knowledge of organizational digital behavior and personal time management. As organizations shift work tasks and employees move into digital domains, the abuse of IT resources for the preservation of psychological equilibrium in the workplace will not only persist, but expand. What requires further attention is the continued exploration and subsequent examination of the extent that "la perruque" has permeated the 21<sup>st</sup> century digital workplace. Additional global and domestic qualitative and quantitative studies are warranted to challenge and ascertain the influence of "la perruque" in the white-collar Information Age social-cultural environment.

### **CONCLUSION**

Our findings evidenced that the real-time demands of American professional and managerial corporate life mandated that employees be technologically tethered and always available to their employers resulting in a type of negative reciprocity (retaliation) known as the Robin Hood effect (Nadistic, 2008). This phenomenon convinced employees that it was acceptable to utilize a few work hours each day for personal business because their employers believed it was equally acceptable to take back earned hours of vacation, sick, holiday, evening, and weekend time from the white-collar worker to perform on-call anytime. Also important was our observance of the Churchill effect (Folger & Pugh, 2002), whereby managers' behavior appeared politically correct but in reality distances were placed between themselves and their subordinates when a company pronouncement was viewed to have a negative impact.

We further observed and interpreted that management initiated invisible organizational remedies to workplace injustices, such as allocating an inconspicuous wage system of compensatory time (off-the-books) in lieu of formal compensation or benefits (Conlon, Meyer, & Nowakowski, 2005; Gilliland, Steiner, & Skarlicki, 2008; & Nadistic, 2008). When employees steal company time for personal business as compensation for lost personal time pilfered by the employer, employers turn a blind eye because every level and layer of management is doing the same thing (i.e. pervasive use of mobile tech devices for non-work-related tasks).



As the lines continue to blur between professional and private lives in the workplace, the pervasive use of mobile tech devices for work-related and personal business will continue to accelerate. As long as employees are required to be available and “always on 24/7/365,” employers need to pursue reasonable solutions to mitigate “la perruque” in the workplace; or openly acknowledge that “la perruque” is here to stay in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century digital environment. Management trust in a remote workforce, employee reliability and accountability in various off-site locations, and reliance on mobile tech devices to manage an exponentially increasing information workload, may help mitigate feelings of workplace injustice and employee apathy. These and other remedies are essential to meet the demands of the *new normal* digital social-cultural organizational environment.

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