

The Art of On-the-Job Leisure Hacking: Hidden Practices between Rules and Resistance

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The Art of On-the-Job Leisure Hacking: Hidden Practices between Rules and Resistance. This paper reconceptualizes the notion of *empty labor* through the lens of contemporary leisure scholarship, shifting the perspective from passive resistance or organizational inefficiency toward a more nuanced understanding of leisure as a meaningful component of working life. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in the Czech Republic using semi-structured interviews with 27 employees and 3 employers across diverse work environments, it examines both visible and hidden, self-initiated forms of leisure that emerge during working hours. These underexplored and often unspoken micro-practices unfold within the interstices of institutional structures and challenge conventional distinctions between work and non-work. The study thus contributes to leisure research by offering a conceptual and methodological framework for identifying and analyzing informal leisure practices initiated by employees themselves, thereby advancing knowledge of everyday agency and meaning-making in the contemporary workplace.

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Introduction

Comparative studies of leisure (Rojek 1995; Hunnicutt 2006; Franc – Knapík 2013) invite us to reflect on how the Protestant ethic and the capitalism derived from it (Weber 2001) have permanently reshaped societal understanding of both leisure and paid work. Under this influence, we have learned to overestimate the importance of work, control human activity systematically, and use leisure as a tool of social integration and moral regulation—primarily to restore the workforce (Best 2010). As Roland Paulsen (2014) noted, this dynamic remains evident today across diverse work environments, where employers grapple with the management of ‘empty labor’—periods during working hours when employees are unassigned formal tasks. This is caused by objective factors rooted in the restructuring of the labor market and the organization of work.

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Contemporary research indicates that ‘empty labor’ results from technological innovation, external dependencies, and structural work constraints (Peters – O’Connor 1980; Pindek et al. 2019). Although work processes have been transformed by globalization, digitalization and flexibilization, the 40-hour week largely persists (Lehndorff – Hermann 2017). Employees are therefore often required to remain present at the workplace for fixed periods even when their immediate tasks have been completed or interrupted. This mismatch between fixed working hours and variable task demands is particularly evident in sectors such as automated production, customer service, and facilities management. For instance, a technician operating a CNC machine is not continuously required to intervene in the production process, and employees in customer service must wait for clients before they can act. For employees whose tasks are heavily automated, tied to rigid schedules, or disrupted by technical breakdowns and absent customers, this often generates extended periods without assigned duties.

In response to such ‘empty labor’ (sometimes referred to as ‘idle time’), employees typically either generate additional work tasks—helping colleagues, sharing information, or extending their own duties—or turn to non-work activities that may offer brief leisure experiences and recovery during working time (Puranik et al. 2020). Employers, in turn, adopt diverse strategies shaped by efficiency concerns and by awareness that prolonged ‘idle periods’ may erode employees’ sense of meaningful work (Schubert et al. 2023): some shorten working hours while maintaining wages, thereby shifting from paying for presence to paying for performance; others assign additional tasks where staff must remain on site, as in maintenance or healthcare. Recent approaches also emphasise allowing workers to engage in leisure and physical activity during working hours to offset the negative effects of sedentary work—a growing public health issue (Ng – Popkin 2012). At the same time, empirical evidence shows that such initiatives can improve employees’ physical and mental health and enhance their work performance (Wilcock et al. 1997; Pronk – Kottke 2009; Liu et al. 2023).

In such settings, employers face strategic choices about how to deal with non-work activities: they can prohibit them as a form of *idleness* or accept these activities as a legitimate part of working time and even use them to increase productivity (McGillivray 2005b; Paulsen 2014; Duerden et al. 2017). Many organizations, however, remain cautious about formally accepting ‘empty labor’, as studies have documented several downsides—from financial costs (Brodsky – Amabile 2018) to negative effects on occupational well-being (Peters et al. 1988; de Lange et al. 2003) and reduced task performance (Gilboa et al. 2008; Fritz – Sonnentag 2009). At the same time, evidence highlights the

ambivalence of these periods. Micro-breaks or informal conversations can stimulate and refresh employees, yet they may also undermine their ability to concentrate on ongoing tasks (Methot et al. 2021; Voicu et al. 2023). Similarly, using ‘idle time’ for personal internet activities can speed up the pace of work but also create tension (Brodsky – Amabile 2018). This mixed evidence illustrates a persistent tension: should ‘idle periods’ be treated as wasted time, or as a normal, negotiable element of contemporary working life?

This paper seeks to reconceptualize the notion of ‘empty labor’ by engaging contemporary leisure scholarship and proposing a shift in the perspective from viewing the phenomenon under study solely as passive resistance or organizational inefficiency toward a more nuanced conceptualization of leisure at work. Firstly, it argues that leisure should not be regarded merely as a break from productivity or covert defiance but as an integral, rewarding experience capable of generating both personal benefits—such as well-being and self-satisfaction—and social ones, including the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Roy 1959; Kjerulf 2014; Stebbins 2015). Secondly, it offers a methodological contribution by demonstrating how qualitative research—in this case, semi-structured interviews conducted with 27 employees and 3 employers across diverse Czech work environments—can effectively uncover the hidden leisure practices embedded within organizational life. Thirdly, the paper examines these employee-initiated, often invisible micro-practices, which unfold in the interstices of formal work structures and challenge conventional boundaries between work and non-work (Beatty – Torbert 2003; Stebbins 2004).

The findings reveal that leisure constitutes an essential and active component of working time, experienced across knowledge-intensive and service sectors alike. Employees emerge not merely as passive recipients of ‘idle time’ but as skilled practitioners of ‘on-the-job leisure hacking’. This refers to the situated, creative and sometimes covert micro-practices through which employees use their tacit and organizational knowledge to carve out moments of leisure within the interstices of formal work structures. These practices typically arise in micro-moments of flexibility and relief, demonstrating both constraint (e.g., interruptions, rigid schedules, surveillance) and agency (e.g., timing, visibility, leveraging insider knowledge). While often motivated by the need to manage workload pressures or boredom stemming from underutilization, such practices also subtly reconfigure organizational norms by showing that leisure at work is not simply permitted or denied from above but actively shaped from below through reflexive and strategic forms of agency. In this sense, on-the-job leisure hacking differs from hidden resistance: rather than overtly opposing management, it appropriates and reinterprets existing structu-

res to meet personal and organizational needs—such as rest, recovery and idea generation.

Literature Review

This paper reconsiders Paulsen’s concept of ‘empty labor’ (2014) in light of literature on *semi-leisure* (Dumazedier 1974), *interstitial leisure* (Stebbins 2017), and *leisure at work* (Lacanienta et al. 2018). Inspired by Dumazedier’s work, it observes a certain similarity between his concept of semi-leisure and Paulsen’s definition of ‘empty labor’—“work time that is spent on non-work activities” (2014: 2). Both concepts refer to a period that individuals can potentially use to satisfy psychosocial needs, fulfill non-work obligations, and engage in leisure activities. It is therefore not a time dedicated exclusively to idleness, as one might mistakenly assume under the influence of the Protestant work ethic. A similar position is taken by Robert A. Stebbins (2017), who reflects on ‘free-time spaces’ at work based on the concept of interstitial leisure. He explains that leisure occurs sporadically at work in the form of uncoerced, intrinsically rewarding activities such as daydreaming, reading a book, or using mobile phones and the internet, to name a few. He writes: it occurs “in short spaces of time taken from what is formally recognized as macro-level work time, but nevertheless informally regarded by employees as time for leisure” (ibid.: 37). According to Stebbins, the employee thus plays a key role in creating and recognizing leisure at work. By contrast, Lacanienta et al.’s study (2018) sees employers as the main facilitators of leisure at work, intentionally incorporating recreational activities into working hours to enhance employees’ resilience, work engagement, and organizational identification. This approach is by no means exceptional and is echoed in several other studies. For instance, McGillivray’s research (2005a; 2005b) examines how employers use recreational activities as part of organizational wellness initiatives to manage working bodies. Employees’ responses to these initiatives vary, and when such programs are perceived as inauthentic or imposed, they may disengage from them or appropriate them in ways that serve their own needs (Fleming 2009).

This suggests that there is a wide range of terms used to define ‘free-time spaces’ at work. One such term is Paulsen’s concept of ‘empty labor’ (2014), whose definition stands in contrast to the productive use of time (Harvey 2005). It evokes the notion of idling—or even slacking—while engaging in non-work activities in the workplace, and it diverts attention from employees’ need to cope with work-related demands and unexpected interruptions that draw their focus away from an ongoing work task—such as exhaustion, face-to-face interactions, and equipment failures (Puranik et al. 2020). Yet, as noted

in an integrative conceptual model on the antecedents and consequences of the subjective experience of idle time (Schubert et al. 2023), employees are by nature active. Being both able and willing to work, they proactively employ action strategies—such as job crafting and work stretching—to prevent the negative effects of ‘empty labor’ on occupational well-being and work performance (de Lange et al. 2003; Fritz – Sonnentag 2009). For instance, they may slow their work pace. If they are unable to prevent the emergence of such ‘idle time’, they instead adopt recovery strategies and cyberloafing, which manifest in micro-breaks such as listening to music.

This perspective, however, is not commonly shared among employers, as confirmed by the findings presented in this paper. Some reject ‘empty labor’ in line with the philosophy of neoliberal management (Harvey 2005), assuming that ‘free-time spaces’ at work overshadow productivity. This is surprising given the abundance of evidence demonstrating that micro-breaks and entertainment contribute to restoration, well-being, serendipitous discoveries, creativity, and the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Fritz et al. 2013; Kjerulf 2014; Stebbins 2015; Nie et al. 2021; Albulescu et al. 2022; Lyubykh et al. 2022). This evidence aligns with the concept of occupational harmony, which presupposes that employees’ well-being and sustainable organizational performance are conditioned by maintaining a balance between the three domains of physical and mental, quiet and active, and individual and social engagement (Liu et al. 2023).

To cleanse the concept of ‘empty labor’ of its pejorative connotations, this paper proposes redefining it through the lens of leisure at work—a concept that allows space for examination of micro-breaks during working hours while not being strictly tied to the physical workplace. It therefore better reflects the realities of today’s labor market, which is increasingly characterised by remote and hybrid working arrangements (Gifford 2022). Moreover, it is broad enough to serve as a basis for analysing two empirically distinct phenomena—employees’ leisure experiences and formal leisure practices initiated by employers. The former refers to employees who naturally seek opportunities for leisure experiences as a way to cope with work demands in potentially alienating structures. A classic example can be found in assembly line workers (Walker – Guest 1952; Roy 1959), who engage in informal conversations and ‘fool around’ to preserve their identity and well-being. In line with Stebbins’ definition of leisure (2020), we may say they strive to induce a positive state of mind or being that occurs at the individual level through unforced, contextually framed activities, pleasant expectations, and memories regarding activities and situations. The latter provides a foundation for reflecting on formal initiatives

incorporated by employers within the structure of working hours to promote productivity, morale, and team cohesion (Kjerulf 2014; Duerden et al. 2017).

Methodology

To gain in-depth insights into employees' leisure experiences, this paper draws on qualitative research conducted by the author of this paper in the Czech Republic between 2019 and 2021—a period during which nationwide lockdowns were repeatedly imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the incidence of working from home increased (Eurofound 2020). Against this backdrop, the researcher examined how employees across diverse work environments experience, negotiate, and govern leisure at work. For this purpose, she applied Giddens' structuration perspective (1984), which reflects on how social structure—in this case, the formal organization of the workplace—both enables and constrains social action by providing employees with resources, interpretive rules (*how things are to be interpreted*), and frameworks for interaction, as well as space for individual agency. Using this lens, the researcher analyzed how leisure at work is shaped in a dynamic relationship between social structures and social systems, where employees, employers, and colleagues co-create and re-negotiate everyday practices within the physical, social, and cultural contexts of the workplace (Dickie et al. 2006).

Data generation

The researcher generated data through semi-structured interviews and analysed them using procedures for developing grounded theory (Strauss – Corbin 2014). With participants' consent, their narratives were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data generation proceeded iteratively, moving in constant dialogue between theory and data, with repeated returns to the field and continuous comparison of emerging categories with participants' accounts. Coding was conducted independently to ensure consistency, and consultations with an expert group enhanced conceptual clarity, without involving additional coders. The process continued until no new insights emerged, strengthening the validity of the developed categories.

Regarding the sampling process, it began in a relatively unstructured way. Drawing on existing leisure-at-work literature (Florida 2014; Stebbins 2020) and on the researcher's previous field experience in agriculture, industry and services, exploratory interviews were first conducted with six employees—three from the knowledge-intensive sector and three from the service sector².

² The distinction between knowledge-intensive and service-oriented sectors can be challenging, as previously highlighted by Gershuny (1978). Two main approaches exist for classifying work in these contexts: (a) by the economic branch in which employees are situated, or (b) according to the actual tasks and responsibilities they

Participants were initially approached through the researcher's personal and professional networks, a strategy that has proved effective in research on a similar topic (Schubert et al. 2023). This facilitated access and encouraged candid discussion; however, the analysis later showed that even within familiar networks some participants withheld information or presented themselves in line with their professional roles. To address this and test the feasibility of the study in workplaces with no prior ties, the sampling frame was subsequently expanded. Building on these insights, the researcher then applied purposive theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2006) combined with direct outreach—particularly in service organizations where employer approval was limited—to capture less visible aspects of the phenomenon.

The study focused primarily on employees' experiences of leisure at work, while also including a small number of employers to enrich organizational context and facilitate access to further participants. Participation across all groups remained entirely voluntary, and disclosure of the independent research role was provided to each participant to enhance openness. The main focus was on originally Czech-owned companies in a stable phase of development (20–60 employees), representing a period of maturity, when employers can invest in cultivating organizational culture rather than focusing solely on survival (Deal – Kennedy 2000).

Sampling criteria included job role, hierarchical level, seniority, and attitudes toward leisure, ensuring diversity of perspectives among participants. These criteria were chosen to reflect both structural and experiential dimensions of leisure at work. Job role and hierarchical level helped capture differences in access to resources and decision-making power, which can shape opportunities for leisure (Kossek – Lautsch 2017). Seniority allowed the study to account for variations in experience, familiarity with organizational norms, and the ability to negotiate or influence practices (Eliasson 2021). Additionally, gender was considered as an analytic category because previous research has highlighted gendered differences in leisure participation and constraints (Riot 2015; Yerkes et al. 2020), which may also influence employees' opportunities to engage in recreational activities at work. This approach made it possible to explore how organizational norms, caring responsibilities and structural positions intersect to shape employees' room for manoeuvre and the conditions under which they exercise it.

perform. For the purposes of this study, the latter approach was adopted, as it better captures the real nature of employees' work activities.

Participants' characteristics

Eventually, 30 individuals were approached, of whom 27 employees and 3 employers agreed to participate; their tenure at the current workplace ranged from one to thirty years. They represented two contrasting organizational settings: the knowledge-intensive sector, with flexible working arrangements and autonomy-supportive climates; and the service sector, characterised by fixed schedules and more controlled environments. Among employees, there were 18 men and 9 women: 14 worked in the knowledge industry (Information Technology, Business & Marketing, Engineering Industry), while 13 worked in the service sector (Hospitality & Tourism, Banking, Financial Services & Insurance, Economics, Administration & Human Resources, Science, Education & Sport, Security Forces, Electrotechnics). They included both front-line workers and leading figures such as a fast-food facility manager, a customer support supervisor, and a head of finance. Employers—the chief executive officer of a software company, the owner of an engineering company producing tailor-made elevators, and the director of the municipal police—were included to provide organizational context and to illustrate how varying degrees of workplace regulation in public and private sectors shape opportunities for leisure at work.

Course of interviews

The interviews followed a guide designed to encourage participants to spontaneously talk about the activities they engage in during working hours. In this context, the researcher discussed with participants the nature and organization of their work, jointly distinguishing between different types of activities based on Stebbins's theory of leisure (2020)—work-related and non-work-related obligations, and leisure activities. Additionally, she determined the frequency with which participants engaged in these activities and the meaning they attached to them.

The interviews took place under various conditions: 20 were conducted face-to-face at workplaces, 4 over the phone, and 6 via online video calls. The majority were carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, when repeated nationwide lockdowns resulted in a reduction of informal social interactions (Voicu et al. 2023)—such as having lunch with co-workers, engaging in small talk or even smoking together. Under these circumstances, participants were more willing to speak about leisure at work without organizational censorship: they spoke openly about activities they had used to engage in before the nationwide lockdown was imposed.

Furthermore, they compared this experience with their leisure during the pandemic and described how they coped with the absence of favoured leisure activities, which included informal conversations with colleagues and playing

computer games. They attempted to replace these with alternative forms of leisure that they initiated themselves. This is illustrated by the account of a software administrator who enriched his home office experience with coffee breaks, playing with his son, and computer games.

*And here's where it fits in—I close the computer for a while, go have **a coffee with my wife or play with my son**, or start up something else, because when we work on the computer, it just **takes a moment to load some games**. So, I end the call and switch to something completely different. (software administrator, 40-year-old man)*

In this study, the researcher placed particular emphasis on the reflection of intertextuality (Schwartz-Shea – Yanow 2012)—the construction of meaning within a specific context, where participants respond to the researcher according to how they perceive her. During interviews, the researcher therefore aimed to present herself as a trustworthy individual, fully aware that the topic in question is discussed with caution in public settings, even in environments where leisure at work is intentionally incorporated. It became apparent that participants spoke mainly about what is objectively permitted during working hours; at the same time, they tended to conceal information that might reveal they were frequently engaging in non-work-related activities or doing something that contradicts (un)written rules.

This led the researcher to: observe how participants presented themselves to her and how they managed and controlled the impression she formed of them (Goffman 1959); remain sceptical of shared meanings and their contextual grounding; continuously revise her interview guide based on participants' reactions to move beyond superficial or irrelevant responses and instead obtain rich empirical material. Initial questions that directly evoked idleness—*What kinds of non-work activities do you engage in?*—were gradually replaced with questions that allowed the researcher to identify: what activities participants pursue during working hours; what enables or restricts the occurrence of these activities; the subtle distinctions between (non)work obligations and leisure activities; the sources of leisure experiences; and the meanings of leisure at work. For instance, she posed these questions: Could you describe what a typical day at work looks like for you? What makes your working day more pleasant? How do you feel when you go ... (for a smoke)?

Results

The research findings indicate that employees' leisure experiences across diverse work environments are substantially shaped by varying employer approaches to leisure at work. While the study is not designed to enable a sys-

tematic comparison between sectors, the findings draw on illustrative contrasts based on a narrative analysis involving 14 employees working in the knowledge-intensive sector and 13 in the service sector.

Those working in the knowledge-intensive sector had experience of employer-supported leisure opportunities. Specifically, employees of a software company were allowed to engage in virtually any activity, as frequently as they wished, provided they met their *objectives and key results*—a goal-setting framework used by the company to monitor performance. Thus, alongside the supported leisure activities discussed further below, these employees were occasionally allowed to consume alcoholic beverages during working hours—either during extended lunch breaks or on occasions such as birthday celebrations. As the CEO of the software company illustrates in the following quote, these moments often served as informal opportunities for knowledge exchange.

*I don't know, not that it is common here, but just, **we each used to have a glass of wine and sit having lunch for two hours, discussing something.** It was elsewhere. There might have been a different group of people than normal, and you learned different things than usual, and it was great.* (CEO, 49-year-old man)

The narratives of software company employees further reveal that they frequently engage in leisure activities in a variety of settings, enabled by an autonomy-supportive work climate and a flexible working arrangement. Most of them, several times a day, visit the relaxation room—equipped with beanbags, table tennis/foosball, and darts; engage in informal conversations with colleagues in the kitchen area; listen to music or podcasts; follow the news; and use the internet for personal purposes.

*The boys have **a coffee ritual** here. When they taught me to drink unsweetened, non-dairy coffee, and that is just great, when I'm already here in the morning. I'm looking forward to having that coffee together at that exact time, around 9:30. We are in the kitchen **sharing gossip and chatting.** It is such a diversion. The same **darts, foosball, just anything.*** (marketing specialist, 45-year-old woman)

Some employees of a software company also associate leisure at work on a daily basis with activities such as playing computer games and chess, smoking cigarettes, walking their dog, and daydreaming. This is illustrated by the narrative of two women responsible for providing customer support. The first occasionally lets her thoughts wander while gazing out at the park, whereas the second used to go for regular walks with her dog before the COVID-19 pandemic. These moments of brief mental and physical detachment

from work were described as contributing not only to psychological well-being but also to improved work performance.

*I have a lovely view of the park from here. So sometimes, I let **my mind wander there**, or when I'm chatting or gossiping with a colleague, in those moments, I completely detach from work. (customer support, 52-year-old woman)*

*Well, my way was to take a dog and go out to the park, and I came back as a slightly different person. And **by taking a break, it gets much better**. You tolerate the noise in the office much more easily, work much better, and do your tasks better. Much faster than before. (customer support, 53-year-old woman)*

As for the leading figures of a software company, they actively link leisure with a transformational leadership approach (Bass 1999), characteristic of the knowledge-intensive sector, which is oriented toward fostering autonomy, initiative, and creative potential. Accordingly, they support participation in collective leisure activities while also accepting other forms of leisure—including those that may be at odds with the Labor Code³. This is once again illustrated by the narrative of the CEO of the software company.

*We also tried to **motivate people to stay with the company longer**, because it takes quite some time to build up the necessary know-how in the area we operate in. That is, online advertising—it's not exactly straightforward, and it takes about a year before you properly understand all the connections. And **that's important for ensuring the quality of the software we develop**. (CEO, 49-year-old man)*

The table below illustrates the varying degrees of support that individual and collective forms of leisure may receive from employers across diverse workplaces. It therefore does not refer solely to the aforementioned employees of a software company, but also includes those with experiences of both acceptance and prohibition of leisure at work. These cases are discussed further below to demonstrate how a specific activity may be received differently depending on the context. This applies, for instance, to the consumption of alcoholic beverages, which cannot be clearly categorised as either accepted or prohibited leisure, as boundaries it occupies an ambiguous position between the two.

³ According to Act No. 262/2006 Coll., the Labor Code (2012), it is prohibited during working hours to engage in activities such as abusing addictive substances, and smoking during working hours "at workplaces and other premises where non-smokers would be exposed to the effects of smoking".

Table 1: Classification of leisure practices by degree of employer acceptance

Categories	Forms	
	Individual	Collective
Supported		Informal conversations with colleagues, practical jokes, playing games (darts, chess, table tennis, foosball, billiards), and stretching exercises.
Accepted	Using mobile phones, browsing the Internet, listening to music and podcasts, watching news, gossip, playing PC games, daydreaming, reading, knitting, greeting card production, smoking cigarettes, and walking a dog.	Consumption of alcoholic beverages during an extended lunch break or on the occasion of birthday celebrations.
Prohibited	Watching movies, taking a nap, and making love.	

Those working *in the service sector* reported experiencing either acceptance (7) or prohibition (3) of leisure by their employers. A notable exception in this regard was employees of an engineering company producing tailor-made elevators and police officers. Despite rigid working hours and material conditions that are typically not adapted for such purposes, these employees had ample opportunities for engaging in leisure experiences as their superiors explicitly valued leisure's contribution to both personal and organizational needs—such as rest, recovery, and the generation of new ideas. The research findings suggest that in such working environments, employees encounter leisure within the production hall, office, or kitchen area. These leisure moments often involve informal conversations, using mobile phones, browsing the Internet, joking, and playing practical jokes.

*So here it suggests itself. There are, for instance, burning plans that last like six hours, and during those six/seven hours, there is no filler—nothing to do, so that person has time. (...) Well, like, if someone arrives on **a bike, we would hide it.** We would **tape up his car.** We put a colleague's bike on a crane and let it hang there. Or covered another's entire car with stretch tape so he couldn't get inside, and those were kind of the bigger ones. (CNC laser operator, 27-year-old man)*

*We try to keep the mood light here, with **jokes and the occasional harmless prank**—nothing extreme, just the kind of thing where we can laugh at ourselves and have some fun. (the director of the municipal police, 51-year-old man)*

Among state police officers working full-day shifts, leisure may also include going to the gym, taking naps, and playing table tennis or billiards because, as McGillivray argues (2005a: 132), their employers invest in the machinery of body maintenance—fine-tuning the working body. The narrative of an operations officer illustrates this.

*When we were at the station, we had things like a ping-pong table and billiards. It was for times **when we had some downtime**, when we were at the station, and we **had no call-outs**. **Then we could**, for instance, **go to the gym**. Although usually, the gym wasn't used during working hours, if we were there and had time, we could **play some ping-pong or do something to unwind**.*

*And when we came back after a night shift—or back when we used to finish around 2 a.m. and then again at 6 a.m.—if **you didn't have a file** that had to be completed that night, **you could lie down on a bed** for a bit before the management came in. **If there was nothing urgent**, it was allowed—as long as you didn't have to work on a file or paperwork. (police officer, 54-year-old man)*

The quoted excerpt from the interview includes expressions that indicate a gradual shift from accepted forms of leisure to those considered prohibited. These are expressed through adverbial clauses of time and condition—“if there was nothing urgent”, “we had no call-outs”, “you didn't have a file to deal with”—suggesting that it was possible to engage in activities not incompatible with the performance of one's duties. Such expressions appeared repeatedly in the narratives of employees working in the service sector, which is characterised by a transactional leadership approach (Bass 1999), a control-oriented work climate, and strict adherence to rules and social norms. Among them were also employees who had experience with the suppression of leisure at work—such as a kindergarten teacher, employees of a fast-food chain, and a customer advisor in a bank.

***It is forbidden**. But when it comes to my subordinates, if they come to me and say: "I need to make **a call for ten minutes**, I just have to call my mother, a friend", I have no problem with that. (fast-food chain facility manager, 33-year-old woman)*

***No, not at all**. There is no such business philosophy there. If I took out a book, or at times I put headphones in my ears and **listened to music** during working hours because I could always answer emails and wouldn't have to listen to the noise in the hall and stuff like that... and as I said before, other colleagues were interested in you. (customer advisor, 29-year-old man)*

The interview excerpt with the kindergarten teacher is unfortunately missing, as the participant declined to have the conversation recorded, being fully aware that leisure is prohibited in her workplace. This prohibition extends even to informal conversations, which are commonly used by employers across diverse work environments as a means of social control⁴. At her workplace, such interactions are prohibited, as is the personal use of mobile phones. Employees who break this prohibition are subject to sanctions in the form of public reprimands—for instance, their misconduct may be discussed in front of colleagues during staff meetings. As a result, hidden forms of leisure emerge in this setting, with individualised leisure experiences prevailing over organized leisure activities, and their occurrence is relatively rare.

Other employees in the service sector reported similar experiences. For instance, a specialised technician creates leisure moments by leveraging organizational knowledge to unwind and foster a sense of well-being. He adapts his action strategies when the boss is absent, uses exclusively a non-centrally monitored computer for personal purposes, or benefits from his knowledge of the security system.

*Well, I sometimes read the news, you know, when I have a free moment or something like that. So I might check the news on it, but I wouldn't, for instance, access a bank account or anything personal like that on **the work device**, because I know **it's connected to the company network**. It's synchronised, so if I were to watch some series or use various sites like that, the company could potentially find out.*

*Well, **there are blind spots on the security camera**. The camera is also on the roof, and of course, one knows exactly where it can see and where it is looking, and it's clear they can turn it in all directions and look wherever they want. But I know they don't do that. I simply, at most, report that I'm going to the roof because we can go to the roof. So, if I don't check in, I know they will keep the camera turned on to that one spot, and I know the camera cannot see us there. So, my girlfriend and I went there sometimes to have some fun, well. (specialized technician, 32-year-old man)*

While such practices illustrate how individual employees creatively exploit small opportunities, the data also show that the ability to 'bend the rules' is far from evenly distributed. It is strongly shaped by job role, hierarchical level, seniority and personal circumstances. In an engineering company producing

⁴ For instance, a customer support supervisor (32-year-old woman) stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, she missed the informal conversations with colleagues that help her detect the impact of negative factors on employees' work performance: *A lot of people on those Zoom calls just don't say what's bothering them that day. So as a supervisor, I lose touch with how my colleagues are feeling, whether they're dealing with something at home that might affect their work, and I really miss that. It means I have to put in a lot more effort to get that information from them, you know.*

tailor-made elevators, for instance, a design engineer enjoyed much greater autonomy than shop-floor employees such as welders or CNC operators. He was not required to record his working hours strictly on the monitoring device and had his own office, whereas his colleagues on the production floor could potentially be seen by the employer through a large office window. This visibility may have limited their opportunities for informal or hidden leisure.

This unequal room for manoeuvre was also evident in the case of the previously quoted facility manager from a fast-food chain. She openly acknowledged that, although micro-breaks were formally forbidden, she would tolerate short private calls or smoke breaks when her subordinates asked. By contrast, less senior employees and front-line workers generally followed official norms more strictly, lacking familiarity with organizational routines and having limited room to negotiate exceptions.

Gender further intersected with these structural factors. Some women in the study prioritised finishing tasks early in order to leave the workplace sooner for family care or felt guilt when engaging in non-work activities, even during officially recognised breaks. In contrast, men more often described using small gaps in the schedule for games or digital media. These patterns indicate that not all employees wish to participate in leisure at work and, more importantly, that opportunities to do so—and the risks attached—vary according to position, seniority and gender.

Discussion

The research findings illustrate that leisure at work is neither peripheral nor incidental; rather, it constitutes a meaningful and dynamically negotiated component of working life, embedded within organizational norms and sustained through employees' everyday agency (Giddens 1984). Employees are revealed as adept 'leisure hackers' strategically crafting leisure moments—both visible and hidden—to manage workload pressure, mitigate boredom stemming from underutilization of their potential, or simply foster personal well-being (Fleming 2009; Paulsen 2014). This reconceptualisation extends conventional distinctions between work and non-work, showing how employees navigate organizational rules to embed brief but meaningful instances of autonomy and restoration within their working day—demonstrating both constraint and agency.

At an analytical level, 'leisure hackers' differs from several adjacent constructs commonly used to describe non-work practices during paid work time. Unlike 'empty labor', which emphasizes time appropriation primarily as withdrawal from work or as a reaction to organizational inefficiency (Paulsen 2014), leisure hacking foregrounds employees' creative and reflexive enga-

gement with work situations, highlighting how leisure is actively crafted rather than passively endured. In contrast to hidden resistance, leisure hacking is not necessarily oppositional or covertly political, while it may involve rule-bending, its primary orientation lies in sustaining well-being, meaning, and situational autonomy rather than challenging managerial authority (Fleming 2009).

Compared to job crafting, which focuses on proactive task, relational, or cognitive modifications to enhance job fit (Wrzesniewski – Dutton 2001), leisure hacking operates at a more micro-temporal and experiential level, centring on brief leisure moments that coexist with, rather than transform, core work tasks. Finally, while impression management captures the dramaturgical strategies through which employees justify or conceal leisure practices (Goffman 1959), leisure hacking refers to the practices themselves—the situated, inventive ways employees insert leisure into the working day. Together, these distinctions position leisure hacking as a concept that captures the creative, context-sensitive, and agentic production of leisure within structurally constrained work environments.

Leisure at work, as shown, is heavily context-dependent. The same activity—informal conversations, listening to music, or checking personal messages—may be perceived as restorative or deviant depending on workplace culture and managerial attitudes (cf. Becker 1963). In knowledge-intensive settings with laissez-faire management cultures, such as a software company studied, leisure practices are visible and often encouraged. Employees openly engage in leisure activities (e.g., playing games, listening to podcasts, browsing online content), and management frames such behavior as conducive to productivity, informal knowledge exchange, and team cohesion (cf. Kjerulf 2014). As Giddens would suggest, structure enables leisure by legitimizing it through formal and informal organizational rules. By contrast, in more regulated service-sector settings, leisure at work is more often moralized, problematized, or actively suppressed. As a kindergarten teacher's account shows, even informal conversations are subject to disciplinary scrutiny, with violations resulting in public sanction. Yet even within such rigid frameworks, leisure emerges—albeit in more individuated, cautious forms—depending both on employees' everyday agency and on managerial attitudes, highlighting the interplay between individual initiative and organizational facilitation.

These contextual differences do not persist when employers recognize the value of leisure experiences during work hours. In such cases, micro-breaks may occur across both private- and public-sector organizations, reflecting an acknowledgment of their potential contribution to productivity, social cohesion, and team identification (Duerden et al. 2017). At the same time, participants' practices resonate with the ambivalent character of interruptions discussed in

the literature: activities commonly embedded in micro-breaks (e.g., informal conversations with colleagues or brief online activities) may support restoration, creativity, and occupational harmony (McGillivray 2005b; Paulsen 2014), while also being framed as potentially disruptive to concentration or task performance (Methot et al. 2021; Voicu et al. 2023). This ambivalence helps explain why some organizations prioritize assigning additional work tasks over supporting leisure opportunities, even though quiet activities are as important as active work engagement for maintaining occupational harmony (Liu et al. 2023).

Furthermore, employees play a central role in shaping leisure at work. As highlighted by the integrative model of idle time (Schubert et al. 2023), they do not merely endure work constraints and interruptions but actively respond to them, mobilizing micro-breaks, playful interactions, or task re-sequencing to recover energy, maintain focus, and preserve well-being. This active engagement is clearly reflected in the data: a CNC laser operator described how, during six-hour production runs with “no filler—nothing to do,” he and his colleagues used humor and practical jokes—hiding a bike, taping up a car—to transform downtime into moments of social bonding and levity. Likewise, a customer support worker spoke of taking her dog out to the park during breaks to cope with office noise and return “as a slightly different person,” able to work faster and better afterwards.

A notable dimension of this process is the reflexivity with which participants narrated and justified their leisure practices. Their accounts frequently drew on culturally sanctioned or organizationally embedded discourses, producing what may be termed intertextual “shadow texts”—indirect reflections that illuminate not only the acts of leisure themselves but also the broader normative landscape in which they are situated (Schwartz-Shea – Yanow 2012). Within these narratives, references to the COVID-19 period occasionally served as a situational point of contrast, enabling participants to articulate what became salient when routine forms of workplace leisure were disrupted or temporarily unavailable. Such contrasts functioned less as chronological markers and more as narrative resources through which actors made sense of the conditions under which leisure at work was experienced and rendered legitimate.

These narrative resources are not merely descriptive but translate into concrete strategies through which actors linguistically and morally legitimate leisure at work. Even in supportive environments, participants often used conditional phrasing—“if there was time,” “if there was nothing urgent”—to legitimize their actions, aligning with Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model of impression management. These narratives reveal an acute awareness of

workplace expectations and subtly negotiated boundaries, which are further shaped by gendered expectations and cultural norms. Gendered differences surfaced in how participants narrated and justified their leisure practices; however, these observations are offered as indicative patterns rather than as the outcome of a dedicated analytical focus. For instance, some women reported feeling guilt when engaging in non-work activities, even during officially recognised breaks, reflecting the internalisation of persistent social norms that privilege continuous work (Voicu et al. 2023). Establishing and maintaining boundaries around leisure thus requires personal initiative and familiarity with broader organizational context.

Opportunities for leisure are also shaped by structural factors such as job role, hierarchical position, and seniority. Employees' ability to engage in visible or 'covert leisure', and the forms it can take, depends on their position within these hierarchies. For instance, in an engineering company producing tailor-made elevators, a design engineer enjoyed greater autonomy than shop-floor employees such as welders or CNC operators, having his own office and fewer formal monitoring requirements. In contrast, colleagues on the production floor were more visible to supervisors, limiting their possibilities for informal or hidden leisure. Similarly, in a fast-food setting, a facility manager could accept short private calls or smoke breaks for her team, whereas less senior employees generally adhered strictly to official norms. These examples demonstrate that leisure at work is socially and hierarchically conditioned, revealing the interplay between employees' reflexive agency and structural constraints (Kossek – Lautsch 2017).

Moreover, these practices underscore the permeability of the work–leisure boundary, highlighting how employees continuously negotiate organizational expectations alongside personal well-being. Echoing the work of Joy E. Beatty and William R. Torbert (2003), the findings emphasize that the boundary between work and leisure is neither fixed nor impermeable. Rather, it is fluid and continually negotiated through structural policies, organizational culture, and individual interpretations. Managerial accounts illuminate this negotiation from the organizational side, revealing both points of alignment—where leisure is framed as supportive of performance or creativity—and points of tension, where boundaries are tightened through monitoring, moral evaluation, or selective tolerance of certain practices.

Especially in intensive-knowledge work, participants did not describe leisure as an interruption of work, but as integral to its performance—serving as a space for creativity, serendipitous discoveries, or even identity development. The example of software company employees occasionally consuming alcoholic beverages during working hours, while also engaging in informal

knowledge exchange, underscores this permeability. These hybrid moments resist simplistic categorization, instead reflecting a continuum where leisure and work inform and reinforce each other.

Ultimately, this research reframes leisure at work as a central, meaning-making practice. Whether in the form of brief digital diversions, quiet moments of rest, or shared humor among colleagues, leisure operates as a resource that supports performance, sustains identity, and cultivates social connection. In line with Giddens' structuration theory, such practices are not merely autonomous expressions but patterned responses to organizational conditions. By navigating, bending, and occasionally resisting the rules of the workplace, employees do not merely 'steal time'—but subtly shape the temporal and moral contours of their workday, producing hybrid moments where leisure and work mutually reinforce each other, facilitate creativity, and sustain identity.

Conclusion

This paper offers three interrelated contributions to the study of leisure at work. Firstly, it reconceptualizes the notion of 'empty labor' (Paulsen 2014) as a legitimate, structured, and generative form of leisure, challenging long-standing dichotomies between work and non-work. By reframing such moments of detachment not as 'idleness' or resistance but as active leisure-making, the paper lays the conceptual groundwork for examining how employees create and inhabit spaces of autonomy at work. Secondly, it introduces a qualitative approach that captures subtle and often hidden leisure practices embedded in everyday organizational routines. Finally, it explores employee-initiated micro-practices that emerge within the interstices of formal work structures, revealing how workers navigate, negotiate and experience the temporal and spatial gaps of contemporary work life in nuanced ways.

Methodologically, the paper demonstrates how subtle and often hidden practices of leisure at work can be empirically captured, even in environments shaped by organizational censorship. Drawing on qualitative data generated primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic—a period that prompted deep reflection on the boundaries of work—the research shows how employees adapt, repurpose, and reimagine their workspaces and schedules to carve out micro-breaks that support their well-being and performance (Fritz et al. 2013; Lyubykh et al. 2022). Particularly in knowledge-intensive roles, participants described these practices as spaces of creativity, identity formation, and coping—revealing the performative and generative dimensions of everyday leisure.

The findings show that opportunities to engage in such practices are not distributed evenly. Job position, hierarchical level, seniority and gender shape

who is able to ‘bend’ or reinterpret organizational rules and under what conditions. While some employees transform downtime into moments of self-realisation, creativity or coping, others operate in more restrictive contexts where fear of detection or sanctions diminishes potential benefits. This also calls for a more critical reflection on organizational discourses of well-being and flexibility: employer support for leisure at work is often conditional, accepted or encouraged only when it does not threaten productivity or established performance norms. Recognising these power asymmetries is crucial for understanding the ambivalence of leisure at work.

The study, however, has limitations. It largely presents employees as active agents who are willing to work and to seize leisure opportunities during downtime. Yet work values are not static; as Francesca Bellini and Vera Lomazzi (2024) show, the centrality of work is declining. Some employees perform only the necessary tasks, focusing on their own self-realisation during downtime, whereas others voluntarily engage in activities beyond their contractual duties—helping colleagues, joining company events or volunteering initiatives, or exercising flexibility in tasks and schedules. Phenomena such as ‘quiet quitting’ and ‘quiet thriving’ illustrate these divergent orientations and highlight that leisure at work does not carry the same meaning for everyone.

The research also relies on retrospective narratives, privileging the cognitive dimension of experience and not addressing the possible negative effects of breaks on employees’ well-being or performance. At the same time, and in recognition of this limitation, interpretive rigor was maintained by foregrounding participants’ reflexive justifications, narrative strategies, and intertextual references, treating these not merely as recollections of past practices but as situated expressions shaped by organizational norms and interactional contexts. Future studies could deepen this analysis by exploring the episodic character of leisure at work, for instance through time-use methodologies linking time, activity and affect (applied, for instance, by Martinkovičová et al. 2020). Although the sample covers diverse work environments to capture variation, it includes only a small number of public-sector employees. Comparative research across private, public and non-governmental organizations would provide richer insights into how structural conditions shape leisure practices.

The findings further call into question the utility of traditional work–leisure distinctions in an era marked by hybrid and remote working arrangements (Gregg 2011). The concept of leisure at work allows for the examination of leisure practices not bound to the physical workplace and provides a framework for analyzing both employer-sanctioned and self-initiated leisure. As such, this reconceptualization invites further research into how leisure emerges across different organizational settings and post-pandemic contexts, including

comparative studies that trace how these practices evolve as hybrid models become the norm.

In sum, by repositioning leisure at work, demonstrating a qualitative approach to its hidden forms, and revealing its uneven distribution and conditional legitimacy, this paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges rigid binaries. It also opens new avenues for understanding how individuals craft meaningful experiences within—and sometimes despite—the structural constraints of modern employment.

Ethics statement

The Social Science Ethics Committee of the institution confirmed that this research did not need ethical approval.

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Nikola Staničková is a PhD candidate in Sociology. Her research interests revolve around examining leisure at work, children's and young people's leisure experiences, and selected social determinants and their influence on the choice of leisure activities among the Czech population.

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