

**Managing distanced flexibility:
the quadrangular relationship in hotel housekeeping work**

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Abstract

This article investigates the division of work between labour market intermediaries in the hotel cleaning business in Amsterdam. Drawing on in-depth interviews and participant observation, it introduces the concept of a quadrangular relationship in which intermediaries with specialised functions, the contractor and the staffing agency, cooperate in the work of labour supply, management and control. By zooming in on the work of the on-site manager, it shows how employers use labour intermediaries to create distance from workers, so as to enforce flexibility and extract labour effort, but leaves the issue of labour mobility to the on-site manager. The findings of the article confirm the importance of including the migration perspective in studies of staffing agencies, as well as considering the managerial work of cultivating informal loyalties and maintaining workforce convocability in flexibilised arrangements of precarious work.

Keywords

Cleaning work, hotels, migrant labour, the Netherlands, staffing agencies, triangular relationship.

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Introduction

Hotels are one of these physical spaces that are inextricable from transnational people flows. Purposed as temporary pit stops for travellers, hotels in large, well-connected cities rely on the work of people who have travelled similarly long distances for their everyday operations. Housekeeping departments, in charge of cleaning rooms and public areas, in particular employ large proportions of migrant workers (Seifert and Messing, 2006; Vanselow et al., 2009). As such, the ideal conception of a hotel as 'a home away from home' for its guests, a mantra oft-repeated in the industry (Lai et al., 2008: 132), also unwittingly refers to a location where many workers are busy with individual projects to build a life away from home.

Work conditions of migrants in service industries have been a cause for scholarly and policy concern. McDowell et al. suggest the hotel as the 'ideal site' to explore 'hyperexploitation and labor segregation in new service-based economies' (2007: 2). The gradual opening up of Western European labour markets to new European Union member states since 2004 has regularised and encouraged existing East-West migration flows (Favell, 2008). Nearly a decade on, new migrants arrive each day to the host country, with limited knowledge of the local language, laws and employment practices, leaving them with little choice but to work in jobs in the secondary labour market like hotel cleaning, under conditions considered unacceptable by most local workers (Piore, 1986).

In their engagement with cleaners, hotels pursue the complementary goals of 'distancing' and 'flexibility' (Lai et al., 2008), making use of services offered by a labour intermediation industry that has shaped and been shaped by migration patterns (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, 2016b). Intermediated employment arrangements have mostly been conceptualised as a 'triangular relationship' between employer, agency and employee (Kalleberg et al., 2000). In Amsterdam, labour intermediaries active in the hotel cleaning sector have extended the range of services offered (Peck and Theodore, 1998) and developed a division of work

that allows them to form cooperative as well as competitive relationships with one another. Such employment arrangements may be better understood as a 'quadrangular employment relationship'. The case of Amsterdam, then, allows us to probe a particular form of the complex intermediated, non-standard employment relations that are increasingly common in many parts of the world (Beck, 1992; Sennett, 1998; Kalleberg, 2009).

The quadrangular relationship could be conceptualised as the overlay of a contracting arrangement atop a triangular agency employment relationship, involving two labour intermediaries each with specialised functions between hotels and cleaners. While excellent studies have answered the call to study the temporary staffing agency as an industry in itself and recognised the function creep of the industry (Peck and Theodore, 1998; Smith and Neuwirth, 2008; Elcioglu, 2010; Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, 2016a), their focus has remained on client-agency-worker relationships and agency worker experiences, leaving work performed on the employers' side relatively uncharted. By introducing the concept of a quadrangular relationship, this article focuses attention on relations among intermediaries.

Studies of migrant workers have rightly called for the recognition of migrant workers' agency in choosing to labour under harsh conditions in a job mostly seen as undesirable, in order to move past a view of workers as passive victims of precarious employment (Janta et al., 2011; Alberti, 2014; Samaluk, 2016; Berntsen, 2016). Workplace studies of migrant work, on the other hand, stress the explanatory power of state-level regulatory contexts and employer strategies that seek to engineer flexible and compliant workers at industry and company levels (Rodriguez, 2004; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, 2016a). To interpret the negotiation and tensions of the employment relationship as an encounter between worker 'agency' and organisational 'structure', however, risks misconstruing the employer side as a coordinated, monolithic organ, when in fact it is constitutive of multiple actors with disjointed interests, as the concept of a quadrangular relationship aims to demonstrate. The article highlights the work of the on-site manager, who, as the only management

personnel in everyday interaction with workers, becomes the one face of the many employers in the quadrangular employment relationship.

The article begins by introducing the current state of hotel cleaning jobs in Amsterdam and drawing comparisons to previous studies on hospitality and cleaning work, as well as studies on migrant labour. Existing analyses on labour flexibility are then reviewed in an attempt to understand the goals of employer strategies. After describing the methods and data employed for the analysis, the concept of a quadrangular employment relationship is specified and the role of labour market intermediaries examined. Finally, I take a closer look at the work of the on-site housekeeping manager and the extent of her autonomy in negotiations over labour effort and mobility.

Bad job: the work of cleaners

As is the case for much hospitality and cleaning work across the globe (Seifert and Messing, 2006; McDowell et al., 2008; Vanselow et al., 2009; Janta et al., 2011; Alberti, 2014; Krzeslo et al., 2014; Ollus, 2016), a job in hotel cleaning in Amsterdam is typically viewed as low status and low skilled. Cleaners are low paid, vulnerable to rights violations, and almost exclusively migrants.

In their assessment of hotel cleaning work, most cleaners I spoke to share the negative judgements attached to hospitality jobs commonly cited in the literature. The work is considered dirty, physical labour that is repetitive and monotonous, poorly managed and lacking in career prospects (Janta et al., 2011), as well as little respected by guests and management (Seifert and Messing, 2006), although some cleaners appreciate the monotony and lack of customer contact on the job compared with working in retail or restaurants. Managers, while assiduously emphasising the importance of respect for cleaners, are prone to betray their low regard for the job (but not cleaners directly), when they discuss cleaners who proceeded to take on other roles in the hotel: 'You actually

could see straight away that, those three, they didn't belong to housekeeping; they were capable of doing much, much more.' (Joost, on-site manager, hotel)¹

Scholars rightly argue that the labelling of hospitality or cleaning work as 'unskilled' or 'low skilled' is complicit in the devaluation of interpersonal skills and flexibility required in service work (Krzeslo et al., 2014). In hotel cleaning, skill and experience are valued, but only to a limited extent. Previous work experience in hotels is an important factor in hiring decisions, as it indicates that the cleaner is ready to work at the pace and quality demanded. The work of cleaning rooms within the specified time is no easy feat, 'an Olympic challenge' as one manager puts it (Jacob, senior manager, cleaning contractor). Nonetheless, the work requires no qualifications and has few barriers to entry. High formal educational attainment such as master's degrees is not uncommon among cleaners, but is not considered relevant or valuable. Most cleaners share the stigmatisation of the job as 'work for stupid people' (Lena, room attendant, hotel). Failure to meet requirements of the job is attributed to lack of motivation, willingness or physical fitness, rather than of any learned competence. The value of relevant experience also ceases to accrue very quickly, as one to two months of work is considered enough to qualify a newcomer as fully trained and productive. In this sense, there is some validity to the characterisation of hotel cleaning work as low skilled.

Pay in hotel cleaning is poor across the world (Vanselow et al., 2009). This is the case for cleaners in Amsterdam as well, despite guarantees of minimum wages and benefits in sector-wide collective labour agreements (CLA), which also cover non-unionised workers. In the Netherlands, two different CLAs may apply to hotel cleaners, depending on their legal employer. Direct hires of hotels fall under the hospitality sector CLA (*cao horeca*), whereas contract cleaning companies hire workers under the cleaning sector CLA (*cao schoonmaak*). The cleaning sector CLA applies at 74% of all hotels nationally (OSB, 2014), and stipulates a standard hourly wage of €11.13, that stands at 120% of the statutory

¹ All names have been changed. Some quotations have been edited for grammar and readability.

minimum wage.² While the hourly wage in itself is not very low, the work schedules available to hotel cleaners mean that the struggle to clock enough hours is constant. Full-time available cleaners report a monthly take-home pay of around €700-1,000, which is less than half of the Dutch national average (CBS, 2015), but significantly higher than wage levels in home countries of migrant workers.

Getting paid in full, however, cannot always be taken for granted. A problem that continues to plague the sector is the underpayment of workers by falsifying work records. Cleaners are paid a legally permissible wage on paper, but for fewer hours than actually worked. Managers sometimes justify the lower recorded work hours by accusing workers of failing to achieve productivity targets. The elevated status of productivity targets above minimum wage laws points to the overriding importance attached to maintaining the translation between time-based wages and piece-based production. Tight productivity targets disqualify 'unproductive' time, such as time spent changing in and out of uniforms, from being recognised and paid; overtime work likewise requires manager's approval to be recognised and paid. The sector comes under regular scrutiny from the labour inspector and journalists, but not enough to stamp out irregularities and violations.³ While most workers I interviewed have not had problems with receiving their wages, some have had experiences of having to confront their managers in order to get paid in full. It remains a possibility that less assertive workers are systematically underpaid.

It can be said, then, that hotel cleaning jobs in Amsterdam are 'bad jobs' (Kalleberg et al., 2000), as is the case elsewhere in the world. And just as in other

² The hourly wage of €11.13 applies to cleaners of 22 years or older after the probationary period from 1 July 2015 onwards, as stipulated in the 2014-16 cleaning sector CLA. Dutch law specifies a monthly minimum wage but not an hourly one, thus the calculations are indicative.

³ Following journalistic reports of worker exploitation in hotel cleaning (VARA, 27 January 2016), the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs and Employment disclosed in parliament that the labour inspector initiated 94 investigations on hotel and hotel restaurants in 2015, in which 16 cases involved rights violations. The minister's position was, however, that 'ensuring the compliance of collective labour agreements is first and foremost the responsibility of social partners' (Ministerie SZW, 2016).

countries, such bad jobs in the secondary labour market tend to be taken up by migrant workers (Piore, 1986). Informants claim that cleaners in Amsterdam are '99.999%' migrants (Joanna, senior manager, staffing agency), and that migrants are preferred to locals, to the point that Dutch people would not 'survive' the job (Dominika, room attendant, staffing agency). The work is heavy, and the odd Dutch person on the job has to deal with the attached migrant label:

'She was gone after one month, and she tells me the reason that, she felt like a foreigner in her home country. [...] [Maybe] Dutch people don't like doing this job because they consider it to be for foreigners.' (Joanna, senior manager, staffing agency)

It must be noted that the 'migrant' category here is a fluid and racialised one. It includes, for example, fresh arrivals from Eastern Europe, as well as Dutch citizens born to Moroccan parents, '*allochtonen*' in Dutch. Racial and national stereotypes permeate the worksite and influence hiring decisions. Outside of Amsterdam, where shifts are often shorter and work pressure less demanding, it seems to be more common for a mix of native and migrant women with childcare responsibilities to take up hotel cleaning jobs. While the scale of fieldwork limits the possibility of making claims on the workforce's gender and national composition, informants report a recruitment pattern of moving from one migrant group to another, akin to what MacKenzie and Forde (2009) identified as an employer strategy to push labour costs downwards. The typical origin country of the hotel cleaner in Amsterdam has moved from Spain and Portugal in the post-war decades up to the 1980s, to Ghana in the 1990s, to Poland from early-2000s onwards, and now increasingly other Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria and Romania.

Writing in the mid-2000s, Hermanussen characterised room attendants in Amsterdam as 'mainly migrants; women, increasingly also men; low- or unskilled, sometimes high-skilled; mostly breadwinners; high frequency of working weeks of thirty-two hours or more; working alone; if employed by cleaning companies, piece-rate wages.' (2008: 187-8) Ten years on, the typical

image of the room attendant⁴ as a migrant woman scrambling from room to room on her own has remained more or less accurate. Compared to a decade ago, however, she is perhaps more often pale-skinned and well-educated, and more often a (non-white) man. Her work weeks are usually just as long but her paid hours are likely to be more uncertain, her piece-rate wages artfully transformed into hourly pay through controls on productivity.

Distancing flexibility: employer strategies in structuring employment arrangements

Aside from the changing demographic composition of cleaners, the Dutch hotel cleaning business has seen growing use of multi-layer outsourcing in the past decade. The proportion of Dutch hotels that outsource room cleaning has increased from 48% in 2004 to 72% in 2013. (Hermanussen, 2008: 178; KPMG, 2014).⁵ More complex intermediation arrangements, such as what is later specified as the ‘quadrangular relationship’, have become more common. Increased intermediation has coincided with more ‘flexible’ work arrangements that transfer the risk of business fluctuations from the various employers to the cleaners, as well as work intensification differentially applied to a segmented workforce. In view of these developments, it is crucial to have a better understanding of the changing labour market structure, and the mechanisms through which work conditions are determined.

In their research on hotel housekeeping departments and employment agencies in London, Lai et al. use the term ‘distancing flexibility’ (2008: 135) to refer to hotels’ use of agency workers to achieve numerical flexibility (Atkinson, 1984; Kalleberg, 2003). They find the use of distancing flexibility to be ‘an ongoing staffing strategy’, in which agencies ‘contribute to changing the pattern of

⁴ In Dutch, the job title *kamermeisje* remains in common usage. This harks back to ‘chambermaid’, which has fallen out of favour in English.

⁵ Most on-site managers whom I interviewed were promoted into their current positions within the past three years, often as a result of the hotel’s decision to outsource its housekeeping operations to a cleaning contractor.

flexibility of such workers from little prospect of employment security through to a continuous labour supply relationship' (Lai et al., 2008: 139-140).

While the picture of employment agencies functioning as long-term labour suppliers for hotels at arm's length is an instructive one, two qualifications are necessary. First, while a stable labour supply relationship can indeed be found between hotels and employment agencies, stability extends differentially to workers. A paradoxical situation exists on cleaners' job stability. At any one time an employer would have a significant proportion of experienced cleaners, who are employed on temporary contracts carefully spaced with wait periods requisite to avoid the award of a permanent contract.⁶ At the same time, from a recruitment standpoint staff turnover rates are upwards of 100% annually, i.e., firms hire more newcomers every year than they have on staff at any one time. Thus, some workers enjoy job stability (but rarely security) to a degree, while others stream in and out of jobs rapidly.

Second, Lai et al. (2008), along with other tourism scholars (e.g., Janta et al., 2011), do not recognise 'flexibility as a necessarily asymmetrical, power-ridden process' (Chauvin, forthcoming: 5). Workers' positive appraisal of flexibility is often cited, without acknowledging the zero-sum nature of flexibility in a particular employment relationship. Contrary to what the management literature may suggest, employers and cleaners are keenly aware of the contest over '*who* is going to be flexible for *whom*' (Chauvin, forthcoming: 5). See, for example, a manager who oversaw the outsourcing of her department denounce an old work regime that is flexible *for* workers as inefficient:

'If you look at how the hotels organised the housekeeping department, it is really a big lose [sic] of money, because people just can work basically every hours they want.' (Paulien, on-site manager, cleaning contractor)

⁶ Because of Dutch labour laws, to avoid giving cleaners a permanent contract, they are often let go after three temporary contracts, left unemployed for three months, encouraged to go home with unemployment benefits and then come back for work afterwards. Only at manager level are permanent contracts offered. It is unclear how the new Work and Security Law (Wwz) of 2015, which lengthened the wait period, have affected this practice.

Similarly, cleaners regularly seek opportunities to move from positions where they are demanded to *be* flexible, on to positions where the job can be flexible *for* them.

The term 'distancing flexibility' nonetheless sums up the employers' twin goals neatly. Distance and flexibility are distinct objectives which complement each other. Instead of deterministically seeing flexibility as 'inevitable' for the hotel industry (Lai et al., 2008: 147), it is better to conceive flexibility as a contested property of the employment relationship, and the pursuit of flexibility as an employer strategy to achieve risk transfer, worker compliance and cost minimisation (Gottfried, 1991; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009).

Migrant workers must concede considerable flexibility as new entrants to the Amsterdam hotel cleaning sector, albeit not as much as in other cases of precarious work (e.g., Peck and Theodore, 2001; Chauvin, 2010; Wagner and Hassel 2016). New cleaners are invariably employed on temporary contracts, which typically last for a fixed six-month term with minimal if any guarantee of weekly work hours. The work week varies seasonally from two to six days; vacation and overtime compensation accumulate in high season and are spent in low season, with no overtime pay. Unlike the 'multi-activity' model in other parts of the cleaning industry (Krzeslo et al., 2014), workers are expected to be full-time available, and thus rarely have more than one employer. To secure this commitment, managers work to ensure a 'livable minimum' of two days of work per week for workers under their wing. Some international employment agencies also share the risk of underemployment partially, by promising to halve rents if workers are assigned less than two days of work per week. Work schedules are communicated on a weekly basis, but it is not uncommon for cleaners to be called in last-minute to work on the same day. Shifts start at a standard time for a standard length, but the realities of the job mean that cleaners may finish later than expected, often without extra pay.

Such work regimes can apply whether hotels use labour market intermediaries or not. Thus the question remains what ‘distancing’ adds to (in)flexible work regimes that hotels can also enforce on their own employees. As is the case in Sweden, collective labour agreements limit the financial gains companies can make by using agency workers (Coe et al., 2009: 71). Minimum wage levels are higher for cleaning contractors than for hotels, and a takeover clause in the CLA requires the retention of workers with longer tenure and the maintenance of existing employment conditions. The financial benefits of distancing are uncertain, and as we shall see later, hinges on the labour effort bargain.

What distancing certainly achieves for hotels is the transfer of business risk and reputational risk. The use of contractors makes it possible for hotels to pay for housekeeping work on a per-room basis, keeping costs as a stable percentage of room sales. This offers hotels a buffer from seasonal and business cycle fluctuations, as well as contractual responsibilities to direct employees like sick pay. As Andrijasevic and Sacchetto note in their study of Czech Foxconn factories, subcontracting arrangements that involve agencies’ extensive intervention in the labour process also ‘render invisible the presence of agency workers’ and ‘the irregularities concerning their working conditions’ (2016a: 2). Hotels, as consumer-facing companies with valuable brands, benefit from the distance they can take from illegal or unsavoury management practices such as underpayment or harsh work pressures. The distancing of these risks can carry immediate tangible financial rewards for owners and managers, as hotels are increasingly managed as investment assets with compartmentalised revenue and cost streams since the 2000s. Of course, the decision to outsource can also simply be owed to the low status of cleaning work, and the consequent lack of interest from hotel management. According to contractors, ‘They don’t want that trouble.’ (Jacob, senior manager, cleaning contractor)

It is often said that subcontracting allows companies to focus on their ‘core’ functions or competences (e.g., Peck and Theodore, 2007). The suggestion that housekeeping work is peripheral to hotel operations upsets many in the business: ‘Without housekeeping, there is no hotel. You go to a hotel to sleep.’

(Joanna, senior manager, staffing agency) What functions do hotels delegate when they outsource the housekeeping department? In other words, what functions do labour market intermediaries fulfil, and how? After a note on methods and data, the remainder of the article will look at the work of labour market intermediaries, and on-site managers specifically: supply, management and control of workers.

Method and data

This article is based on 17 interviews with 19 informants who occupy various roles along the chain of intermediation in the employment of hotel cleaners in Amsterdam, conducted between September 2015 and February 2016. The interviews were supplemented with participant observation at one hotel, which allowed me to speak with another 6 informants.

My informants included hotel managers, cleaning contractor office staff, recruiters at staffing agencies and cleaners (see appendix for other informant characteristics). The interviews were semi-structured, but informants were encouraged to elaborate on aspects that they themselves saw as interesting or significant. All interviews included questions on career history and aspirations, and, if applicable, migration experience. I asked cleaners about their everyday work routines, interaction with co-workers and employment conditions, as well as what they consider as important to do the job well. Managers were asked the same, with additional focus on how they manage fluctuations and segmentation in their teams, and their decisions of hiring and promotion. The interviews were conducted in English, and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. The choice of location was left to the informant. Most interviews with managers took place in their workplace, whereas those with cleaners were mostly in a public place such as cafés. All interviews were face-to-face and audio-recorded, except for one interview done over Skype, for which the informant did not wish to be recorded. Some informants have requested anonymity, and because of the interconnected nature of the data, all names of individuals and companies have been changed.

I reached most informants through the snowballing technique. Three 'snowballs' can be identified, originating from two key informants and myself. My first contact with the key informants, who are senior managers at a cleaning contractor and a staffing agency respectively, was an unsolicited email to the company's general enquiries address, introducing myself as a student researching personnel management practices and asking for a meeting. In the meeting, I explained my research interests in more detail, posed interview questions, and asked for their help to secure interviews with their colleagues and business partners, a request to which they kindly agreed. Other informants were found through my own network of friends and colleagues, and their connections.

As a student, my research project is not 'political', in the sense that it is unlikely it will ever enter the world of political institutions. My appearance as a non-Dutch, non-white, young, bookish and mild-mannered boy/man underscored this point. This afforded me a special position before my informants. My insignificance and harmlessness assuaged their concerns. I could perform curiosity and amateurism, and offered up my own migrant stories. And in return, I was given stories and information that would not be given to, say, a union organiser or a journalist.

My 25 informants introduced me to a network of companies that enable, sustain and rely on the work of cleaning hotels in Amsterdam. An inventory of the companies which the informants discussed comprises 3 cleaning contractors, 3 staffing agencies, and 31 hotels managed by 18 hospitality groups. While the data collected are not intended to be representative of the hotel industry of Amsterdam or the Netherlands, it is sufficiently broad to ensure the significance of qualitative insights into the organisation of hotel cleaning work in a mid-sized European destination city like Amsterdam.

The 31 hotels mostly fall under the 3- to 5-star categories, and have between 21 and over 600 rooms. Of the 31 hotels, 22 are run by a company with international operations, while the other 9 are part of national chains or

independently managed. The three cleaning contractors include one of the 'big five' in the sector, with around 10,000 employees and yearly revenues of over €200 million, and two companies in the mid-sized category, with a workforce of 300-3,500 employees and yearly revenues of €10-100 million (Service Management, 2015). The three staffing agencies discussed by informants have 3-10 office staff who maintain the work of recruitment, dispatch, administration, worker accommodation and client relationships, plus 1-4 affiliates in Eastern European cities in charge of recruitment.

The quadrangular relationship: cooperation and competition between contractors and staffing agencies

Hotels, cleaning contractors and staffing agencies form a diverse range of configurations to assemble and employ the workforce they require. One particular form, which I term the quadrangular relationship, appears to be increasingly common in the sector. The concept of a quadrangular employment relationship answers calls to explore the temporary staffing industry in itself (e.g., Elcioglu, 2010; Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, 2016a). Taking the triangular relationship one step further, it encourages the specification of different roles played by labour market intermediaries in a multi-layer subcontracting chain. In doing so, it represents an attempt to understand a temporary staffing industry that has undergone restructuring to specialise 'up' and 'down' (Peck and Theodore, 1998), and examine services the industry offers beyond simply supplying labour, but also, for instance, on-site management and facilitation of international migration (Andrijasevic and Sachetto, 2016a).

A simple employment relationship involves just the employer and the employee. The triangular relationship introduces an agency which acts as an intermediary, whose role is often conceived as a *de jure* employer of record, as opposed to a *de facto* employer with management responsibilities (e.g., Kalleberg et al., 2000). In line with studies that attempt to 'restore agency to the agency' (Elcioglu, 2010: 120), the quadrangular relationship takes the step of distinguishing two types of

labour market intermediaries, namely contractors and staffing agencies.⁷ Functional specialisation of staffing agencies is not a new idea, akin to the restructuring ‘up’ and ‘down’ of agencies described by Peck and Theodore (1998) almost two decades ago. The innovation of the quadrangular relationship lies in examining the sustainably but selectively cooperative relationship between the two intermediaries on worksite level. On industry level, the two can be business partners as well as competitors.

A contractor takes on management responsibilities at the worksite, such as scheduling, quality assurance and training, and aims at taking on outsourcing contracts of entire departments. This means that it commits to delivering a variable, flexible and reliable workforce. Considerable effort is spent cultivating client relationships and ‘optimising’ work processes. Ensuring a sufficient stock of workers is the responsibility of individual on-site managers, who make use of staffing agencies’ services to fulfil part of their staffing needs. A staffing agency focuses on delivering individual ‘good temps’ (Smith and Neuwirth, 2008) – ready-to-work, just-in-time, flexible and reliable. The work of dispatching involves some understanding of what is ‘good’ for specific clients, and adapting recruitment strategies accordingly. For the staffing agency, a ‘good’ worker is one that requires no further effort from their part once she steps into the worksite: ‘When the person, they come, they sign the papers, they start working, and we don’t see them, we don’t hear them, then it’s OK.’ (Joanna, senior manager, staffing agency) Exact divisions of work between employers naturally vary⁸, but the simplified matrix below provides some examples of potential arrangements. All four options are seen as stable, sustainable organisational structures for hotels of different scale and management preferences.

⁷ The staffing agency is addressed in the literature variously as ‘temporary work agency’, ‘temporary help agency’ or ‘temporary staffing agency’. In this article, I avoid the ‘temporary’ designation, which, as many studies have recognised, is not an accurate description of many workers’ experiences.

⁸ The size, pay level and language of the workforce, especially, have bearings on the decision to place management personnel on site. For examples of ‘vendor-on-premises’ or other on-site supervisory arrangements, see Smith and Neuwirth, 2008; Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2014.

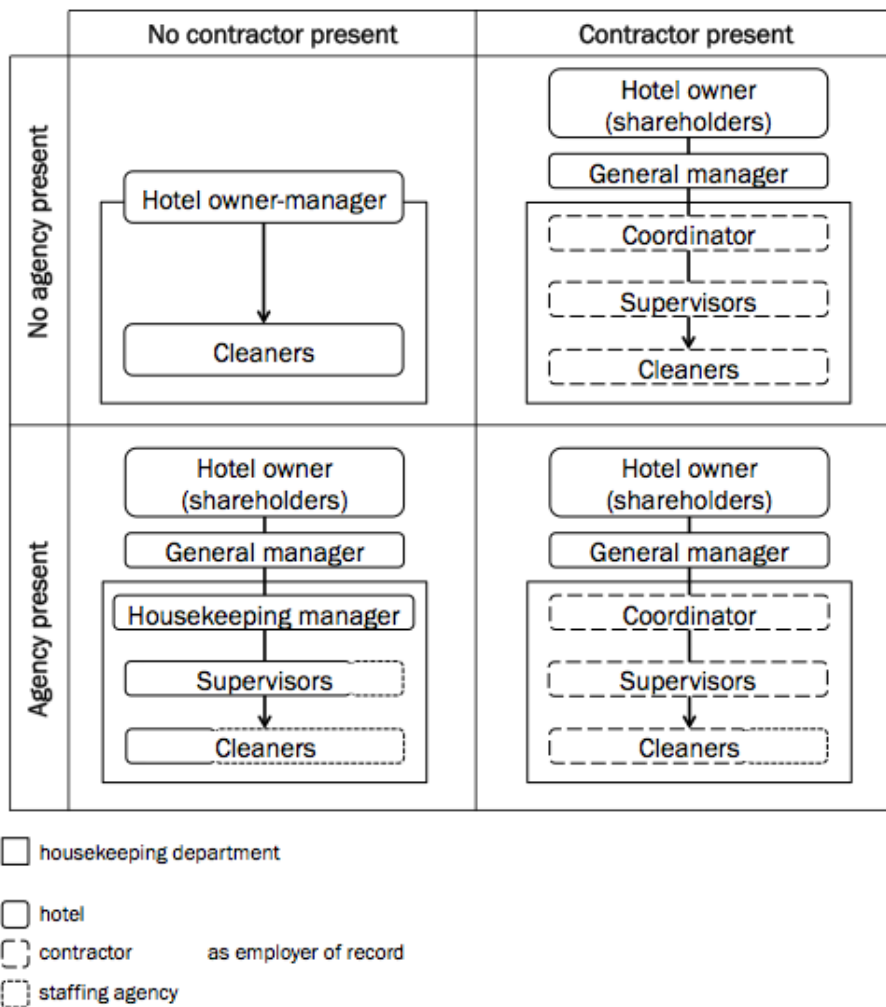


Figure 1. Examples of housekeeping department organisational structures

Thus the quadrangular relationship can be conceptualised as the overlay of a contracting arrangement atop a triangular agency employment relationship, creating a three-tier segmentation of the workforce. Intermediary companies can and do play different roles in different worksites: a contractor who uses the services of an agency at one worksite, may be competing with its partner as an agency for another client's order.⁹ The 'contractor' and 'agency' roles are then specific to the worksite, although companies may choose to focus strategically on a particular role.

⁹ The reverse, where a staffing agency bids for an outsourcing contract for an entire housekeeping department, is much less likely.

In the case of hotel cleaning in Amsterdam, the four actors in the quadrangular relationship are hotels, cleaning contractors (*schoonmaakbedrijven*), staffing agencies (*uitzendbureaus*) and cleaners. Contract cleaning companies vary greatly in scale, ranging from regional players that specialise in the hotel sector to multinational franchises that clean anything from hospitals to airplanes. Regardless of scale, they are keen to portray a professional image that involves company uniforms and strict dress codes, supported by off-site training that leads to qualifications recognised by industry organisations. On the worksite, there is often a push for bureaucratic instruments that serve to standardise the work process. Itemised checklists are created for measuring the quality to which rooms are cleaned. Cleaners are reminded of health and safety rules in daily meetings; some companies use fingerprint technology to ensure cleaners coming into work are the same people whose work authorisation has been checked in the hiring process.

The staffing agencies are much smaller organisations. The dispatchers take pride in their nimbleness and, indeed, functional flexibility:

‘... We are not people that write, we’re people that do. [...] To be honest [the office] it’s just me and my colleague dealing with the hotels; it’s one girl doing the finance; and there are two guys taking care of the houses. [...] Here the lines are short, there is no hierarchy, everybody picks up the phone, doesn’t matter who you are.’ (Joanna, senior manager, staffing agency)

Despite the small staff size, the agencies offer a range of services that allow them to tap into the migrant labour supply. They make use of internet resources (see Janta et al., 2011) and overseas affiliates to recruit migrant workers from Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and other Eastern European countries. The agencies I spoke to do not make transport arrangements for workers, nor do they make use of posting arrangements (see Pijpers, 2010; Wagner and Hassel, 2016). Once workers arrive in Amsterdam, they are picked up at the train or bus station and brought to accommodation provided by the agency. The worker has one face-to-

face meeting with an agency representative, either at the agency's office or the accommodation, signs employment and housing contracts and insurance papers, receives a public transport pass, and is ready to work. The entire process, from a hotel placing an order to the cleaner arriving in a new country for work, takes just two weeks.

The work of the staffing agency, however, goes beyond simply supplying flexible workers and extends to labour management and control. While accommodation provided by agencies is small-scale, decentralised and non-mandatory, affording workers significant autonomy unlike the dormitory regimes described by Pun and Smith (2007) or Andrijasevic and Sacchetto (2014), the double identity of the staffing agency as employer and landlord provides significant leverage for dispatchers, for instance, when persuading workers to take on an extra shift. It is their success in maintaining an exceptionally pliable workforce of migrant cleaners that, surprisingly, makes them a useful partner even for contractors which are in much of the same business. As we shall see, the contractors' on-site managers consider agency staff an essential part of their teams, in spite of the high cost attached.

The on-site manager in the quadrangular relationship

Despite her limited autonomy constrained by company policy and practices, and being situated near the bottom of the corporate hierarchy (Lloyd and Payne, 2014), the on-site housekeeping manager occupies a key position within the quadrangular relationship. Employed by the cleaning contractor, she reports to a business manager at her company, while also being accountable to the hotel's general manager. She must manage the size and the skills of her team to fluctuate with the demand of the hotel, enforce policies and profit-making goals of her employer, coordinate with other labour suppliers, and keep her team members happy enough to function. For workers, she is the face of all the many employers: she enforces the instabilities of a flexible employment relationship on the workers, but also shares the work of making those instabilities acceptable. As the

manager of a clearly defined unit, away from corporate offices, she has to deal with the practical consequences of segmentation of her team.

A variety of titles are used to refer to the on-site manager, from 'coordinator' to 'executive housekeeper' to 'head of housekeeping' (*chef huishouding*). She presides over a department that includes room attendants, public area attendants, a 'linen man' (rarely a 'linen lady'), supervisors, and sometimes an assistant manager. The main everyday task is to manage production and scheduling of cleaners. By making sure enough hands are on deck, she makes sure that the rooms are cleaned. She is also responsible for recruitment and training, and thus the overall task of achieving numerical flexibility. Other tasks include administration, personnel-related, such as recording hours worked, or otherwise, such as ordering cleaning and amenity supplies. At some hotels she even has to put on the wash for dirty rags.

Hotels are strongly hierarchical work organisations, and the on-site manager has a clear position in the hierarchy. The contracting arrangement in the quadrangular relationship means that her domain of responsibility is even more clearly demarcated than a housekeeping manager employed by the hotel. The hierarchy means that certain 'business' decisions are out of her reach, as her role is designated as 'operational'. Such decisions will simply have to be accepted and executed. Studies on service work have noted the 'powerlessness' of low-level managers in face of standardisation of processes and intensifying performance management and control, with help of computer information systems (Boulton and Houlihan, 2010). A key exception lies in people management, specifically, the allocation of hours and contracts (Lambert and Henly, 2012). I argue that the 'powerlessness' of the on-site manager is in fact powerful – it renders certain management demands non-negotiable for workers. The work of scheduling is a good example, where the bargaining over labour effort is taken out of reach from the on-site manager, with productivity targets that are set even before the worksite comes into existence.

Labour effort

Recall that hotels have offloaded the risk of business and seasonal fluctuations to contractors. To manage that risk, contractors must do work to reconcile their revenue, which they receive for each room cleaned, with their costs, which they pay to workers or staffing agencies per hour worked. That translation between piece-rate and time-rate relies on a standard time for cleaning, expressed in minutes per room, negotiated between hotel management and the cleaning contractor by the sales manager. As a normative standard of worker productivity, the time-values act as an exchange rate that allows the cleaners' work product to be translated into a normative quantity of time worked. Time, in minutes, becomes a scale of reference that applies both to labour input and output. The overriding goal for the on-site manager's day-to-day work is to maintain the equality between production time-value and clock time, as expressed by the equation below:

$$\textit{production time-value} = \textit{clock time}$$
$$\textit{minutes per room} \times \textit{number of rooms cleaned} (n) = \textit{hours worked in a shift}$$

The scheduling work of the on-site manager in this sense is routinised, almost mechanical. She receives occupancy figures from the hotel, estimates the number of rooms to be cleaned in the coming week, works out the number of cleaners needed and schedules their shifts. The determination of amount of minutes allocated to cleaning each room, perhaps the most important figure in the contracting relationship, is strictly a 'business' decision. This figure is determined beyond the worksite, before the contractor even starts work at the hotel. Here the on-site manager at a newly built hotel discusses how little he can do if he feels the productivity targets are unreasonable:

'It's not my work to give more time to them [the cleaners], of course. The sales manager, from Tecaro [the cleaning contractor], has an agreement and contract with the hotel. You know Michael? The sales manager. Sometimes I talk with Michael if I have feeling that it's not gonna work, that the hotel gives, for example, 19 minutes for one room. "Can you talk with

the manager in hotel..." I cannot talk direct to the hotel manager... I can, but it's better via the sales manager, because it's his job to deal with it. [...]

Has it changed? When you talked to them, like, oh...

Mostly not. [laughs] Because they're general manager of the hotel, they will be asking other hotels who are also working with Tecaro, so, this kind of thing, they will not give in more minutes.' (Abi, on-site manager, cleaning contractor)

The work of translation borne by the time-values is inevitably problematic, especially if cleaners or their manager have no say in its determination.¹⁰ The distancing achieved by the quadrangular relationship reinforces the distance between 'business' and 'operations'. Cleaners, the key variable input of the production process, are given few chances to engage with the realm of 'business', where parameters of the work process are determined. In this way, workers are prevented from mounting challenges to specific elements of the work process. The classification of productivity issues as 'business' not 'operations' enacts the level of work effort as a unilaterally determined 'economic fact of life'. The entire bargaining consists of one offer that is immediately final and non-negotiable; the worker can either take it or leave it.

Labour mobility

The option of leaving can be a significant source of worker agency, or 'labour mobility power' (Alberti, 2014; Berntsen, 2016). Chris Smith suggests that in addition to the indeterminacy of labour effort, 'the structural absence within the capitalist employment contract of a mutual agreement between the two parties over the magnitude of work effort' (2006: 390), there is a second, oft-ignored aspect of indeterminacy, that of labour mobility. One might argue that cleaning contractors have made the same mistake of neglecting labour mobility. While

¹⁰ The categories established to capture the length of time needed to clean a particular kind of room, like the distinction between 'stay-overs' and 'check-outs', however finessed, can only ever be an estimation based on experience and peer comparison.

extensive systems of control have been developed to monitor productivity, there is more struggle to regulate the 'constant turnover' of staff upon which employers rely (Janta et al., 2011: 1007). It is not unusual for employee turnover at housekeeping departments to exceed 100% annually, a much higher rate than the employers' goal of numerical flexibility, or even curbing collective action, would demand. While revocability is built into the conditions of employment with the contractor, leaving employers with little risk of overcapacity, the 'convocability' of labour, or the capacity of the agency to assemble and hold together a workforce as and when needed (see Chauvin, 2010), is left to the on-site manager and partly outsourced to the staffing agency.

As mentioned above, a key area of autonomy available to the on-site manager is the allocation of work hours. While controls on productivity determine the total amount of work hours, it is up to the on-site manager to distribute the hours among individual workers. The following excerpt shows how Ewa sees sufficient work hours as important for loyalty and stability:

'So it's very rare for the part-time people to stay here for [longer]...?'

No, I have some group, at the moment. But, like I told you, we try to keep them on work, you know. They have enough hours; they have enough motivation to stay here. They're not looking for something else, that's important. I can say, at the moment, I have really a [stable] team, the people who are really with us. There is, always a few, which they're like... tsk.

You know that...

Maybe they're going to stay, maybe they're going to call me tomorrow they're not coming anymore. That can happen, but, no.

But also the part-time people, there are some that you feel like they like it here...

Actually only part-time people, because the full-times... Yeah, they don't have any other option, let's say.

And how many of those would you say...?

From the whole group, maybe 2, 3. No, because... That's also part of my job, to try to find the people who are going to stay longer, because we have to invest the time, energy, money, to train them. So it would be nice to keep them here.' (Ewa, on-site manager, cleaning contractor)

The excerpt also makes clear that the cultivation of loyalty is inextricably linked to differentiation and segmentation among workers (Chauvin, forthcoming). The loyalty of 'full-timers' is secured, at the cost of flexibility: they have permanent contracts from before the department was outsourced, which guarantee five days of work per week, no more, no less. For flexible 'part-timers', however, the manager is keen to develop some form of informal loyalty to ensure stability in her team. The quadrangular relationship enables a three-tier segmentation, which seemingly provides an easy solution for how to discriminate among workers. The reality, however, is more difficult. Ewa struggles with this segmentation:

'Do people from WorkPeople [staffing agency] cost more than people from GSV [cleaning contractor] for you?

Of course. Twice.

Does that make you... really?

Yes. But still I need them. It's difficult. [...] Why? Because we have to be really flexible. [...] I cannot keep them [cleaners] without work, or I cannot let them work more than six days in a row, so, that's why I need WorkPeople. That's the advantage of... yeah, yeah, to have a flexible team. And of course, if it's really busy, then I need all of them, but if it's really quiet, the priority for me is first full-timers, then GSV, then WorkPeople. And WorkPeople knows this, so the people are on holiday, or long holiday,

or they're going somewhere else. But yeah. They are, much more expensive.

So you would, would you also... [pause] give work to people from GSV first, because they're cheaper?

Mhm. [nods for yes]

Yeah. So...

But the other story is that, I try to be fair. And, I'm telling the people who are working with me from WorkPeople even, they are for long time with me.' (Ewa, on-site manager, cleaning contractor)

Ewa shows that she is reluctant to base her scheduling priorities solely on the employment status of her team, despite clear economic incentives to do so. The three-tier segmentation entailed in the quadrangular relationship, then, forms only a legal-economic basis for differential treatment of workers. The clear prescriptions of a permanent full-time contract do deliver stability (with inflexibility) for both manager and worker, as one would expect; but the distanced flexibility of an agency cleaner does not automatically mean instability. Instead, loyalty to different degrees can develop based on personal interactions, ethno-national identification and the manager's situated notions of fairness.

The uneven reciprocation of favours enacts loyalty between the manager and workers. Workers offer up dependable availability at short notice and labour under intense time pressures to achieve productivity targets. The manager, in turn, picks up the phone to ensure their teams are not severely underemployed. By tapping into the network of hotels serviced by the contractor company, or warning the staffing agency of low demand in advance, managers help to secure extra work assignments for cleaners they consider 'their people'. Besides scheduling, extra paid work in the evening, approval for overtime or holidays, and giving cleaners the same floor or section every shift are other examples of favours or privileges managers can grant or withhold in order to reward or

punish cleaners. As cleaners accumulate such favours, which are based on personal relationships with the on-site manager and not transportable to a new worksite (see Chauvin, 2016), they become more reluctant to act on their capacity for mobility.

Conclusion

This article investigates the work of the on-site manager in a complex employment arrangement with multiple layers of labour market intermediation. It introduces the concept of a quadrangular relationship to argue for a better understanding of the divisions of work among various employers in long subcontracting chains.

In its examination of the empirical case of hotel cleaning in Amsterdam, this article reveals that user companies in their use of labour intermediaries do not see short-term cost minimisation as an overriding goal, and instead place much value on the capacity of intermediaries to supply 'distanced flexibility'. The unattractive employment conditions of the job as a cleaner has secured the revocability of commitments to the worker, but bring the 'convocability' of a 'reliably contingent' (Peck and Theodore, 2001: 492) workforce into question. It falls to the on-site manager to deal with problems of labour mobility, whereas the bargaining of labour effort is taken out of the worksite and rendered non-negotiable to workers.

The research supports previous claims of the theoretical importance of adopting a migration lens in studies of the staffing industry (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Pijpers, 2010; Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, 2016a). Career trajectories of migrants who proceed to take up managerial positions, and the role of ethno-national identification and stereotypes in the formation of informal loyalties between managers and workers, offer promising avenues for further research.

The article has placed the spotlight on the on-site housekeeping manager, a role that has evolved through time with accompanying contradictions. Her autonomy is curtailed by standardisation of processes, taking away her power to help as well as to tyrannise. She presides over a system of bad jobs, where high staff turnover is just as good an expression of worker resistance as of capitulation (Chauvin, forthcoming). And she, often a migrant worker herself, enforces the bargain between employers and workers every day. As Ewa confesses, 'It was not my idea to work for a cleaning company for goodness' sake. But it's happened, so just make the most from what's possible.' (Ewa, on-site manager, cleaning contractor) In the search for improvements to workers' welfare, how managers 'make the most' may well be where such improvements could be achieved most immediately, if only incrementally, and deserves more attention from those who champion the workers' cause.

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Appendix

Table 1. Characteristics of informants

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|----|
| Total number of informants | | 25 |
|----------------------------|--|----|

| | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|----|
| Most recent legal employer | Hotel | 7 |
| | Cleaning contractor | 14 |
| | Staffing agency | 4 |
| Work function | Office staff (incl. senior managers) | 5 |
| | On-site manager | 8 |
| | Supervisor | 3 |
| | Cleaner | 9 |
| Gender | Female | 18 |
| | Male | 7 |
| Age (estimate) | 21-30 | 12 |
| | 31-40 | 5 |
| | 41-50 | 6 |
| | 51-60 | 2 |
| Nationality | Dutch | 9 |
| | Polish | 7 |
| | Other European Union | 4 |
| | Non-European Union | 5 |
