



First up then out: Self-employment as a response to normative control practices in elite consultancies

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ABSTRACT

While normative control practices aim to raise employee motivation and commitment to professional standards in professional service firms, there is much debate on when and for whom such practices remain motivational. Based on interviews with 18 self-employed consultants who left elite consultancies, we find that, for them, normative control practices, such as learning opportunities and social events, lose appeal over time. This paper contributes to the literature on normative control by conceptualising how consequences, like lack of autonomy, reduced learning and growing work-life conflict, increasingly undermine the motivational impact of normative control practices during a consultant career. Self-employment can help consultants avoid these unwelcome effects because independence solves autonomy issues and improves their work-life balance. Mapping this under-explored but very common move from employment to self-employment in the consulting industry introduces the concept of occupational careers to the debate on boundaryless careers.

1. Introduction

Professional service firms have invented various normative control practices to keep employees committed to professional standards (e.g. Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Gerber & Krzywdzinski, 2019; Robertson & Swan, 2003). These practices, such as social events, learning opportunities, and rewarding career trajectories, attempt to align employees' motivations with corporate goals and values. Increased identification with company goals guides employees' actions. When they internalise the company values as their own, it decreases the likelihood of them leaving (Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2013; Müller, 2017; Sundberg, 2019).

Usually, normative control practices are intertwined with career management and corporate culture management (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Fournier, 1999; Kunda, 1992). The normative control practices are embedded in corporate culture and they are aligned with utilitarian controls, based on various rewards, and coercive controls, based on contractual obligations. In contrast to traditional bureaucratic control regimes, 'under normative control, membership is founded *not only* on the behavioral or economic transaction' (Kunda, 1992, pp. 11, *our italics*). Adding normative controls implies that the various controls

institutionalise the same professional norms. As Fournier puts it, 'these new softwares of control rely on a complex interweaving between bureaucratic logic and the autonomisation of conduct' (Fournier, 1999, p. 293). Indeed, in knowledge-intensive professions, such as management consulting, high-tech engineering, or banking, normative control practices are combined with other organisational controls to motivate professionals to become hardworking, loyal, and committed employees (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Costas, 2012; Fournier, 1999; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Kunda, 1992; Michel, 2011).

Nevertheless, in time, many consultants working for elite consultancies turn to self-employment despite the engaging normative control practices designed to keep them on board. Statistics in the Netherlands show that, currently, almost half of Dutch consultants are self-employed (CBS, 2021; I&O research, 2019). In Italy, that number is even higher (Maestripieri, 2019). Although there are national differences, overall, the percentage of self-employed consultants is very high (Alvesson, 2004; Cross & Swart, 2021; Dendrinis, 2011; Donnelly, 2009). It remains unclear why so many consultants have turned to self-employment and why, as it appears, normative control practices at elite consultancies seem to boost commitment initially but only for a certain period. In other settings, like banking or high-tech engineering, life-long

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employment is still more common, despite reported problems, such as employees experiencing ‘an invasion of their private life by corporate requirements, and, in many cases, considerable personal suffering, manifested in burnout’ (Kunda, 1992, p. 223; Michel, 2011).

While most studies on consultant careers focus on *going up* within elite consultancies, fewer investigate *going out* (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Malhotra, Morris, & Smets, 2010; Meriläinen et al., 2004). Working in consultancies is considered the golden standard, much more than self-employment. For instance, Muzio et al. (2011, p. 448) write that ‘the bulk of management consultants are employed by autonomous professional organisations.’ That is a surprising claim, considering a career in consulting usually ends with self-employment. It seems most consultants only start their careers at one of the big four (consulting divisions of the biggest accountancy firms), big three (biggest strategy consultancies), or similarly large corporate consultancies to get their initial professional training.

Until now, we know little about consultants’ motives for leaving the corporate environment. Given the specifics of the consulting context, including various normative control practices, one might wonder if the motivations for leaving overlap with those for choosing self-employment, such as a desire for better work-life balance, better opportunities to determine work schedules, more autonomy, and more job control (Deery & Jago, 2015; Golden et al., 2011). For the consultants who leave, we do not know if such hopes work out, as, in general, work-life balance does not seem to improve due to self-employment (cf. Annink, Den Dulk, & Amorós, 2016; Johansson Sevä & Öun, 2015). To better understand consultants’ motives for becoming self-employed, we will explore the following research question: *How do self-employed consultants look back on their work-life as employees at elite consultancies, and how did the experience of normative control practices play into their decision to leave?*

The study is based on interviews with 18 self-employed consultants who previously worked at large international consultancies, such as the big four, the big three, or big IT consultancies. The interviews focused on the moment that consultants experienced less motivation to stay, often when work-life conflict became an issue or when corporate normative control practices, such as social events or learning and development opportunities, became less attractive over time, and self-employment looked the more promising alternative.

Our study contributes to the literature on normative control by better explaining how, over time, normative control practices become less motivating for more mature consultants. Initially, practices like social events and various learning opportunities are very motivating for consultants starting their careers. Over time, as more senior consultants, their work motivation lowers due to experiences of insufficient autonomy, lack of authenticity, reduced learning, and increased work-life conflict. The reported tensions present themselves as long-term consequences of normative control practices for employees. This dynamic pattern has not been mapped before (cf. Costas, 2012; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Kunda, 1992; Michel, 2011). Secondly, we can add learning opportunities to the list of attractive normative control practices, particularly at professional service firms with a young workforce, where professional development is key to success. Whereas presentation rituals have been discussed in Kunda (1992), later work has mainly focussed on the motivating influence of the social events as typical normative control practice (cf. Costas, 2012; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2017). Reducing normative control practices to only social events would imply too narrow an understanding of how normative control can work. In particular, in knowledge-intensive contexts, such as high-tech engineering or consulting, normative control works through the appeal of professional development, with learning on the job, mentoring, and training as key norm-setting practices (cf. Fournier, 1999). The learning practices are crucial in mediating towards normative control, whereas the social events seem to have a moderating influence. Third, we contribute to the literature on entrepreneurship by locating self-employment as an effective way for consultants to avoid the

negative consequences of corporate normative control practices, such as work-life conflict and lack of autonomy (cf. Annink, Den Dulk, & Amorós, 2016; Dale, 2012; Garrety, 2008; Van Gelderen & Jansen, 2006). The opportunities for self-employment explain why this is a popular escape route in consulting. Finally, our study shows how self-employed consultants demonstrate a new kind of boundaryless career. While boundaryless careers are usually conceptualised as moving between organisations, ‘occupational careers,’ such as those of consultants, have rarely been studied (cf. Cross & Swart, 2021; Donnelly, 2009; Hoyer, 2016). Consultants change sides from ‘corporate professionalism’ to a new form of ‘occupational professionalism’. The latter deserves more attention in the consultant literature and in the literature on professions (cf. Evetts, 2013; Muzio et al., 2011).

This paper starts by discussing the existing literature on normative control and its ambiguous effects on experienced work motivation in large professional service firms. It then considers self-employment as a career step for employees leaving such a corporate work setting. Next, we present the methodology section, followed by an analysis of our findings. We conclude by discussing theoretical and practical implications and ideas for further research.

2. Corporate normative control

2.1. Normative control practices in professional service firms

Normative control, as characterised by Kunda, ‘is the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions. [...] they are driven by internal commitment, strong identification with company goals, intrinsic satisfaction from work’ (Kunda, 1992, p. 11). Kunda did his case study in a high-tech firm. There, the engineers were highly educated professionals, and one of the senior managers remarked that you could not tell them what to do: ‘Power plays don’t work. You can’t *make em* do anything. They have to *want to*’ (Kunda, 1992, p. 5). Kunda studied how the managers let their engineers contribute to corporate goals and values by making them want it themselves. He focussed on ‘the practice of normative control and its consequences,’ calling for more of these ‘detailed studies of white collar, professional, and managerial workers among whom the trend is supposedly most pronounced’ (Kunda, 1992, p. 16). The call for research remains relevant.

Professional service firms, like a bank or consultancy, all promote a shared value orientation. For instance, consultants are socialised during numerous social events to identify with the important professional values of their firm, as this helps to create ‘commitment and loyalty’ (Alvesson, 2012, p. 314), and it helps to retain an expert workforce (e.g. Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Gerber & Krzywdzinski, 2019; Robertson & Swan, 2003). In a corporate setting, normative control works via corporate culture management (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Fournier, 1999; Kunda, 1992; McLoughlin, Badham, & Palmer, 2005; Willmott, 1993) so that company norms and values help to regulate employee behaviour (Rennstam, 2017). In particular, at professional service firms, where there is no tangible product, professional values that guide employee behaviour are vital (Alvesson, 2012; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009). Career management, commonly based on utilitarian forms of control, is designed to align with corporate culture management aimed at ‘professionalism.’ The various control techniques and practices are intended to reinforce one another by institutionalising the same professional norms. Such practices seek to govern at a distance and are designed to replace, in part, more bureaucratic forms of control (Fournier, 1999). Normative controls are *added* to the more traditional controls. The latter may be reduced but are never replaced entirely. Normative controls can best ‘be seen as an additional overlay of control that complements other means of eliciting compliance’ (Kunda, 1992, p. 220).

Several of these normative control practices have been studied in the context of white-collar firms, including a call-centre (Fleming & Sturdy,

2011), and elite firms, such as consultancies (e.g. Costas, 2012; Poulter & Land, 2008), a bank (Michel, 2011), and a high-tech firm (Kunda, 1992). The most reported practice here is organising social events. These events are a form of culture management centred around informality and creating a family feeling or a sense of belonging (Hemsath, 2001; Müller, 2017). During such social events, many personal friendships are formed. Examples of such events include Friday evening drinks with the team, nights out in pubs, weekend trips with family members invited, fundraising events, and sporting competitions (Costas, 2012; Kunda, 1992; Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2013; Thompson, Callaghan, & van den Broek, 2004). While these activities are held outside working hours, participation is often voluntary only on paper. The free and sponsored social events aim to encourage team building, commitment (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011), and loyalty towards company values (Grugulis, Dundon, & Wilkinson, 2000).

A related practice is organising kick-offs for new employees (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Kunda, 1992). During introductory training sessions, new employees are exposed to the desired brand image of the professional service firm (Miles & Mangold, 2004) and valued behavioural norms (Poulter & Land, 2008). Employees feel that they have to act within these conventions of the corporate culture, which stimulates more homogeneous behaviour (Costas, 2012).

Offering training opportunities throughout the career is mostly reported in organisations with high professional standards (Evetts, 2013; Fournier, 1999; Kunda, 1992). It is a practice that works both motivationally and disciplinarily. As Fournier (1999, p. 299) concludes in a study on the appeal of professionalism in a privatised public service organisation in the UK, 'the professionalisation of conduct through the articulation of competencies allows for the control of employees at a distance.' In his study of a Silicon Valley-based high-tech firm, Kunda finds professionalisation in ongoing presentation rituals at the team level, across teams, and at the company level. Management, trainers, and colleagues teach one another the company values in general and how they apply to the projects they work on. This way, they continuously internalise professional values. Kunda concludes a chapter about these on-the-job training practices with the following observation: 'Presentation rituals are occasions for enacting, enforcing and reinforcing the display of the managerially sanctioned member role and are thus a mechanism for mediating normative demands and normative responses' (Kunda, 1992, p. 159). The learning culture is experienced as very motivating, and it creates commitment, as illustrated in the following quote: 'I've done a lot of training. Even the fact that I was offered this position shows that they want to develop people. That is why I like it here' (Kunda, 1992, p. 176).

In addition, normative control in elite firms, such as consultancies, law firms and investment banks, is supported by providing all kinds of 'free amenities, including childcare, valets, car service, and meals' (Michel, 2011, p. 336). These services are experienced as a sign of being cared for and treated well, and they aim at distracting employees from the required long working hours (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Due to increased commitment, elite firms can also offer very competitive salaries. Some firms offer lifetime employment, a sign that they care for their employees, and the opportunity to work from home is experienced as a sign of trust (Kunda, 1992). Together, these normative control practices provoke a willingness to go the extra mile, meaning employees will work more hours than the average employee and commit to high standards (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Bouwmeester et al., 2021; Casey, 1999).

While the discussed normative control practices have many positive effects on professional commitment, there are also some reported downsides. First, increased identification with a company ideology may suppress freedom of expression and independent thoughts, undermining feelings of autonomy and authenticity, causing cynicism, distancing, and less motivation, which might ultimately reduce commitment (Kunda, 1992). To remedy such effects, professional service firms have tried to develop forms of neo-normative control that allow for more

varied subjective worker identities, with more room for personal expressions and authenticity. Workers are also given more autonomy and flexibility to keep them committed and motivated. However, these attempts cannot yet be considered unambiguously successful (cf. Costas, 2012; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2017; Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2013).

Second, social activities outside working hours are designed to be fun events; however, they can also negatively impact work-life balance perceptions when creating social pressure to participate on top of a demanding working week. They make it difficult to draw boundaries between work and private life or sustain friends and interests outside work (Bouwmeester et al., 2021; Costas, 2012; Kunda, 1992). Indeed, employees of knowledge-intensive firms, such as consultancies, high-tech firms, or investment banks, experience burnout due to their persistent efforts to act in the name of the corporate interest (Bouwmeester et al., 2022; Kunda, 1992; Michel, 2011). Experienced bodily breakdowns can distance committed individuals from the organisation, leading to feelings of social exclusion (Costas, 2012; Michel, 2011; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016) or being consumed (Bouwmeester & Kok, 2018; Dale, 2012). However, it is not yet clear for whom or at what point in a career normative control practices, like social events or various learning and career progression activities, lead to such negative experiences.

2.2. Careers in consulting: the move to self-employment

Professional service firms, such as banks, law firms, and elite consultancies, like the big four (Deloitte, EY, KPMG, PwC) or the big three (Bain, BCG, McKinsey), need committed employees aiming for high professional standards (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Kärreman, 2008; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Therefore, they have institutionalised various normative control practices. In elite consultancies, these practices have been aligned with the up-or-out model, meaning that consultants 'compete against each other for promotion to a limited number of positions at the next grade' (Malhotra, Morris, & Smets, 2010, p. 1397).

Given there are fewer positions available at each higher level, consultancies experience high fluctuations in their workforce (Kaiser et al., 2011). Most consultants starting as juniors make it to the level of senior consultants; however, after five or six years, many of them leave. Going higher up in the pyramid to become a manager, senior manager, director, or, eventually, senior partner becomes more difficult with each step, as these higher levels require a new skill set (Donnelly, 2008; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008; Meriläinen et al., 2004). For instance, internal leadership tasks or managing consultant-client relations can become too much of a hurdle. Also, becoming more successful at project acquisition than your peers can be a challenge.

If you do not go up in consulting, the unwritten rule is that you go out. Options are to start as an internal consultant or manager at a client organisation, move to another consultancy, or become a self-employed consultant. Among these options, choosing self-employment is very common (Alvesson, 2004; Cross & Swart, 2021; Dendrinis, 2011; Donnelly, 2009; Maestripieri, 2019). Still, self-employment is an underexplored step in the consultant career. It implies a move out of employment in a consultancy, whereas careers are commonly studied within the boundaries of organisations.

Why, at some point, do employees of professional service firms, such as consultants, choose self-employment? One suggested motivation is that self-employed consultants can improve their work-life balance, as indicated in a survey by Eden McCallum (2018). Others find that self-employment gives more autonomy, job control, and opportunities to determine work schedules, thus positively impacting work-life balance (Deery & Jago, 2015; Golden et al., 2011). However, there are contradictory findings, raising doubts as to whether self-employment really improves work-life balance in general (Annink, Den Dulk, & Amorós, 2016; Johansson Sevä & Öun, 2015).

Another reason to choose self-employment over employment is that intrinsic work motivation might improve (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2010; Thatcher et al., 2006). Intrinsic motivation increases if individuals experience sufficient control over their work (Galletta, Portoghese, & Battistelli, 2011), have opportunities to use and develop their capacities (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 7), and receive recognition and appreciation (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Lindner, 1998). Personal recognition and true appreciation can, in particular, improve commitment (Nyakaro, 2016, p. 48). While normative control practices may motivate employees by fostering feelings of relatedness and appreciation during social events, self-employment might instead motivate by giving more autonomy. How these various motivational factors are experienced during a consultant career is still unknown.

As discussed before, about half of all consultants become self-employed in many countries, usually after a period of employment. Therefore, normative control practices at elite consultancies might become less successful in keeping commitment at a high level over time. Still, when leaving elite consultancies, some self-employed consultants may also experience downsides, like loss of job security, less social interaction, and no opportunities for promotion (cf. Holtz & Zahn, 2004; Newgass, 2007). Until now, we do not know for whom, when, or related to what corporate experiences the move to self-employment is experienced as the right career step.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

This interview study explores how consultants who have worked for elite consultancies reflect on their work-life retrospectively, considering what motivated them to choose self-employment. We decided on a qualitative research design to allow for collecting rich data on an under-researched phenomenon (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Flick, 1998; Myers, 2009). Our research approach is interpretive as we study how interviewed consultants give meaning to their decision to leave the corporate context and become self-employed professionals (Gephart Jr, 2004).

Our study can be characterised as abductive, including inductive and deductive features. When studying the motives for self-employment we follow the steps of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). At the same time, we draw on existing theory to interpret how normative control practices initially strengthen commitment at elite consultancies but fail to do so later, which looks like an anomaly (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). By building on earlier work on normative control, such as Kunda (1992) and Fournier (1999), we seek to explain how work experiences related to normative control practices change over time in the context of consulting.

3.2. Research context

The Dutch management consulting sector is this study's research context. Deciding on self-employment is common among Dutch consultants, where about 100,000 consultants are currently self-employed and a similar number is employed at consultancies (CBS, 2021; I&O research, 2019). Widespread self-employment is also reported in countries such as Greece, Italy, Scandinavia, the UK, and the US (Alvesson, 2004; Cross & Swart, 2021; Dendrinis, 2011; Donnelly, 2009; Maestripieri, 2019; Maestripieri & Cucca, 2018). The Eden McCallum-LBS Future of Consulting Survey 2018 (Eden McCallum, 2018) and the COMATCH (2017) report indicate that self-employment is recently gaining popularity among consultants in Europe and the US. Therefore, big international elite consultancies, such as the big three and big four firms, only employ a minority of all consultants in the Netherlands because the SMEs also employ many consultants. Still, the influence of elite consultancies on setting professional standards in the field remains substantial (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004, p. 149; Muzio et al., 2011).

3.3. Data collection

We used purposeful sampling to select our interviewees (Patton, 2002). The sampling criteria were: self-employed Dutch consultants who had left a division of a large elite consultancy before becoming self-employed. The consultancies they previously worked for had more than 500 employees and, usually, several thousand in the Netherlands (consulting divisions of the 'big four' accountancies or the big IT consultancies). We used the search terms *independent consultant* and *freelance consultant* on LinkedIn to identify consultants that would fit the criteria. In case a self-employed consultant had been working for an elite consultancy in the past, we sent them a message via LinkedIn to request their participation. Furthermore, we used snowball sampling to find more participants through those we had already identified (Lee & Lings, 2008).

The sample has four female and fourteen male consultants. This imbalance is comparable to other studies among self-employed consultants, with a female percentage of 21 (Eden McCallum, 2018) and 13 (COMATCH, 2017). We found another imbalance in the level of experience. There are only three junior consultants in the sample, similar to Eden McCallum (2018) and COMATCH (2017). A possible explanation is that most consultants decide to become self-employed after they have first gained some experience at consultancies (Eden McCallum, 2018; Newgass, 2007).

Table 1 gives an overview of our interviewees (IV), including their age, gender, years of consulting experience, years of employment in a big international consulting firm, the type of big firm, their specialisation, level of seniority, and years of self-employment. Note that the years of consulting experience are not always the sum of the years in a big firm and the years of self-employment. Nine self-employed consultants (IV1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 14 and 17) gained consulting experience in smaller consulting firms before moving to a large elite consultancy.

The in-depth interviews had a similar structure to keep some control over the discussed themes (Neuman, 2000). We tailored additional questions based on the direction of responses. Each interview started with opening questions to get acquainted with the participants. Then, we asked questions about the experienced work life at the elite consultancy, including the company culture, social events, training programmes, work-life balance policies, experiences with management, and reasons for the self-employment decision. Next, we compared the discussed practices and work experiences as an employee and as a self-employed consultant in more detail, covering topics like work-life balance, commitment, work motivation and work satisfaction in both settings.

As comparisons between employment and self-employment were made over time and retrospectively (and not between groups), we could use a relatively small sample of interviewees (cf. Creswell, 2007, p. 67). Eight interviewees were self-employed for more than four years, and memories of perceptions may transform over time (Røvik, 2016, p. 294). Retrospection bias can then weaken the data gathered from interviews. However, career choices are key biographical decisions, and such memories stay with us. Sometimes, the distance even helps to see the bigger picture, which may have reduced retrospection bias.

The second author performed all interviews by phone due to public health circumstances in 2020 (i.e., COVID-19). To ensure the quality and stability of the sound recordings, we did not carry out any video conversations. The interviews lasted from 43 to 86 min and were conducted in Dutch, the interviewees' native language, to allow participants to speak freely and feel comfortable. We asked all respondents for permission to record the interview. We transcribed the recordings in Dutch, and the quotes have been translated into English and cross-checked by both authors.

3.4. Data analysis

To analyse the data, we have coded the interview transcripts,

Table 1
Interviewee characteristics.

IV	Gender	Age	Consulting experience	Years in a big consulting firm	Type of firm	Specialisation	Level	Years of self-employment
1	Female	35	12	5	Big 4	Strategy	Senior	4
2	Male	58	31	8	Big 4	Strategy/Finance	Senior	23
3	Female	28	4	1	Big 4	Human Resources	Junior	1
4	Male	32	7	2	Big 4	Human Resources	Junior	5
5	Male	47	22	2	Big IT	Strategy/Marketing	Junior	4
6	Male	56	34	17	Big4/Big IT	Strategy/M&A	Senior	11
7	Male	34	12	4	Big IT	Finance/Risk	Senior	2
8	Male	33	9	4	Big 4/Big MC	Strategy/M&A	Senior	2
9	Male	44	20	10	Big 4/Big 3	Strategy/M&A	Senior	7
10	Male	35	9	7	Big 3	Strategy	Senior	2
11	Male	33	5	4	Elite strategy	Strategy	Senior	10 months
12	Male	45	14	12	Big 4	IT	Senior	2
13	Female	41	14	13	Elite strategy	Strategy/M&A	Senior	7 months
14	Female	36	8	4	Big IT	Finance/Risk	Senior	2
15	Male	26	3	3	Big IT	Strategy/IT	Senior	2 months
16	Male	42	16	8	Big 3	Strategy/M&A	Senior	8
17	Male	33	11	7	Big IT	IT	Senior	2
18	Male	37	9	4	Big 4	M&A/Finance	Senior	5

developing overarching categories (Thornberg, Perhamus, & Charmaz, 2014). To facilitate this process, we used the qualitative data analysis tool Atlas.ti. At first, we developed descriptive first-order codes. Afterwards, we organised the data more abstractly, using second-order codes (i.e., axial coding). Finally, we identified aggregated constructs (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). The first aggregate construct summarises the experienced positive links between normative control practices and commitment as assumed in the literature, illustrated with quotes like: ‘We once had a GPS game in the zoo in [place in the Netherlands]. That was really nice’ (IV3). Such group experiences often increased commitment. Second, the undermining impact of “critical tensions” on this assumed relationship formed an aggregate construct, as illustrated here: ‘Without a long-term development ambition, you start asking yourself: why am I working all these hours?’ (IV1). As a third aggregate construct, we report the experienced sustainability of the decision to

stay self-employed, given the positives and negatives, as illustrated with quotes like: ‘Entrepreneurship involves economic risks. So, I cannot say I will *never* go back to employment. It could happen’ (IV4). Fig. 1 illustrates our first- and second-order codes and the aggregate constructs.

After the second author had started the coding process, the first author reviewed the first and second-order codes, and subsequently, we decided to add some and merge several of them. When interpretations differed, we discussed them to arrive at a consensus and improve interrater reliability. The same process repeated after various rounds of reviewer feedback, suggesting there were still too many first-order codes. We then discussed which codes could be merged and how our theoretical model could be improved, resulting in many new versions.

Our initial roles in the research team were MSc student in a management consulting programme and thesis supervisor from January until June 2020. When the thesis research turned out to be very

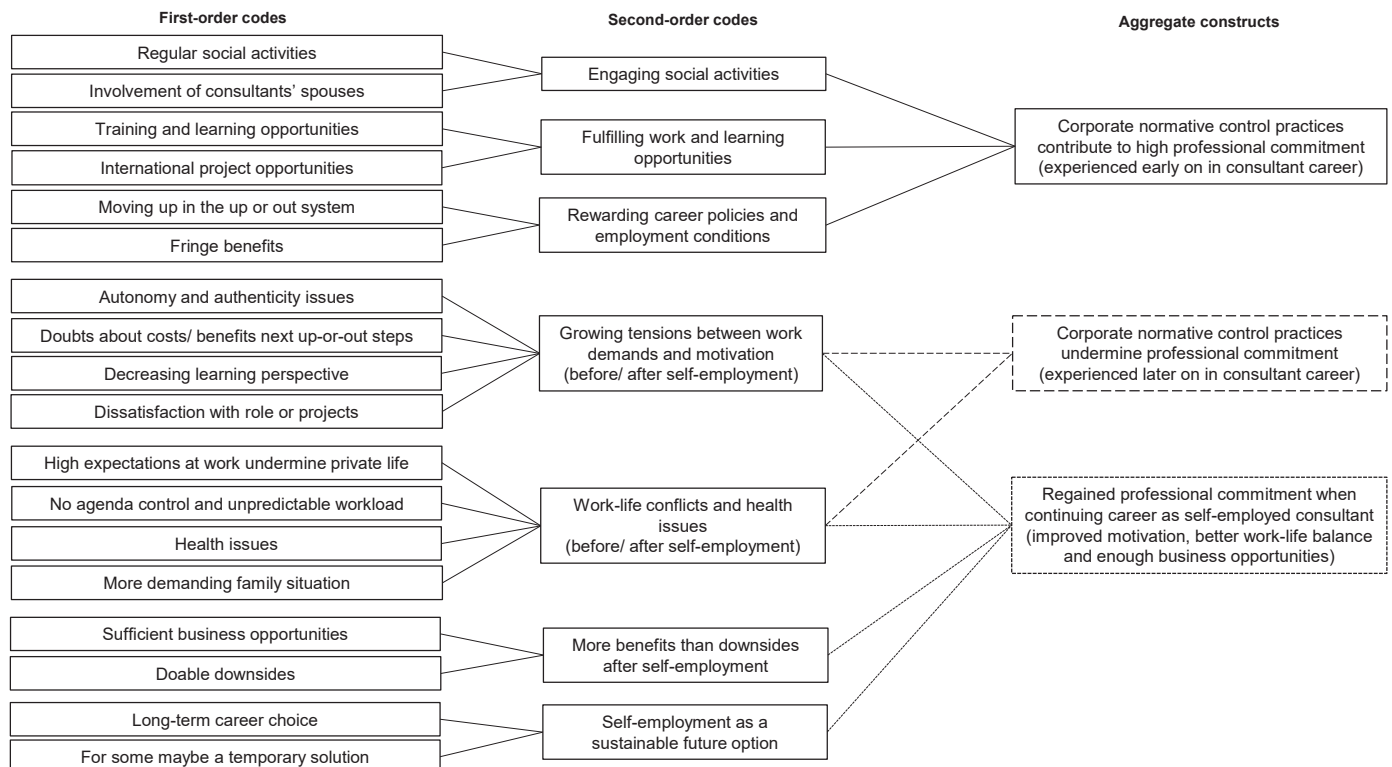


Fig. 1. First- and second-order codes, and aggregate constructs.

promising and worth preparing for publication, both authors decided to continue to work on the project based on the collected interview data. As the second author did not envision an academic career, from then on, the first author did the analysis, theorising, and writing.

To synthesise our findings, we applied comparative analysis and found patterns by comparing the 18 interviews (Myers, 2009). This process included inductive steps to construct the categories and ensure we did not exclude any rich data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, the analysis became abductive when we related identified patterns to the existing theoretical debates on normative control and work-life balance in professional service firms. While the normative control construct was not included in the interview questions, we used it to interpret the data and it was part of the research puzzle from the start.

There is saturation at the level of aggregate constructs, second-order codes, and most first-order codes, meaning no new codes could be added halfway through the 18 interviews (Francis et al., 2010). As Tables 2–4 show, most codes were already grounded in the early interviews.

4. Findings

The interviewees reported how social events, training programmes, and rewarding employment conditions at the elite consultancies they worked for initially positively influenced their feelings of professional commitment (Fig. 2, arrow 1). They also mentioned how critical tensions resulting from these normative control practices undermined their commitment over time (arrows 2 and 3). The move to self-employment reduced the experience of critical tensions linked to these practices, and commitment increased again (arrow 4). Fig. 2 presages our findings, and we will discuss each of the four horizontal arrows in the following paragraphs.

4.1. Normative control practices and experienced commitment

Self-employed consultants report how early in their career at elite consultancies, normative control practices, such as various social events, learning opportunities, and ambitious career policies, have positively influenced their commitment. These practices all contribute to establishing professional norms and values while, at the same time, motivating employees to meet these standards, as noticed before in various contexts (Kunda, 1992; Michel, 2011; Poulter & Land, 2008). Table 2

provides quotes illustrating the different codes characterising normative control practices and consultants' appreciation and growing commitment. In the last column, the table reports how grounded each code is, presenting the number of respondents who mention the practice. Each of them could provide further proof quotes. Table 2 presents one illustrative proof quote in addition to the power quotes discussed in the text.

4.2. Engaging social activities

Our findings align with earlier studies on large elite consultancies that emphasise how they focus on organising many social activities (Costas, 2012; Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2013). The more regular social activities include 'drinks after work' (IV1), a 'GPS game in the zoo' (IV3), an 'escape room' (IV6), a 'treasure hunt' (IV11), or a 'closure event with the client' (IV18). Annual social activities include 'annual parties' (IV2), 'kick-offs for new recruits' (IV8), 'weekend trips, such as ski-trips' (IV10), and 'summer- or autumn schools' (IV1). These social activities are experienced as a reward for the demanding working weeks and, at the same time, stimulate 'team building' (IV12), a 'network' (IV8), a 'community' (IV16), or a 'family feeling' (IV1). Also, having 'peer groups of new recruits' (IV15) is experienced as helpful for team building. Consultants indicate how participation in these social activities raises their commitment:

If you meet more people and participate more in social activities, you develop a better connection [...]. So, in the beginning, a little less, but gradually, if you participate in more activities, you also [...] get more committed. (IV14)

Consultants can propose ideas for social activities to their managing partner, and the partner decides whether a budget is made available and how it is spent. Also, initiatives without the managing partner's involvement are sponsored, which is often much appreciated:

That [activity] was without partners [...]. It was very low profile, and that was great. So [...], those kinds of events [self-initiated without the partner being involved but still sponsored by the firm]... that was very committing for me. (IV11)

At times, consultants' spouses were given small presents or involved in social activities to keep them on board (IV7). Including spouses aims at mitigating the feeling 'that consultants are again a day away from



Fig. 2. Experienced professional commitment due to normative control practices over time.

Table 2
Normative control practices experienced as creating commitment.

Codes for normative control practices	Illustrative quotes of motivational experiences with normative control practices in consulting firms	Times codes are grounded per respondent
	Engaging social activities	
Regular social activities	<i>Once a year, there were activities organised by [a big four firm], such as a ski trip. [...] Every year, you also had a summer school or autumn school, so a week of training, dinners, and parties (IV1).</i>	17 (IV1/2/3/4/6/7/8/9/10/11/12/13/14/15/16/17/18)
Involvement of consultants' spouses in social activities	<i>At one point, there were a lot of consultants [...] abroad, and due to a project finalising [...], they could not go home for the weekends. Then, I expressed to them [including the consultant's spouse] my appreciation and sent [...] flowers and a dinner voucher to the home front to thank them for the flexibility of their partners (IV6).</i>	3 (IV6/7/10)
	Fulfilling work and learning opportunities	
Training and learning opportunities	<i>You also have training courses, which are each time in a different city in Europe. [...] You notice that the training aspect within [a big four firm] is well organised (IV8).</i>	14 (IV1/3/4/5/6/7/8/10/11/12/14/15/16/17)
International project opportunities	<i>All projects worldwide were also [published] on the intranet [...]. If you are good at what you do, there are certainly opportunities to [...] gain international experience (IV16).</i>	7 (IV2/6/11/13/15/16/17)
	Rewarding career policies and employment conditions	
Moving up in the up-or-out system	<i>A disadvantage of all the big four companies is that they pay little in the first years [...]. The rewards are that you learn a lot. [...] The salary increases fast, but it takes a while to catch up with other sectors (IV8).</i>	14 (IV1/3/4/5/6/7/8/11/12/13/14/15/16/18)
Fringe benefits	<i>I really have to say, the employment conditions were so good that it was difficult for me to decide to leave [...] a good salary, company car, fully paid pension, lots of training, 31 holiday days ... (IV12).</i>	13 (IV1/3/4/5/6/7/8/11/12/13/14/16/17)

home' (IV10). It should take partner criticisms away and keep the spirit high at home.

4.3. Fulfilling work and learning opportunities

Besides organising motivating social activities, large elite consulting firms invest time and money in the training and development of employees to keep them committed. Several consultants report that they had a personal 'training budget' (IV3) and many 'national' (IV4) and 'international development opportunities' (IV6). The next quote illustrates how consultants appreciate this type of practice:

I had training based on soft skills. Well, I already mentioned that training on leadership. I also had subject-matter training courses. I thought it was fantastic. (IV7)

Look, I want to work hard for someone who also invests in me by being a good mentor who helps me develop as a professional. (IV11)

Other normative control practices aim at making learning on the job attractive by creating 'opportunities for international projects' (IV14). They encourage commitment as well:

I have had a number of international opportunities that were absolutely fantastic [...]. I am happy to stay for that. (IV11)

In the beginning [...], I did not expect to stay this long, but when I [...] got the chance to go [to China], my loyalty was definitely strengthened. (IV13)

Even though international projects are appreciated for their many exciting on-the-job learning opportunities, it may result in 'less contact with colleagues' (IV17), which could reduce commitment. This lowering commitment can also happen 'when working longer for one client' (IV5). Staying in touch with colleagues during training programmes and fun social activities is considered valuable. The total package of social events and inspiring learning opportunities creates a willingness to go the extra mile and commit to the company's professional standards.

As the quotes indicate, the training opportunities, a good mentor, and various on-the-job learning opportunities are much appreciated. To be happy in a consultant role, consultants must enjoy the learning. Learning on the job is deep learning and a rewarding experience for consultants. It is a way to grow professionally and align your values with company values. This way, the learning contributes to normative control while management steers at a distance.

4.4. Rewarding career policies and employment conditions

Consultants describe how career policies in their firms follow the up-or-out model. This model creates 'a large internal competition' (IV6) in which consultants 'pursue a career' (IV3), characterised as a 'rat race' (IV7), a 'race to be seen in and to gain appreciation' (IV14). By going up, 'you can earn a good salary' (IV5). This is mentioned more than once, but 'it takes some time to arrive at that level' (IV15). Initially, the rewards in consulting are mostly in learning opportunities, mastering all the demands better, and then performing well. The up-or-out system adds normative pressure by letting consultants commit to standards required for the next level.

A fast-growing salary and various fringe benefits add to the positive experience. While consultants work hard in a competitive environment, they also feel well-treated. They mention how they appreciate 'many days off' (IV12), a 'bonus' (IV16), discounts 'on health insurance' (IV3) and 'sports subscriptions' (IV14), a 'fully paid pension' (IV12), and a 'lease car' (IV5).

Initially, this package of paid learning and being with very friendly colleagues in a fun environment is a great deal. Most who start at elite consultancies like it and really want to go the extra mile (see arrow 1 in Fig. 2). These findings not only replicate the earlier discussed conclusions from studies on normative control but also show the motivational and steering impact of learning and development in this particular work context. Still, the consultants we interviewed were all self-employed already. They had decided to leave a big elite consultancy after several years, despite the initial enthusiasm they experienced. So, what motivated these consultants to decide on self-employment at some point?

4.5. Tensions undermining the motivational aspect of normative control practices

Although all the consultants we spoke to felt very committed early on in their careers due to normative control practices, such as social events, learning opportunities, career progress, and attractive fringe benefits, over time, this positive feeling wore off. This phenomenon of normative control practices' waning impact is illustrated here:

Then you bite the bullet, and then you say: even though that lease car of mine is so beautiful [...], I am not a slave [...] to my lease car. I am going to look for new opportunities. (IV12)

The willingness to commit decreases due to various critical tensions,

Table 3
Tensions undermining the motivational aspect of normative control practices.

Codes for tensions	Illustrative quotes of critical tensions undermining the attractiveness of normative control practices over time	Times codes are grounded per respondent
Growing tensions between work demands and motivation		
Autonomy and authenticity issues	<i>I had an idea for the Marketing department [...], but I was [employed] in the Finance department, and they said: that is not permitted [...], that is [...] a wrong box. [...] Then I thought: I am going to start for myself (IV2).</i>	15 (IV1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8/9/10/11/12/14/17/18)
Doubts about costs/ benefits next up-or-out step(s)	<i>Without a long-term development ambition, you start asking yourself: why am I working all these hours? The salary is not worth it. Certainly not (IV1).</i>	10 (IV1/2/3/9/10/11/12/15/17/18)
Decreasing learning perspective	<i>‘For a starter a corporate consultancy is perfect. You have many opportunities to grow and do training [...]. As a senior, not working for a client is more expensive. It becomes more difficult to get the money for training (IV17).</i>	7 (IV2/5/8/10/11/17/18)
Dissatisfaction with role or projects	<i>I left [a big four firm] at the time because I was [...] pushed into a role that did not suit me (IV6).</i>	7 (IV1/2/4/6/9/14/16)
Work-life conflicts and health issues		
High expectations at work undermine private life	<i>I actually left the consultancy because of the work-life balance. I just could not handle it anymore and I did not want to continue like this because I was thinking: ‘then I am going to divorce’ (IV7).</i>	12 (IV1/2/5/7/8/9/11/13/14/15/17/18)
No agenda control and unpredictable workload	<i>That was the biggest problem: it was so unpredictable. I could sit in the office for five hours and say to my friends: are we going to the movies tonight? But when [...] a partner walks in who suddenly needs something, then you [...] sit there until two o’clock in the morning (IV11).</i>	8 (IV1/2/5/9/10/11/13/18)
Health issues	<i>I thought my time at [big IT consultancy] was fantastic. I left because [...] I had a car accident and [...] felt down for a while. (IV7).</i>	7 (IV1/2/7/13/14/15/18)
More demanding family situation	<i>Let me think, one month earlier I quit, so one month later my second child was born [...]. So then I thought that one child is already hardly possible, so with two, it will be a crisis (IV18).</i>	6 (IV7/8/13/16/17/18)

such as low autonomy, growing mismatches between work demands and work motivation, and reduced learning benefits. Also, for many, work-life conflicts increase. Table 3 summarises these tensions, of which some have also been observed in other high-performance settings (Kunda, 1992; Michel, 2011).

4.6. Growing tensions between work demands and motivation

At some point, normative control practices lose their positive appeal for consultants due to various critical tensions. They mention a lack of autonomy and authenticity, growing doubts about the up-or-out system, a decreased learning perspective and dissatisfaction with their projects as tensions (see Table 3). First and foremost, consultants mention how, in time, their lack of autonomy and authenticity undermines their motivation. The ‘dependence on the managing partner’ they are working for (IV14), ‘the partner’s dominance’ (IV11), and the type of projects tied to the partner’s business area and industry all limit consultants in what they are allowed to do. Self-employment is then seen to solve the autonomy issue and return a feeling of authenticity by choosing your own projects and executing them in your own way:

I have colleagues who worked at [a consulting firm] and were told what colour suit to wear. They wanted to be very clear: this is the [big four firm] way. [...] It does not matter whether his name is Jos or Jan [...], you get exactly the same result in the end. (IV15)

Second, after some years, consultants start doubting whether the up-or-out model still suits them. They experience the tight career path predefined by the up-or-out model as a ‘straight jacket’ (IV5). The opportunity for promotion in the up-or-out system is mainly a motivator early in the career. After achieving the manager level, a ‘certain path’ (IV1) must be followed, entailing serious ‘discussions’ (IV1) about how to achieve the highest positions in their firm. Lack of appreciation and the feeling of being treated like a ‘number’ (IV17) also plays a role here. At some point, consultants conclude they do not want to commit to all the demands of a corporate career, in spite of the benefits:

I did not feel appreciated. I had the idea [...] that it is their way or no way [...]. That ‘hierarchy’ thinking was what made me say: I am leaving. [...] Then you can offer yoga workshops etc., but [...] I can also just do yoga at the gym. (IV3)

Third, decreased learning opportunities were mentioned as a reason for reduced professional commitment. When consultants get into a more

senior position, opportunities to attend training sessions or obtain certificates are ‘fewer’ (IV8). The big consulting firms are well-known for their extensive learning and development programmes in which consultants initially experience that they learn a lot, but the learning decreases over time, and then people start leaving:

Consultancies offer a lot of nice things, but they are never enough to keep you. People do not do six interviews a day or work until midnight for the money or because they like the company. No, it is because you learn something. (IV11)

As a fourth reason, consultants expressed how dissatisfaction with their projects reduced their commitment. The longer consultants are employed, the more familiar they become with the content of their projects, and learning from such projects reduces. This lack of learning created tension, especially when large elite consulting firms had a shortage of assignments meeting a consultant’s preferences or expertise:

You have to be willing to deviate from that. [...] You cannot be without a project for months if there are other projects available. [...] Then, of course, you start doubting your added value, and then it is not very nice anymore to work at [a big four firm]. (IV4)

As Fig. 2, arrow 2 indicates, normative control practices at elite consultancies become less attractive over time. The willingness to comply with professional norms, repetitive work, or goals related to the next career level reaches a dead end. For many, the demands to qualify for a senior manager, director or partner role do not feel worth the effort. At the same time, new projects do not provide as many on-the-job learning opportunities anymore, and less time is given for training as work demands get higher. As a pattern, many consultants lose motivation and become less committed after several years.

4.7. Work-life conflicts and health issues

Being a consultant requires a ‘lifestyle’ (IV8), which revolves around the repeatedly mentioned motto, ‘work hard, play hard’ (IV13). Regular working weeks that already exceed 40 h are made longer by adding fun social activities and training. Consequently, consultants report work-life conflict related to high expectations at work but also mention lack of agenda control, unpredictable workloads, health problems, and life-stage issues (see Table 3) These life-side factors that undermine commitment arise for many on top of the work intrinsic factors, such as experiences of reduced learning or feeling a low degree of authenticity in

the work.

To begin with, due to the high expectations at work, consultants' social lives are under pressure. Work pressures and normative control practices, such as social and learning activities in the evening, make it more difficult to schedule activities with non-work friends and to maintain those relationships over time, which lowers commitment in the end:

At some point, work-life balance indeed becomes an issue. Sometimes, there were desires from the organisation that you [...] share knowledge with other colleagues outside working hours, and you do not get paid for that. So yes, at some point, that will start to hurt. (IV17)

Also, the highly competitive work environment reinforces a culture of high expectations and high performance:

Everybody reached the targets, but then it became a kind of competition among each other for who could make the most [billable] hours. So [...] that pressure, I really experienced it. [...] And that was [...] actually what I liked the least. (IV18)

Second, work-life conflicts that originate from the frequently mentioned lack of agenda control and unpredictable workload are a reason for lowered commitment. These unpredictable workloads often start with unexpected client and management demands:

Let me say it like this, work-life balance, and also being in charge of your own agenda, that was also a reason to start being self-employed. (IV18)

Third, work-life conflict can relate to health issues. Working for a large elite consulting firm is seen as a 'top sport' (IV7) for which consultants are required to be 'physically fit' (IV2). To become eligible for the next promotion, they want to 'stand out from the crowd' (IV6). However, these efforts can easily 'tire' (IV11) and 'overstrain' (IV1) the consultant. As soon as serious health issues arise due to work or private reasons, consultants feel they can no longer meet the high work demands, and they need to reduce their commitment:

I was close to burnout. So, I also went to the company doctor and explained that it was just becoming too much. I also did not work for a while. (IV1)

Lastly, participants reported life-stage changes that caused work-life conflict. A recurrent example is getting children: 'I just had my second child, and because that was quite intense, I (...) left [big IT consultancy] earlier' (IV7). Such changes in the family situation result in different 'needs' (IV8) and 'priorities' (IV13). For example, consultants who moved into a more demanding family situation could 'feel irritated' (IV17) when pushed to participate in all kinds of social activities.

Work-life conflicts and health issues can originate from work, as

normative control pressures demand high commitment and high performance of consultants, which can lead to exhaustion. However, pressures on the life side can also increase due to greater family responsibilities or private health issues, creating work-life conflict, especially when work demands remain high. As indicated in Fig. 2, arrow 3, work-life conflict, partly also due to normative control practices, can add to the tensions that outweigh the positives of normative control, which, in turn, further undermines professional commitment. For many consultants, such work-life conflict made the move to self-employment more urgent.

4.8. Self-employment helps avoid the pressures of corporate normative control

At the point in their consultancy career when the various tensions at work undermine their commitment too much, many consultants consider self-employment a better option. As mentioned before, about half of all Dutch consultants have decided to become self-employed at some point in their careers (CBS, 2021; I&O research, 2019). Our interviewees explain how moving to self-employment gave them more work autonomy, more freedom to choose the projects they like, and more say over their work-life balance. In addition, economic uncertainties and other downsides appear to be manageable. Table 4 summarises the experienced benefits of self-employment and reflections on the sustainability of this option, compared to employment in an elite consultancy.

4.9. More benefits than downsides after self-employment

First, while working for a corporate consultancy makes it difficult to feel authentic and autonomous, interviewees told how self-employment gave them more say over what they could do as consultants:

In such a big organisation, before a project gets approved, it takes six to seven weeks. Everybody has to look at it. That is [...] why I decided on self-employment. What I missed at such a big four was the speed in decision-making and the opportunity to make my own decisions. In a partner culture, all decisions need to get support from the top. (IV3)

In addition, the kind of projects you get depends on the consultancy. For example, a self-employed consultant who had worked for one of the big three said that small companies or start-ups could not previously be served due to the high fees. Self-employment gave more autonomy here as well:

A very big reason is that I can now decide what projects I take on. Now I can work for very small organisations, very small start-ups. That is what I like a lot. That is a very big reason. (IV9)

Table 4
Value of self-employment as long-term career choice after employment in consultancies.

Codes for perceived benefits	Quotes illustrating the experienced benefits of being self-employed compared to employment in an elite consultancy	Times codes are grounded per respondent
	More benefits than downsides after self-employment	
More autonomy, authenticity, nicer projects	<i>At [a big four firm] the partner could decide everything, and then you could get an assignment, and 'good luck.' If you are independent you can say: 'Wow, my goodness, thanks for asking me, but at the moment I do not have the time.' (IV18)</i>	18 (IV1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8/9/10/11/12/13/14/15/16/17/18)
More agenda control, reduced work-life conflicts	<i>You can better manage what you do during the day. So, today I have six projects, rather big ones, but I can organise my day myself. I can say, now I do this, and not that. I am in the driver's seat. That gives me more peace of mind, and my work-life balance is really great. (IV9)</i>	18 (IV1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8/9/10/11/12/13/14/15/16/17/18)
Sufficient business opportunities, doable downsides	<i>What I experienced earlier during an internship, and later heard from the HR department is that they cannot use their data or get concrete results from them. That is something to work with. So, I started with a simple concept. And so I got my first clients for [employee] exit research. (IV4)</i>	12 (IV1/3/4/5/6/8/9/10/11/12/14/18)
Long-term career choice	Self-employment as a sustainable option <i>For the kind of work, I could go back but not for the hierarchy, the structures. It is not that I have a problem working for a boss, but it is ... it is the incentive structures and the partners. Look, the partners, when they sell a project, the only thing that matters is the next sale. So I do not know if I could go back there, you know, and with a partner above me... (IV11)</i>	15 (IV1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8/9/10/11/12/14/17/18)
For some, maybe a temporary solution	<i>I would really prefer to stay self-employed, but financially, this is a big question currently. (IV13)</i>	3 (IV13/15/16)

I am now in a completely different industry than where I came from, and I love that. And next time, I might be in the healthcare sector [...]. I think it is fantastic to be able to do that as a consultant. (IV12)

Self-employment is also perceived as a form of consulting that provides new learning opportunities that 'bring motivation back' (IV5). Self-employment helped consultants improve autonomy and authenticity in their work, offering new learning opportunities and countering the increasingly undesirable consequences of normative control practices at elite consultancies.

Second, self-employment helped reduce work-life conflict compared to the previous work setting. Self-employed consultants say they can now better control their agenda. They are their own manager and can discuss their planning with clients directly. After becoming self-employed, many consultants experienced more 'control' (IV5), 'freedom' (IV2), and 'flexibility' (IV4) than during employed consulting. And while they enjoyed the learning opportunities during their earlier employment, they did not like that it was at the expense of their social life. Self-employment solved that issue as well:

At some point, I acknowledged... this is not how it should be. And yes, I still love the learning. [...] So, I keep [...] learning [...], but it is no longer at the expense of my social life or not as much. (IV11)

The experience of a better work-life balance also links back to the kind of projects self-employed consultants can now do:

The best example is my CV. I like pop music a lot, you know. And when I worked at the big consultancies, I saw, at max, 10 performances. As I started for myself - and I also became a board member of two music halls in Amsterdam - I have seen more than 2000 performances. [...] My work-life balance has improved by a factor of five. It is much better now. And it is worth it, although I do earn less money, and it is more difficult. Assignments do not fly in like grilled chickens, so to speak. (IV2)

Selecting their own projects and changing hobbies into work made a difference not only in feeling more autonomous and authentic but also in improving the work-life balance experience of consultants who turned to self-employment after having worked for an elite consultancy. The root cause for this different experience is that while the job role stays the same, the corporate setting, with its normative controls, has disappeared.

Third, while deciding for self-employment may come with entrepreneurial risks, they are experienced as manageable. In general, business opportunities are experienced as positive. Still, there is some financial uncertainty, administration is a burden, and acquisition means a lot of hard work:

Everybody tells you to do it and that they will help you. That was one of the eye-openers for me. They tell you they will introduce you here and there, they have this for you and that, but at the end of the day, it is you. You have to do it all yourself. That is not easy. That is a big challenge. (IV6)

Another downside of the new work setting is that you have no colleagues. Some self-employed consultants say they miss the opportunity to work in teams and discuss ideas together. A solution for this is being part of a network:

Now, I work with a group of 30 independent consultants spread over the world. They have weekly meetings that are grouped around topics. Here, you can ask for help. The network can also give you assignments. [...] I can imagine doing more with this network. You can discuss with them, like, 'Hey, I'm experiencing this problem, what would you do?' [...] That is what I miss. You are totally on your own in your office. [...] I am a social person; I need people around me. (IV14)

Despite these downsides, such as entrepreneurial risks and loneliness, self-employed consultants experience more benefits overall and are mostly very satisfied with their new situation, including their income:

As a self-employed consultant, you determine your own salary, that freedom you have. And you earn a lot more than at a corporate consultancy. You also have the freedom to take a break of one or two months between two projects. No one considers that a problem. (IV17)

4.9.1. Self-employment as a sustainable future option

The interviewed consultants were unanimous that self-employment is a 'positive change' (IV1), which they 'do not regret' (IV3). Most of them see it as a sustainable and long-term career step. Five consultants consider self-employment the only sustainable future option for them:

I do not really see it happening that I am going to hand in that freedom again, so I think they really have to come up with a very good package to persuade me to return. (IV17)

Likewise, five others stick to independence as a permanent choice but admit they miss the motivating aspect of working with their old colleagues in a corporate setting:

I would like to go back to the same company in my current role. I really miss having colleagues. It was fun working with them. [...] Sometimes, the advisory division looks for external consultants when they do not have enough consultants themselves. (IV12)

The third group of five consultants has no real plans of returning to an elite consultancy but could imagine working for a 'smaller consultancy' as a possible exit option (IV10) or moving to a 'client company' (IV2, IV7). Two consultants (IV3; IV18) consider their current self-employment as only the first step. They plan to become entrepreneurs and grow their independent activities into their own consulting companies:

Let me say it like this. I do not plan to stay self-employed. I want to start my own consultancy. [...] In the end, I hope to have 10 or 12 people and that we can help the client fully develop their data-driven strategy and make it visible [with a dashboard]. (IV3)

For the 15 consultants who consider self-employment a long-term solution, going back to employment in an elite consultancy is not an option.

At the time of the interviews, only three consultants in our sample considered self-employment a temporary solution. One consultant got frustrated at work due to procedural mistakes causing a delayed promotion. That was enough to opt for self-employment for a while:

It was not the right place for me anymore due to all kinds of circumstances, and I knew I had to leave and do something else for now and see if this [self-employment] was something for me. If I like this, I will continue. If not, then I will go back. (IV15)

Another consultant in her first year of self-employment feels 'this might not be financially sustainable' (IV13). A third consultant was self-employed for eight years and expressed a deeper motivation to leave self-employment at some point. He wanted to be able to engage more with one organisation and work on something for a longer period, despite 'the many upsides' and 'the easy money of self-employment' (IV16).

Overall, self-employment appears surprisingly attractive and sustainable as a career step for consultants who left their consultancies. As indicated in Fig. 2, arrow 4, interviewees see it as a permanent step. Self-employment helps them regain their professional commitment lost due to the downsides of corporate normative control practices. They explain that they now experience greater autonomy and more authenticity, and there are new learning opportunities. They can choose to do the projects they really like and have more say over their work-life balance.

5. Discussion

The objective of this study was to provide insights into how

consultants look back on their work-life as employees at large elite consultancies and how corporate normative control practices played into their decisions to leave. Similar to earlier studies on normative control, interviewees reported how practices, such as social events, career policies, and rewarding employment conditions, initially consolidated their commitment (e.g., [Alvesson & Robertson, 2006](#); [Costas, 2012](#); [Fleming & Sturdy, 2011](#); [Fournier, 1999](#); [Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004](#); [Kunda, 1992](#); [Michel, 2011](#)). We have also shown in more detail how training and learning opportunities contributed to commitment in this context. Nonetheless, it becomes clear that, over time, several unwelcome consequences of these normative control practices began to undermine work motivation and work-life balance, consequently lowering commitment. Self-employment was then envisioned as the way to get work motivation back and reduce work-life conflicts. In general, this career step worked out for our interviewees as intended. The following paragraphs discuss four main theoretical implications of our findings and potential venues for future research.

First, our study adds to the literature on normative control by showing how its practices become less motivating during a consultant career due to various growing tensions such as lack of autonomy and authenticity, reduced learning and work-life conflict. For our interviewees, it took, on average, around eight years of employment in an elite consultancy before leaving. This dynamic perspective is missing in studies on the ambiguous or contradictory effects of normative and neo-normative control (cf. [Costas, 2012](#); [Dale, 2012](#); [Fleming & Sturdy, 2011](#); [Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013](#)). Our study confirms that, initially, the interviewed consultants experienced career progression and social events as very motivating and real compensation for the hard work demanded at large elite consulting firms. Participants saw fun social activities as helping create a community feeling with a shared value orientation, and it motivated them to go the extra mile as found in earlier studies on normative control and corporate culture management (e.g. [Alvesson, 2012](#); [Costas, 2012](#); [Fleming & Sturdy, 2009](#); [Grugulis, Dundon, & Wilkinson, 2000](#); [Kärreman & Rylander, 2008](#); [Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2013](#)). However, over time, an experienced lack of autonomy and authenticity appeared to break the positive effect of these practices. In addition, learning decreased and work-life conflicts reached an increasingly unmanageable level for many of the consultants who explained why they decided on self-employment. Unsurprisingly, employees 'are less likely to stay with an organisation if there is work-life conflict' ([Deery & Jago, 2015](#), p. 464). Participating consultants described as reasons for work-life conflicts life-stage changes and private health issues that became increasingly at odds with the high demands at work. While initially appreciated, the social events and evening training programmes were then also added to the regular workweek, leading to a growing frustration that private life always comes second. These downsides made staying employed no longer the better option for our interviewees (cf. [Dale, 2012](#); [Garrety, 2008](#)).

We expect that our explanation for the perception of diminishing returns of normative control practices during a consultant career might apply to a broader context of knowledge-intensive professional service firms where self-employment is an option, but this will not be an easy way out in every sector (cf. [Kunda, 1992](#); [Michel, 2011](#)). Differences between employee characteristics might also be relevant to explain the dynamic patterns, such as having left university recently, being educated vocationally and in what direction, being younger or older, being more or less experienced, cultural background, and entrepreneurial ambition. Study designs like longitudinal diary studies, the study of career biographies, or interviewing respondents every year could add more depth to our insights into the dynamics of normative control practices in corporate contexts.

Secondly, we show the motivating aspect of the many training programmes, mentoring, and learning on-the-job opportunities and how they steer at a distance. They help to internalise company norms and professional values. This motivating aspect provides a more complete picture of the institutionalised normative control practices that can

establish commitment and a shared value orientation, especially early in a consultant career. Intrinsic motivation strongly benefits from the opportunity to learn and develop ([Deci & Ryan, 2002](#)) and from experiencing personal recognition and appreciation for such learning when climbing the career ladder ([Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009](#); [Lindner, 1998](#); [Nyakaro, 2016](#)). Learning benefits are initially experienced as the strongest motivator to commit to hard work, professional development, and aligning with the norms and values imposed by the consultancy. Still, at some point, learning benefits decrease, and they no longer compensate for the reported downsides that come with the required commitment, such as exhaustion or work-life conflict. Further research could focus on different learning modalities, such as training programmes, learning on the job, the kind of projects assigned, mentoring, and the coaching the role of project managers etc., to see how these learning practices can be part of normative control designs that stays effective at different career stages (cf. [Fournier, 1999](#); [Kunda, 1992](#); [Poulter & Land, 2008](#)).

Third, our study contributes to the literature on entrepreneurship by presenting self-employment as a way to avoid the downsides of corporate normative control practices, such as work-life conflicts or lack of autonomy and authenticity ([Dale, 2012](#); [Garrety, 2008](#); [Kunda, 1992](#); [Michel, 2011](#)). While self-employment may not improve work-life balance in general ([Annink, Den Dulk, & Amorós, 2016](#); [Johansson Sevä & Öun, 2015](#)), self-employed consultants do report improvements, as elite consultancies can be very stressful and demanding corporate work contexts (cf. [Alvesson & Einola, 2018](#); [Bouwmeester et al., 2021](#); [Bouwmeester & Kok, 2018](#); [Noury, Gand, & Sardas, 2017](#)). That so many consultants are leaving this high-performance context indicates that self-employment can be helpful. Furthermore, self-employment may give more autonomy and authenticity than neo-normative control designs ever could. While this outcome is debated in entrepreneurship literature (cf. [Protas, 2008](#); [Van Gelderen & Jansen, 2006](#)), for consultants who move from indirect to direct client contact, being self-employed means they can make work decisions without consulting their project manager, who, as well as the client, must be satisfied. In addition, they no longer have to meet company demands regarding what kinds of projects to accept, what price to ask, and what deliverables to promise. By being able to choose the projects they like, increased autonomy adds to work motivation and renews professional commitment (cf. [Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2010](#); [Thatcher et al., 2006](#)). The reported advantages of self-employment seem to compensate for possible downsides like a drop in income or increased uncertainties related to project acquisition. Another downside of self-employment was the mentioned lack of colleagues to work with. One consultant solved this by participating in a network organisation, a solution also reported in Italy ([Maestripieri & Cucca, 2018](#)). Overall, self-employment seems to be a rather sustainable option for consultants in terms of risks versus well-being (cf. [Berrill et al., 2021](#)). For future research, the entrepreneurship literature could pay closer attention to consultants' boundaryless occupational career that moves from employment in an organisation to self-employment and entrepreneurship. Self-employment is not the only way to avoid corporate normative control pressures at elite consultancies. Alternative escape options to be studied are moving to a client, a smaller consultancy, consultancies that operate lower in the market, or those that specialise in the area of a consultant's interest.

Fourth, although self-employment is a common step in a consultant career after employment in a consultancy, this boundaryless career step is theoretically underexplored in the consultant literature ([Cross and Swart, 2021](#); [Donnelly, 2009](#); [Maestripieri, 2019](#)). Our study illustrates how an occupational career ending with self-employment moves from a context of organisational or corporate professionalism to a new form of 'post-corporate' occupational professionalism ([Evetts, 2013](#); [Muzio et al., 2011](#)). In such a boundaryless career context, corporate employment conditions compete with those of self-employment. Corporate normative control practices like social events and learning opportunities create quite favourable conditions for junior consultants, while the

greater autonomy, authenticity and acceptable entrepreneurial risks of self-employment create very competitive conditions for more mature consultants. While a career trajectory from employment to self-employment is not uncommon in many professions, we see a new dynamic in the consultant occupation, with optimal learning conditions for junior consultants in the corporate context and then self-employment as an underexplored escape route to avoid the downsides of normative control practices in the corporate setting (cf. Dale, 2012; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Garrety, 2008; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2017). This new form of occupational professionalism seems to be enabled by corporate professionalism, as consultants' professional development has initially taken place in an organisational context. Further research could explore this new form of 'post-corporate' occupational professionalism in more depth.

6. Conclusions and practical implications

Consultants explain how they have decided on self-employment due to a growing desire for autonomy, authenticity and better work-life balance, which they could not realise in a corporate context with strong normative controls. Family responsibilities or a growing desire to follow up on their own ideas and select their own projects also contributed to participants' decisions. We also find that the attractiveness of learning practices in the corporate context declines over time. Therefore, large elite consulting firms could seek to make their normative control practices more life-stage-proof. We found that some employees who left big consultancies could be convinced to return for social reasons as long as it would not create too much work-life conflict. In addition, if learning opportunities would remain attractive later on in a career and if autonomy and authenticity issues could be tackled, there is potential to keep an experienced and entrepreneurial labour force on board much longer. Creating opportunities for intrapreneurship might help, as many consultancies keep warm ties with their self-employed alumni, sometimes calling them associates. It could help keep more senior consultants with an entrepreneurial mindset committed for longer, thus making employment in elite consultancies more sustainable for some of the experienced employees (Bouwmeester & Kok, 2018; Dale, 2012; O'Mahoney, 2011). For consultants who are considering self-employment, career guidance or coaching could be developed. Consultancies could anticipate this career step better, as it is very common. In addition, management students preparing for a consultant career could be informed that a consulting career usually ends in self-employment, not in senior partnership at an elite firm. Therefore, self-employment in consulting deserves more attention in consulting education at business schools.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Onno Bouwmeester: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Analysis; Co-Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Visualisation; Supervision. **Maxime Slaats:** Conceptualisation; Methodology; Investigation; Analysis; Co-Writing – original draft.

Data Availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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