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*Neo-Villeiny and the Service Sector: The Case of Hyper Flexible and Precarious Work in Fitness Centres*

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**Abstract**

This article presents data from a comprehensive study of hyper flexible and precarious work in the service sector. A series of interviews were conducted with self-employed personal trainers along with more than 200 hours of participant observation within fitness centres in the UK. Analysis of the data reveals a new form of hyper flexible and precarious work that is labelled neo-villeiny in this article. Neo-villeiny is characterised by four features: bondage to the organisation; payment of rent to the organisation; no guarantee of any income; and extensive unpaid and speculative work that is highly beneficial to the organisation. The neo-villeiny of the self-employed personal trainer offers the fitness centre all of the benefits associated with hyper flexible work, but also mitigates the detrimental outcomes associated with precarious work. The article considers the potential for adoption of this new form of hyper flexible and precarious work across the broader service sector.

Keywords: gig economy; hyper flexibility; neo-villeiny; non-standard work; precarious work; service sector; and workplace flexibility.

## **Introduction**

The ways that people are employed by organisations has, in recent years, undergone significant change. Chief amongst these has been a global shift away from the once standard employment model characterised by full time, permanent contracts, reasonable pay levels, good job quality and prospects for career progression. Increasingly and especially prevalent in the service sector, is employment based on temporary, short term, part time, informal job arrangements as well as various forms of self-employment and subcontracting (Mandl et al., 2015; ILO, 2015; OECD, 2015). Such work arrangements affect 75 percent of the global workforce (ILO, 2015) with 50 percent of the jobs created in the OECD since the mid-1990s being of this type (OECD, 2015: 15). In the US there has been a move towards what has been labelled the ‘gig economy’ – a positive sobriquet for flexible working associated with the free spirited musician – that denotes a work relationship that meets the specific and short term needs of the organisation but one that is devoid of commitment on the part of the organisation to the worker (see Friedman, 2014). In the United Kingdom there has been a large increase in ‘on-call’ work based on zero hours contracts replacing more standard types of employment (Mandl et al., 2015).

The nature of flexible employment such as the zero hours contract is that the employee is not guaranteed any work or pay, employers have complete discretion over the hours worked and paid for and it entails few of the employment rights

enjoyed by workers on more standard contracts. This mode of precarious employment has become known as ‘hyper flexible working’ whereby employers are able to make rapid changes to the size of their workforce, to the working hours of individual employees and to the employment costs incurred (see Rose, 2009; Reilly, 1998).

This article identifies a new form of hyper flexible work arrangement that combines high levels of worker flexibility with high levels of emotional labour and, ostensibly, organisational commitment from the worker; the latter having traditionally been seen as something sacrificed by the adoption of new forms of labour flexibility (Burgess et al., 2013). This new form of work is labelled neo-villeiny in that it reflects the defining characteristics of a villein, a work relationship that existed in medieval Britain between serfs and Lords. These characteristics are: bondage to the landlord/employer; payment of rent to the landlord/employer; no guarantee of any income (rent merely guarantees the opportunity to earn); and extensive unpaid and speculative work that is highly beneficial to the landlord/employer. Neo-villeiny is an extension of hyper-flexible work: one that creates new levels of worker precarity and exploitation. Crucially, it is one that de facto *requires* the worker to behave in a manner that displays a high level of organisational commitment, such as offering extensive and high calibre customer service.

The objectives of this article are first to describe the characteristics of neo-villeiny as a contemporary work arrangement; second to illustrate this with the empirical case of self-employed personal trainers (SEPTs); and third to consider the implications of this new form of work for both the fitness industry and for the service sector more generally. The next section of the article examines the defining characteristics of

medieval villeiny and develops the concept of neo-villeiny. Thereafter, the research methods used to investigate an occupational group that typifies the concept of neo-villeiny are explained. This is followed by an illustration of neo-villeiny based on empirical material generated by research into the fitness industry and the work of self-employed personal trainers (SEPT). The ways in which the work arrangements of the SEPTs involve different forms of worker exploitation are then considered in terms of the intellectual, aesthetic and emotional labour provided by them (see Harvey et al., 2014). The article concludes by pointing to some of the wider implications of this type of work for the extension of the capitalist exploitation of labour, specifically in the service sector.

### **Medieval Villeiny and Neo-Villeiny**

Whereas it has long been established that flexible working provides tangible or quantitative benefits for the firm, it also comes furnished with downsides (Jahn et al., 2012). The lack of commitment on the part of the organisation to the employee that is manifest in hyper flexible work in particular is likely to be reciprocated by employees who will also demonstrate a lack of commitment towards the organisation (Burgess et al., 2013). This may be expressed in an absence of discretionary effort and organisational citizenship behaviours (Boxall and Purcell 2011: 222), or “resistant emotional misbehaviour”, whereby employees “self-consciously pursue interests that are known to be alternative to those of their employer” (Vincent 2011: 1376; see Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). The absence of organisational commitment can be especially damaging in the service industry where high levels of discretionary and emotional labour are critical (Boxall and Purcell, 2011: 222; Hochschild, 1983;

Korczynski, 2002). The negative impact of hyper flexible work on employees invariably negatively affects service quality and customers' experience of their interaction with the service provider (see Heskett et al., 1997; Judge et al., 2001). The precariousness of hyper flexible work can also undermine continuance commitment, or the employee's assessment of the costs associated with leaving the firm (Meyer and Allen, 1991; Meyer et al., 2012), rendering organisations more susceptible to labour turnover (Somers 1995, 2009) and leading to the loss of tacit and explicit knowledge, skills and abilities and increased recruitment and training costs.

In response to these potential negative consequences, organisations are impelled to find work arrangements that allow them to enjoy the benefits of hyper flexibility without sacrificing employee commitment. One such new arrangement, defined in this article as neo-villeiny, blurs the distinction between employed and self-employed workers, such that self-employed workers carry out many of the activities formerly carried out by employees. In effect they act as representatives of the organisation just as would an employee. Before elaborating on this, however, it is first necessary to describe the medieval villeiny on which this idea is based. An important turning point in feudalism in Britain occurred in the middle of the twelfth century with the differentiation between free peasants (or freemen) and villein peasants. The former were under the jurisdiction of the Crown and the latter subject to the power of lords and their manor courts. This change gave the Crown "a social basis upon which its jurisdiction could be distinguished from the domestic powers of the lords" as well as being "necessary for the intensification of the exploitation of villein peasants on customary tenures by the lord of the manor" (Kennedy, 2008: 71).

The medieval villein was bonded to the landlord as “part of the landlord’s agricultural equipment” (Harding, 2001: 224) and paid a rent to the landlord in order to use the lord’s land (see Kanzaka, 2002; Dyer, 2002; Miller and Hatcher, 1978). The arrangement between the villein and the landlord required the villein to work on the lord’s land in addition to the work they performed on their rented plot. The landlord was in no way obliged to compensate the villein should the villein encounter a bad harvest. Moreover, the villein had no protection under the law if he was evicted by the lord and had no right to claim damages (Miller and Hatcher, 1978). Legally the villein could not leave the service of his lord with the only way of severing feudal relations being to abscond (Antony, 1977). Such an arrangement very much favoured the lord because “the very dependence of the villeins enabled lords to insist that their holdings were kept intact or nearly so in order that they would be capable of sustaining families that would provide the reservoir of labour the lord *might* need” (Miller and Hatcher, 1978: n.p. italics added).

From the discussion above it is possible to distil four key characteristics of medieval villeiny: i) bondage to the lord; ii) payment of rent to the lord to work the land; iii) insecurity due to the lack of a guaranteed crop outcome; and iv) the provision of extensive, unpaid, speculative work. In one sense the idea of the villein can appear archaic, relying as it does on out-dated notions of serfdom, servitude and slavery (see Cooke, 2003), underscored by inequities under the law that no longer exist in the West at least. Such forms of work relationship might well be relegated to a pre-capitalist history where freedom was not the legal right of all persons: where feudal society dictated the relations between nobles and the peasantry. Nevertheless, on closer examination, it is possible to imagine that the structure of feudal relationships

can survive or reappear in different forms within capitalism over time as a means to ‘solve’ managerial problems that restrict the amount of surplus that can be extracted from labour. While of course not exactly the same as the medieval concept, there are elements in present day forms of the work relationship that share important characteristics with the relationship between the lord and his villein.

The defining characteristics of villeiny can be identified in contemporary capitalism in a scaled down format in the relationship between the owner of capital and certain workers (the neo-villeins). While the socio-economic and political context between the two eras is radically different, the structure that sustains exploitation has enough similarities to be able to apply the notion of neo-villeiny. First, the neo-villein is bonded to an organisation and to the physical resources possessed by that organisation. The bond under capitalist neo-villeiny is to the means of service ‘production’. Importantly this differentiates neo-villeiny from modern day slave labour. While both are a form of bondage, for the neo-villein the subjugation is less tangible as it is ensconced in the right to access capital resources to provide a service. Moreover, for the neo-villein the arrangement can include the personal perception that s/he is economically better off, or at least potentially so, than if they engaged in other working arrangements. Bondage for the neo-villein also represents a form of continuance commitment that constrains, circumscribes and in the extreme case curtails choice. The neo-villein is bonded to a workplace because of the actual or potential benefits of remaining therein, their inability otherwise to secure their own capital resources and the high financial cost of leaving.



Second, the neo-villein must pay some form of rent to the organisation in order to secure the opportunity of work. While the medieval villein paid rent in the form of produce, animals, fees and fines in return for a tenured landholding (Forgeng and McClean, 2009: 16) the neo-villein may pay cash rent or engage in beneficial activities as a form of rent in kind in return for the use of premises, physical resources and capital equipment. The neo-villein requires resources which they cannot acquire independently in order to provide economic value from their labour - forming the basis of the 'work relationship' with the organisation. The rent gives the neo-villein the right to use the organisation's resources in predefined ways; it is up to him or her to deploy those resources in ways that will generate an income.

Third, the neo-villein suffers insecurity due to the lack of a guaranteed outcome from their labour. Neo-villeiny is a contractual relationship characterised by wage insecurity in that the contract sees no income directly flowing from the organisation to the worker. The rent paid only grants the worker an opportunity for the self-generation of income. For the medieval villein the arrangement was such that "once he had paid what he owed and done those services incumbent on him, what remained of the fruits of his land and his labour were his own" (Miller and Hatcher, 1978: xi). The same holds for the neo-villein albeit under capitalist conditions the neo-villein is a non-capital owning entrepreneur whose income comes from whatever surplus s/he can generate from income over and above the rent that they are obligated to pay the organisation.

Fourth, the neo-villein must engage in extensive unpaid and speculative work that does not necessarily guarantee them an income but which is highly beneficial to the

organisation. In medieval times, while “rent was an important feature of villeinage [...] labour services were its defining feature” (Bailey, 2014: 48). Similarly, the neo-villein pays a rent for access to capital resources to be used in the generation of income but also engages in other forms of productive labour for the organisation for which they receive no direct financial reward. These forms of productive labour can be many and varied involving intellectual, physical and emotional labour. The organisation thereby benefits from a low cost and highly flexible worker, but it is also able to exploit the full range of its worker’s human capital.

Elements of neo-villeiny can be observed across the contemporary service sector, for example in the work of the self-employed hairstylist who rents space and facilities in a beauty salon (see Cohen, 2010), in sex work in legal brothels (Wagenaar, 2006) or even in the relationship between cabin crew and the European ultra-low fares airline Ryanair. In the latter case, for example, the work relationship is mediated by an agency whereby cabin crew must pay the significant cost of training in order to work at the airline (Harvey , 2012). As outlined earlier the objectives of this study are to define characteristics of neo-villeiny and map historical notions of the villein onto contemporary service work. The context of personal trainers provides a useful case to illustrate different dimensions of neo-villeiny. The article explores how the frame of neo-villeiny sheds light on the dark side of changing flexible work arrangements that offer autonomy on their surface but shift financial and other responsibilities to the worker and which present an ominous future for service work. Thus, the focus of this article is an example of neo-villeiny where the work arrangements conform to all of the characteristics of neo-villeiny. This example, to which the article now turns, is

based on a comprehensive study of the work of self-employed personal trainers (SEPT).

### **Data Collection Methods**

The data used to illustrate neo-villeiny comes from an ethnographic study (see Atkinson et al, 2002) conducted between February 2009 and April 2011 in two fitness centres in South Wales, UK. In large part the fieldwork was comprised of participant observation at the two fitness centres (cf. Sassatelli, 1999; Sparkes, 2009; van Maanen, 1998) and semi-structured interviews with SEPTs, some of whom worked at the sites of observation while others worked at alternative fitness centres in South Wales. This methodology facilitated an examination of the social organisation of SEPTs and an investigation of their working lives in context and in their everyday accomplishment (Atkinson et al., 2002; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

The focus on the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of the interaction between SEPTs and clients of the fitness centres meant that ethnographic methods, especially the use of observation, were the most appropriate in order to understand the nature of the work as it was conducted in relation both to the site (fitness centre) and the (potential) client. The semi-structured interviews concentrated on the realities of work for the SEPT, allowing an exploration of the different dimensions of neo-villeiny. As far as it was practicable to do so all interviews followed the same schedule whereby participants were asked general questions about their experience of work and then encouraged to think more specifically about the qualities that were needed to become

a successful SEPT. This enabled a discussion of issues of importance to the respondents that they themselves raised during the interview (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Mason, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

A total of 17 interviews were conducted with male and female SEPTs ranging in age from 21 to 40. The interviews were conducted outside of the fitness centre and lasted between 45 minutes and two hours (see Table 1). The interviews were held towards the end of the observation period so that the interviewer was able to discuss findings from the observation with the interviewees. These data were especially important for understanding the frequent interactions between SEPT and fitness centre members and their rationale for exercising within the fitness centre where the SEPT operated. The interviews were transcribed and then manually coded by theme and sub-theme in order to identify key terms, behaviours, events and activities (Charmaz, 2006; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Over 200 hours of observation were carried out at the two fitness centres. The first fitness centre, Gym 1, was part of a national chain and at the time of study accommodated more than 5,000 members. The number of SEPTs operating at Gym 1 increased from five to 15 during the period of study. The second fitness centre, Gym 2, was a smaller independent business with approximately 500 members and 5 SEPTs.

Being a member of both fitness centres allowed one of the research team to observe the SEPTs at work (see Buchanan et al., 1988). Field notes were taken unobtrusively during light workouts undertaken by the researcher that formed the observation periods. Workout sessions lasted no longer than one hour so that the researcher's time at the fitness centre was not noticeably different from the average time a member

would spend there. The research activity was thus highly participatory (see Adler and Adler, 1987). The field notes recorded visual aspects of the work and also anecdotal instances or ‘critical incidents’ (Brandt, 1972) of the SEPTs’ use of aesthetic capital, for example. These notes are, of course, subject to the observer’s “conscience, understanding and interpretation” (Coffey, 1996: 66; see also, Emmerson et al., 2011). Permission to undertake the research was sought from management at both research sites and all the SEPTs operating in each site were also aware of the presence of the researcher and the purpose of the study.

TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

### **The Self-Employed Personal Trainer (SEPT) as a Neo-Villein**

Personal trainers can either be employed directly by a fitness centre or self-employed, however, the study participants all viewed the former merely as a precursor to the latter. Many of the respondents cited either (or in some cases both) the absence of control over one’s schedule or the potential to increase their income as a reason why they exchanged employment in the fitness industry for self-employment in that same industry. Whereas the employed personal trainer receives a wage from the fitness centre, they must surrender a sizeable portion of a client’s fee, paid in exchange from a personal training session, to the fitness centre (up to around 65 percent of the fee). Under conditions of self-employment the self-employed personal trainer (SEPT) receives the whole fee paid by the client for their services, but the fitness centre benefits from the unique characteristics of what was delineated earlier as neo-villeiny.

To explore and explain further the article now considers the work of the SEPT in relation to the four characteristics of neo-villeiny.

### *Bondage and SEPT work*

The first characteristic of neo-villeiny is that the workers are bonded to an organisation and to the physical resources possessed by that organisation. A consistent theme throughout the interviews was the SEPTs' perceived dependence upon (or bondage to) the fitness centre. This dependence was expressed by SEPTs in their definition of the fitness centre both as a source of potential clients and a space in which to work with them. Each of the gym members represented a potential client for the SEPT and the fitness centre was thus an ideal context for the SEPTs to generate work. The interview data shows how all the study participants recognised the importance and even the necessity of using the fitness centre in order to advertise their services. The ability to interact well with the members of the fitness centres was also widely considered to be fundamental to the success of their business (Harvey et al., 2014). Alfie, for example, phrased it in this way: "you have to be out there with clients, booking taster sessions and getting known" (interview notes, May 2009). Alfie claimed to be "in work" for around 60 hours per week of which "30 hours is personal training. The rest is being around, talking to people, getting to know them. That's what gets you business". (Interview notes, May 2009) A consistent feature of the observation was the "friendly SEPT" actively engaging members in conversation as a means of promoting their services. The "super-fit SEPT" also displayed their physical capital with the promise of what might be achieved under their tutelage (this is further explored below).

Bondage to the fitness centre was also expressed in discussion of the difficulties of working outside the fitness centre. Sally spoke of her attempt to set up a “network of personal trainers throughout Wales”, independent of fitness centres, with exercise being conducted either within the home or on public ground. This business venture had, however, failed due to logistical challenges and because the business was unable “to attract enough clients” (Interview notes, April 2009). Similarly, Phil spoke of the obstacles to operating a personal training business outside the fitness centre in the mode of British Military Fitness (BMF), where ex-armed services personnel conduct armed forces style fitness sessions outdoors to groups of clients. He commented: “that’s the way forward. Group your clients together so they pay less and you get paid more per hour” (Interview notes, May 2009). However, Phil acknowledged the difficulties of doing this for a single operator without the financial capital for marketing or an established brand. He explained the problems of operating without the constant access to a potential client base in the fitness centre. As he put it: “it’s more difficult to get people [attract clients] outside the gym – people go to the gym for a reason”. (Interview notes, May 2009)

Bondage for the SEPT may be seen as a form of continuance commitment that binds them to the fitness centre because of the benefits available within it and the costs of operating outside of it. Although they were all theoretically free to terminate their relationship with the fitness centre at any point, such a decision would have meant surrendering an integral and invaluable source of clientele and income. The clients themselves were also bonded to the fitness centre for a variety of reasons such as convenience, satisfaction or a membership contract and would have been reluctant to move elsewhere should the SEPT have ended their relationship with the fitness centre.

Consequently, bondage for the SEPT was enforced through the relationship between their client and the fitness centre.

### *Rents and SEPT work*

The second characteristic of neo-villeiny is that the worker must pay some form of rent to the organisation in order to secure the opportunity of work. In order to operate within a fitness centre (that is to use the facilities and equipment and, more importantly, gain access to a potential client base) a SEPT must pay rent to the fitness centre in order to ‘work-the-land’. At Gym 1, rent was set at between £350 and £450 per calendar month, depending on the range and extent of activities undertaken by the SEPT on behalf of the fitness centre. Rent at Gym 1 could be reduced if the SEPT agreed to undertake nominated activities for the fitness centre such as conducting exercise classes, inducting new members, staffing the reception area, basic equipment maintenance and even cleaning, or as Sally put it: “We all do a bit of cleaning... We all do class instruction in the studio.” (Interview notes, April 2009). In reducing the monetary rent paid by the SEPT, these activities represented a system of rent payment “in kind”, as consistent with the concept of medieval villeiny outlined earlier.

Rent in kind was most obvious at Gym 2 where SEPTs were given the opportunity to forego monetary rent if they carried out a full and extensive range of such activities. The reception area at Gym 2 was often staffed entirely by SEPTs rather than employees and it was common to observe SEPTs tidying away exercise equipment such as dumbbells and weight plates at both fitness centres and engaging members in conversation as they did so. Importantly, by carrying out these activities the SEPT



eroded employment for other workers in the fitness industry as, in some cases, paid staff were no longer required to carry out these roles.

### *Insecurity of Income and SEPT work*

The rent paid by SEPTs guaranteed them the opportunity to attract clients but did not guarantee them any income. Phil was keen to point out that this fee did not generate business in itself; it merely provided the opportunity for the SEPT to attract clients who might then solicit their services. Usually this service comprised of a series of one-to-one sessions where the SEPT devised an individual exercise programme and motivated the client to achieve exercise goals. The sessions were normally either thirty minutes or one hour in duration. In Gym 1 the amount charged per session was the standardised personal training rate set by the gym for all SEPTs: £15 per half hour and £25 per hour. Notably, the fees charged by the SEPTs dramatically increased the client's expenditure on fitness over and above what they paid for gym membership. For example one single half hour session per month with a personal trainer at Gym 1 doubled a member's monthly fitness expenditure (the membership cost was £15 per month). As personal training sessions often occurred weekly the cost implications and the financial disincentives of using the service provided by the SEPTs are clear. This demonstrated the precarious and often seasonal nature of the fitness instructor's work and also highlighted the difference between the SEPT and other self-employed service workers such as hair stylists. Simply put, the fitness centre client was able to exercise without the paid assistance of the SEPT, whereas it is uncommon for the average customer of the hair salon to enter the premises and style their own hair.

The seasonal nature of demand for personal training also posed a problem for the SEPTs. One interviewee operating at Gym 1, Phil, put it this way:

‘Before I make any money each month I have to cover around £400 for rent, insurance and stuff. That means I have to instruct 10 clients before I break even... It’s fine after Christmas – loads of people trying to stick to their New Year’s resolutions. It’s really tough in December though because everyone’s partying... not in the gym.’ (Interview notes, May 2009).

Nancy explained the instability and insecurity in work opportunities in this way: “personal training tends to come in peaks and troughs. New Year – everyone’s throwing money at you. Now, summer holidays, everyone wants personal training. Then you have months in between with nothing.” (Interview notes, June 2009)

#### *Unpaid and Speculative Work and the SEPT*

SEPTs were able to reduce the rent they pay to the fitness centre by engaging in additional activities that would otherwise be carried out by unskilled staff. However, rent reduction was not the sole reason why SEPTs undertook these additional responsibilities. Indeed it was clear from both the interviews and the observation that SEPTs engaged in what might in different circumstances be considered to be discretionary effort.

The research participants stated that they had undertaken certain activities not because doing so would reduce their cash rent payment, but because it would give them the opportunity to interact with potential clients. For Joe this involved offering unsolicited guidance to members on posture and form between sessions with paying

clients. Joe used humour to establish a rapport with clients. He told us: “I’d say ‘do it this way because if you don’t I’ll need to call an ambulance’. Get them laughing. Get them onside.’ (Interview notes, April 2009). Sally identified the importance of conducting exercise classes since: “that’s where you pick up extra clients because they relate to you as an instructor.” (Interview notes, April 2009) Likewise Phil talked of being happy to do most things with the exception of cleaning the toilets because these activities usually brought him into contact with potential clients (Interview notes, May 2009). During observation at Gym 2 Malcolm was regularly seen ‘spotting’ members – ‘spotting’ involved assisting a gym member by enabling them to lift heavy weights and exercise to failure without the risk of injury and was thus viewed as an extremely useful and valuable activity by the members. This kind of unpaid and speculative activity was performed solely as a marketing exercise for the SEPT but importantly these activities were also intrinsically beneficial to the fitness centres in terms of providing good customer service.

The unpaid and speculative work of the SEPT, understood by many as a necessity in order to attract clients (as explained above), represents a variation of what Standing (2011) refers to as work-for-labour, or unpaid labour, which was required by the job. According to Standing, work-for-labour is complementary activity that is not recognised financially but which is necessary in order to get the job done. It is noteworthy that the work-for-labour of the SEPT required the exploitation of a wide range of different forms of human capital, especially intellectual and physical capital, but most importantly emotional capital, as discussed below.

### **Neo-Villeiny, Work-for-Labour and Human Capital**

In terms of intellectual capital, a degree of codified expertise is needed, for example, the successful completion of Level 3 Certificate in Personal Training or Level 3 NVQ Diploma in Personal Training that included modules on anatomy and physiology, health, safety and principles of exercise (OCR Fitness Instructing and Personal Training Qualifications), in order to operate as a personal trainer. In the course of customer interactions SEPTs were keen to showcase their expertise of anatomy or fitness so as to demonstrate the extent of their intellectual capital. By using intellectual capital, defined as “knowledge and knowing capability” (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998: 245), the SEPT conveyed the quality and quantity of their fitness expertise to the client. Examples included their understanding of the human body and the safe, appropriate and most effective use of fitness equipment.

As a consequence of the powerful commercial rationale for the SEPT to ensure that their knowledge was current, the fitness centre did not need to incentivise SEPTs to maintain their knowledge, skills and abilities with knowledge contingent pay. Nor did it need to provide SEPTs with any training. Continued membership of professionalised trade associations such as the Register of Exercise Professionals (REP) was subject to meeting the “continuing professional development” (CPD) requirements whereby members had to attain 24 CPD points every two years. Points were received for completing online training through the REP website<sup>i</sup>. With this program professional requirements guaranteed voluntary training and skills upgrading by the SEPTs to maintain their membership.

This enhancement and demonstration of intellectual capital represents work-for-labour as the advice provided to members of the fitness centre was not directly

remunerated by the centre nor did it necessarily result in remuneration from clients. Nevertheless, it benefited the fitness centre as members had access to qualified and invariably enthusiastic experts whose presence in the fitness centre was perceived as a perk of membership. In this way the SEPT acted to encourage the member to maintain their membership with the fitness centre.

Work-for-labour in this context also incorporated an aesthetic dimension. The concept of physical or embodied capital emphasises the idea that the body itself is a form of capital (Shilling, 1991), which can confer advantage or disadvantage over others (Bourdieu, 1986). Physical capital is linked to the concept of aesthetic labour or the commodification of physical presence where the aesthetic labourer leases their ‘embodied competencies’ (Warhurst et al., 2000) to the firm. The aesthetic labour of the employee is beneficial to the firm because the employee is constructed as a ‘walking billboard’ (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996) for the business. Warhurst and Nickson’s (2009) findings of the importance for workers in the service industry to ‘look good’ and ‘sound right’ is especially true of the fitness industry. Through their physical capital the SEPT demonstrated the benefits of belonging to a particular fitness centre. Aesthetic labour was also extremely important for the SEPT’s own business; their adornment, physique and physical capacity were all key factors in their success in attracting clients (Harvey et al., 2014). As Deirdre put it: “if you have all the [relevant fitness] knowledge, but you’re an 18 stone PT ... [clients] aren’t going to start with you because they see the way you look and think I don’t want to look like that”. (Interview notes, April 2009)

Both Gym 1 and Gym 2 appropriated the physical capital of the SEPTs who operated within the premises by requiring them to wear a standardised fitness centre uniform polo shirt. The words “Personal Trainer” appeared on the back of the polo shirt which meant that the SEPTs were consequently indistinct from one another and indistinguishable as independent entrepreneurs. Although self-employed, the SEPTs operating within both fitness centres *appeared* to be employed by the fitness centres themselves.

The fitness centre also benefited from the emotion capital of the SEPT made manifest through their emotional labour. Observation at both sites revealed the great effort made by the SEPTs to engage with fitness centre members by offering advice or, more often, friendly conversation. For the SEPT, refusal to provide appropriate emotional labour or engaging in what Vincent (2011) refers to as ‘resistant emotional misbehaviour’ would have been highly detrimental to their own personal/professional interests as well as to those of the fitness centre. If they contravened what are commonly referred to as the emotion rules of the business (see Noon and Blyton, 2007: 180), the SEPT risked ostracising potential clients from whom they derived their income. Their adherence to emotional norms was thus enforced not by the commercial rules (see Bolton and Boyd, 2003) of the fitness centre but by the self-determined and self-enforced internalised rules that influenced the success of their own business.

Emotional labour was a recurrent theme in all of the interviews revealing the widespread perception of its importance to the success of the SEPT. For example, Sally claimed that: “You need to talk to people, to get to know them ... You have to

show an interest in them ... The personality is very important. They always say that people don't buy the product, they buy the person" (Interview notes, April 2009). Similarly Alfie made the point that: "... if you're a good PT then you get referrals, but if you've got a good personality and you're approachable and you're good at approaching people then you'll get business" (Interview notes, May 2009). Interviewees shared the belief that enthusiastic interactions with fitness centre members enhanced their success as a SEPT. Thus this provision of emotional labour and high calibre customer service directly benefited not only their own business interests but also those of the fitness centre.

The emotional aspect of work-for-labour is crucial to neo-villeiny as a new form of work. Hyper flexible work relationships demonstrate a lack of commitment on the part of the employer to employees and workers contracted in this way are likely to reciprocate with a lack of organisational commitment. This lack of organisational commitment may be manifest in the absence of discretionary effort or in emotional indifference and/or emotional misbehaviour. Such a response is extremely hazardous to the success of the firm especially within the service sector. The neo-villein work model helps to bridge this schism by representing a form of hyper flexible working where the normal trade-off between flexibility/ low costs and lower service quality is overcome. This type of hyper flexible working produces workers who willingly shoulder all the insecurities and risks of self-employed status while also providing an ancillary revenue stream for the organisation and high calibre services to customers. In sum, the benefits to the organisation are high, while the risks are low.

## **Conclusions**

This article began by highlighting the global shift away from standard employment and towards non-standard forms of employment. Hyper flexible working is a manifestation of non-standard work *in extremis*. Whereas advocates identify the advantages of hyper flexible working for the firm in terms of temporal, numerical and financial flexibility, these must be weighed against the disadvantages for the firm in offering precarious work including the negative impact on organisational commitment and its consequences such as emotional misbehaviour which is particularly damaging in service sector work.

Neo-villeiny represents a new form of hyper flexible and precarious work that unlike other variants of non-standard work, offers organisations considerable and unequivocal benefits. It combines all the benefits to business of hyper flexible working (such as reduced labour costs and increased managerial discretion) together with those benefits commonly associated with high levels of organisational commitment of workers such as extensive discretionary effort and high calibre emotional labour. Moreover, the neo-villein also contributes financially to the firm, not only in terms of unpaid labour, but also in the payment of rents to the organisation in order to be able to work there.

Due to the unequivocal and unilateral benefit of neo-villeiny to the organisation, it is important to comment on the prospects for wider diffusion of this model in the broader service sector. It is important to point out that the case of the SEPT as the archetypal neo-villein is unique. Many of the participants in this study willingly surrendered their former employment contract with fitness centres in favour of self-



employment in order to realise the potential, although evidently not inevitable, benefits of becoming ‘entrepreneurs’. In this way, the SEPTs are complicit in their own exploitation and fitness centres are spared any conflict that otherwise might have ensued were employment contracts for workers to be unilaterally withdrawn by the employers.

However, forms of self-employment or entrepreneurialism have already been used to replace former employment contracts sometimes referred to as the rising ‘gig economy’. Moreover, with the increase in the ranks of the self-employed that now constitute around 15 per cent of the total UK workforce (ONS 2014), firms already have a sizeable hyper flexible workforce to draw upon. The potential ‘benefits’ of entrepreneurialism are being promoted throughout the economy as the new (and often the only) way to generate jobs and income in the future. The retail sector, for example, is a leader in the fragmentation of work and is experimenting with a variety of options for using cheaper labour and deploying it only as needed (Carre et al, 2010: 259). The long term sustainability of the sector’s strategies are being called into question based, as they currently are, on cost cutting and maintaining market share with service and efficiency goals on the one hand using a workforce characterised by high turnover, low skills and low commitment on the other (ibid). In this context then, there is great potential for management to form neo-villeiny that reconciles the costs associated with the prevailing low road approach to employment.

The existence of new levels of work precarity and exploitation extends the possibility for capitalist exploitation of labour in the service sector and offers a seductive solution to managerial problems. While this article has focused on a form of hyper

flexibility in fitness centres, neo-villeiny is certainly feasible across the service industry and thus provides a dubious blueprint for management and postulates an ominous outlook for the future of work and employment in the service sector.

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Sheena Vachhani is a Senior Lecturer in Management. Her research centres around themes of embodiment, difference, ethics, identity and the feminine in organization: broadly concerned with critical approaches to the study of management and organisation, especially post-structuralist perspectives and critiques of power. Sheena has a particular interest in feminist post-structuralism including, but not limited to, the work of Luce Irigaray. Sheena is currently engaged in projects on leadership and materiality, ethico-political feminist resistance, dirty work, practices of remembering, and corporeality in physical labour. I have published in scholarly journals such as *Organization Studies*, *Organization and Culture & Organization*, as well as contributed to various edited collections. I have recently edited a special issue of *Leadership* on 'The Materiality of Leadership' (with Alison Pullen).

Karen Williams is an associate professor in international employment relations in the School of Management, Swansea University. Her background is in linguistics (German and French) and international relations. Research interests include the transfer of employment relations strategies and practices in multinational companies



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Table 1. Interview schedule.

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Age range</b> | <b>Location</b> | <b>Date</b>      |
|------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <b>Roy</b>       | Male          | 35-40            | Other           | April 2009       |
| <b>Deirdre</b>   | Female        | 20-25            | Other           | April 2009       |
| <b>Joe</b>       | Male          | 25-30            | Other           | April 2009       |
| <b>Sally</b>     | Female        | 35-40            | Other           | April 2009       |
| <b>Danny</b>     | Male          | 35-40            | Gym 2           | April 2009       |
| -                | -             | -                | -               | April 2011       |
| <b>Dee</b>       | Female        | 25-30            | Other           | May 2009         |
| <b>Alfie</b>     | Male          | 20-25            | Gym 1           | May 2009         |
| <b>Phil</b>      | Male          | 20-25            | Gym 1           | May 2009         |
| <b>Sam</b>       | Male          | 25-30            | Gym 1           | May 2009         |
| <b>Alan</b>      | Male          | 20-25            | Gym 1           | May 2009         |
| <b>Colin</b>     | Male          | 25-30            | Other           | June 2009        |
| <b>Nancy</b>     | Female        | 25-30            | Gym 1           | June 2009        |
| <b>Bill</b>      | Male          | 20-25            | Gym 2           | November<br>2009 |
| <b>Liz</b>       | Female        | 20-25            | Gym 2           | November<br>2009 |
| <b>Malcolm</b>   | Male          | 20-25            | Gym 2           | November<br>2009 |
| <b>Malcolm</b>   | Male          | 20-25            | Gym 2           | May 2010         |

### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> See, for example, <http://www.exerciseregister.org/cpd-training/continued-professional-development>.