



# Interfaces of control. Technocratic and socio-ideological control in a global management consultancy firm<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper investigates a variety of forms of management control in a large management consultancy company. The very high level of compliance with corporate objectives among employees is highlighted and singled out as a phenomenon worth exploring. The company exhibits a rich variety of various formal control devices focusing on financial issues as well as human resources. The paper shows that these do not fully work according to intention and that their control effects do not comply that well with the bureaucratic-technocratic logic they rest upon. Technocratic control systems are instead identified as non-obvious sources of socio-ideological control. The paper emphasizes the interface between different forms of control and argues for a more symbolic, meaning-focusing view on bureaucratic and output measurement control.

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## Introduction

Forms of management and organizational control are a common theme in organization and business studies. In fact, the whole idea of management accounting, for example, is founded on the belief that management control is possible, important, and, indeed, necessary. Although the literature on organizational and management control suggests a wide array of forms of control, it is common to emphasize a main form of control, either in the form of a particular organizational structure or in the form of a specific mode of control dominating. Mintzberg's (1983a, 1983b) five types are well-known, as are Edwards'

(1979) three and a variety of versions setting up one authoritarian-hierarchical-tayloristic against a normative-market-self-governance version (e.g. Clegg et al, 1996; Friedman, 1977; Govindarajan, 1988; Govindarajan & Fisher, 1990; Speklé 2001). One influential variation of the last theme is to contrast structural control with cultural control. Earlier enthusiastic versions of this include Peters and Waterman (1982), but also more sceptical researchers like Kunda (1992) have emphasized the significance of normative control—or engineering culture—as a particular form of control.

There is a strong tendency to emphasize an either-or orientation in the literature. The first author of the present paper is no exception, having paid particular attention to cultural control (Alvesson, 1993, 1995). To concentrate on one type of phenomenon may often be motivated by the need to have a focus. Theoretical interest as well as what seems to be vital or interesting in a particular empirical site can create a rationale for

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investigating a particular form of control. It is sometimes also argued that organizations typically are structured in particular configurations and tend to move towards balanced and ‘pure’ forms (Mintzberg, 1983a). In a study of a major American high technology company, Van Maanen and Kunda (1989) emphasize that for many employees “...‘culture’ replaces ‘structure’ as an organizing principle and is used both to explain and guide action” (p. 72). They consider that the formal organization is not, per se, particularly important.

However, a case can be made for understanding various forms of control as simultaneously active, at least in reasonably complex organizations. Indeed, Kunda (1992) maintains that certain elements of bureaucratic control remain in place, even when normative control is predominant. In the company studied by Kunda, control of culture is supplemented by bureaucratic and utilitarian control. To use Mintzberg’s (1983a) typology, a battery of control forms seems to be used in many contemporary organizations, typically blending standardized output measures with standard operating procedures (standardized work procedures) and a professionalized work force (standardized knowledge). In such settings it might be counter-productive to assume the existence of a dominating form. Indeed, different control forms may be linked to, and supporting and sustaining each other, rather than subdued and marginalized by a dominant form.

On a conceptual level, it can be argued that contrasting forms of control, while analytically distinct, do not necessarily exclude each other. On the contrary, it can be argued that structural forms of control also have a significant cultural dimension (Ferner, 2000; Ranson, Hinings, & Greenwood, 1980). From an anthropological point of view, it could be argued that structural forms of control are cultural phenomena themselves, that have and take on specific meaning depending on cultural contexts (taken for granted in Western culture, signifying modernism and/or imperialism in other cultures). Structural forms never exist in a culture-free context, nor is this ideational level necessarily tightly connected to a particular social form. Structural forms of control focusing on behaviour and/or measurable output

are supported and/or complemented, sometimes perhaps challenged or contradicted by, cultural ideas and values.

The present analysis focuses on the interface between certain structural arrangements and the ideologies and norms targeting how people are supposed to think, feel and act. A key theme is how a high level of compliance—including a readiness to work very long hours and accept very ambitious objectives in terms of keeping deadlines and accomplishing high margins in project work—is achieved. How different forms of technocratic control interact and merge with socio-ideological control is investigated.

The empirical domain addressed is the management consulting industry and profession, in particular as it is manifest in very large, international companies whose services include advice-giving and strategic planning as well as the implementation of suggested solutions, often involving a large group of consultants over a long period of time. How a fairly strict form of control is accomplished in one such company is an interesting question which is capable of giving some input into how we can understand modes of management control within the particular empirical domain investigated, but also in more general theoretical terms.

### Forms of management control

Although managers do other things, the exercise of control is a dominant part of the manager’s job (Mintzberg, 1989; Tengblad, 2001). Management control has been defined in numerous ways but most definitions seem to agree that management control includes the exercise of power (influence) in order to secure sufficient resources, and mobilize and orchestrate individual and collective action towards (more or less) given ends (c.f. Langfield-Smith, 1997; Speklé, 2001 for reviews). Management control typically includes an apparatus for specifying, monitoring and evaluating individual and collective action. It focuses worker behaviour, output and/or the minds of the employees. Sometimes it attempts to focus on all three.

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