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Time is money – or not?

Relational construction of temporal meanings in professional work

by

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Department of Management

Supervised by Prof. Laura Empson and Dr. Ece Kaynak

Presented for examination to Prof. Dan Kärreman and Prof. Stefan Haefliger

London, June 25, 2026

Für Großvater

I, Inka Luhrs, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.



Abstract

Time is central to how professional work in organizations is priced, organized, and evaluated. Despite this centrality, how temporal meanings are formed and what shapes their construction within organizations remains less understood. This thesis thus explores how professionals construct temporal meanings in high-performance professional organizations.

To do so, it examines the system of billable hours – where time is tracked in six-minute increments and assigned explicit value – across three City law firms characterized by continuously demanding temporal expectations, performance pressure, and intensity. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 80 professionals from trainee to senior partner level, the analysis examines – across three empirical chapters – how professionals interpret and enact expectations around temporal commitment, how such meanings are constructed and reinforced through hierarchical working relationships, and how one firm manages temporal uncertainty without relying on prediction and time-based metrics. A distinctive feature of the data is its relational structure – junior/mid-level and senior professionals were selected to provide two-sided accounts of relational dynamics in stable working relationships.

The research reveals that relationships crucially shape temporal meanings in professional work. Even when organizations uniformly measure and control time, professionals construct markedly varied meanings through relational dynamics with senior professionals in their immediate environment. A particularly revelatory case further shows that when time is removed from organizing and valuing work altogether, professionals construct value through relationships instead – revealing temporal parameters as an overlay on fundamentally relational processes of meaning construction. Temporal meanings are thus mediated through and expressions of relational dynamics rather than arising directly from organizational systems or individual differences.

These findings make three core contributions: to research on temporality in organizations by suggesting temporal orientations and structures as inherently relational; to research on ideal worker images by revealing them as plural and fragmented rather than singular and uniform; and to research on overwork by foregrounding the relational level as a crucial mediating analytical level. Additionally, this thesis opens a conversation about managing temporal uncertainty through relationships, identifying the decoupling of time and value as a novel mechanism for managing irreducible unpredictability, and relationship focus as its enabler and an alternative organizing principle to time.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Time is central to organizational life. The study of temporality – how we relate to time – has become an important strand of organizational research (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988; H. Lee & Liebenau, 1999). Earlier management research had been largely preoccupied with time as a resource to be measured and managed efficiently (Taylor, 1911; McGrath & Rotchford, 1983). Inspired by anthropological research documenting differences in how cultures relate to time, organizational scholars have increasingly attended to how time is experienced, conceptualized and valued within work contexts – how individuals attribute meaning to time (Hall, 1959, 1983; Adam, 1994; Bluedorn, 2002; Tang, Richter, & Nadkarni, 2020; Shipp & Jansen, 2021).

The system of 'billable hours' is the dominant model of charging clients across various professional services such as consulting, accounting and law (Yakura, 2001; Alvehus & Spicer, 2012; Lupu & Rokka, 2022). Professionals under this system are typically expected to account for their work in 6-minute increments – recording what tasks have been worked on for which client for every six minutes of the working day. The resulting time sheets can range from a few phrases listing the activities undertaken in the same project for one client for the whole day (common in big projects like often in consultancy), to extensive lists of meticulous time periods and task descriptions when switching frequently between mandates for several clients (typical in many areas of legal work).

Beyond its external function for pricing, the number of chargeable hours[1] typically serves internally as a primary measure of performance, informing bonus payments and promotion decisions. In this way, the familiar notion of time as money is not merely a metaphor but an institutionalized reality – time is explicitly assigned monetary value and becomes the primary basis through which

[1]The terms 'billable hours' and 'chargeable hours' are used interchangeably throughout this thesis. The former term is more common in academic literature and US practice, while the latter is frequently used in UK firms where this research is set.

professional worth is determined. In professional contexts, time therefore not only structures and coordinates professionals' work but also becomes a medium through which professionals understand and demonstrate their own value and commitment to the organization (Coffey, 1994; Anderson-Gough, Grey, & Robson, 2001; Lupu & Rokka, 2022; Feldman, Reid, & Mazmanian, 2020). This makes the meanings professionals attribute to time particularly multi-faceted and consequential in these contexts.

Yet despite this centrality, how professionals construct temporal meanings remains less understood. Existing research has suggested that temporal structures shape temporal orientations (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Oborn & Barrett, 2021), and shown how professionals navigate and internalize the financialization of time in their use and recording of time (Yakura, 2001; Alvehus & Spicer, 2012; Pitts, 2022). The meanings professionals attribute to time, however, are often treated as implicit rather than examined directly, and broader reviews of temporality have identified the factors and processes through which temporal orientations are actually formed within organizations as a significant and unresolved gap (Tang et al., 2020; Shipp & Jansen, 2021). High-performance environments – where temporal expectations, performance pressure and intensity are continuously demanding – make such dynamics particularly visible, as organizational and institutional structures create strong tensions and challenges around temporal commitment and work-life boundaries that professionals must navigate. This thesis therefore asks: *What shapes how professionals construct the meaning of time in high-performance professional organizations?*

My overarching finding and argument of this thesis is that relationships fundamentally shape and account for variation in temporal meanings. Across three professional organizations, relational dynamics in professionals' immediate environment – specifically hierarchical working relationships – crucially mediate how professionals interpret and respond to organizational systems of measuring and controlling time. Even when organizations uniformly measure time and prescribe its value through billable hours systems, professionals construct markedly varied meanings through their relational dynamics with senior professionals. And – as one particularly revelatory case shows – when time is removed from organizing and valuing work altogether, professionals construct value through relationships instead. This reveals temporal meanings as fundamentally constructed through and expressions of relational dynamics rather than arising directly from organizational systems or individual differences alone.

I arrived at this finding by examining temporal meanings in different forms across three empirical chapters. In the first two empirical chapters, temporal meanings manifest as interpretations and expectations about temporal commitment: how time relates to performance, how workload should be managed, what balancing of private time is legitimate, and how accountability for temporal efficiency is understood. Specifically, Chapter 5 explores how professionals manage temporal demands based on competing narratives about balance and performance, and reveals two co-existing ideals of the 'ideal professional' which I term the Hyper-Performer and the Sustainable High-Performer. Chapter 6 investigates how those meanings are constructed and reinforced through relational dynamics in hierarchical working relationships, and reveals various mechanisms through which these interactions tilt interpretations and enactment towards overwork. In the third empirical chapter – Chapter 7 – temporal meanings take the form of understandings about how time relates to value. Focussing analysis on one firm that does not evaluate, manage, and price work based on time as the industry standard, this chapter addresses how professionals manage uncertainty in their work. In doing so, it reveals how temporal meanings are constructed without relying on temporal parameters.

This thesis draws on an interpretive qualitative study of 80 professionals across three law firms characterized as high-performance environments. Specifically, I interviewed 40 partners, 32 associates and trainees, and 8 other professionals across firms representing Tiers 1, 2, and 3 within the City corporate law firm market. A distinctive feature of the data is its relational structure – partners and associates were selected to be from the same teams and regularly working together, yielding two-sided accounts of 30 pairs that made relational dynamics and misalignments visible that ordinary individual-level data would not reveal.

Law firms provide a particularly rich empirical context for this research, as the billable hours system is highly institutionalized, and continues to be the dominant model for pricing, remuneration, and control across the sector, making time the key medium through which performance is experienced and evaluated. Despite this centrality, the legal sector has received surprisingly little attention in research on temporality – most existing studies related to billable hours are set in consulting, accounting, auditing or other contexts (Coffey, 1994; Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Yakura, 2001; Alvehus & Spicer, 2012; Evans, Kunda, & Barley, 2004; Pitts, 2022). One exception is Lupu and Rokka (2022) who draw on data from a law firm alongside an auditing firm. More generally though, prior work has not examined relational data despite acknowledging the role of relationships (Reid, 2015; Lupu & Rokka, 2022; Heaphy & Trefalt, 2024), and has

often focused on contexts where professionals are not settled into stable working relationships (Coffey, 1994; Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Yakura, 2001).

This thesis makes three core contributions to organizational research. First, it contributes to research on temporality in organizations by complicating assumptions about how measuring and controlling time shapes action through temporal meanings. Foregrounding relational dynamics as a crucial determinant and mediator, I reveal temporal meanings as fundamentally constructed through and expressions of relational dynamics and thus suggest understanding temporal orientations and structures as inherently relational. Second, this thesis contributes to research on ideal worker images by challenging the assumption of a singular, monolithic norm. Revealing two legitimate ideals co-existing and varying within the same organizations, I suggest reframing ideal worker images as both plural and fragmented. Third, the thesis extends research on the persistence of overwork by foregrounding the relational level as a previously under-examined analytical level that mediates between individual and organizational factors. By revealing how relational dynamics in hierarchical working relationships systematically tilt interpretations and enactment towards overwork even when senior professionals may intend otherwise, I add to explanations for why overwork sustains. Additionally, this thesis opens a conversation about managing unpredictability through relationships by identifying an alternative approach to prediction and control, or acknowledgement and adaptation. I show how decoupling time and value can foster resilience to such temporal uncertainty by reducing reliance on temporal developments through replacing temporal parameters with relationship-based assessments in determining value.

This thesis proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 provides the theoretical motivation for this research by reviewing the relevant literatures. It starts with a broad introduction to professional work and temporality, before motivating the overarching research question. The chapter then reviews research on the ideal worker image, persistence of overwork and uncertainty management to motivate the three sub-questions that the empirical chapters address. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the methodological approach, including elaborations on selection of setting, sites and interviewees; reflections on positionality and access; and descriptions of both data collection and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 provides a brief introduction to chargeable hours in the legal context and the three research sites. Chapters 5-7 represent the empirical chapters of this thesis. Chapter 5 first draws on organizational recruitment materials to establish the co-existing narratives assumed in the sub-research question. It then examines how novices enter the organization before exploring how junior and mid-level professionals settled in stable

working relationships interpret and enact expectations around temporal commitment in their environment, revealing the two temporal ideals mentioned above. The chapter closes with an analysis of cross-firm patterns and a selection of individual transition accounts that point towards the relational level as a potentially crucial factor in the construction of temporal meanings. Chapter 6 builds on this and investigates junior and mid-level professionals' data alongside seniors' accounts. After presenting a systematic misalignment pattern, it analyzes four forms of interactions between partners and associates to reveal how temporal meanings are reinforced, become misaligned, and result in sustaining overwork. Chapter 7 takes a different approach in focussing on one of the firms and analyzing it as a revelatory case. It begins by showing how professionals exhibit a distinctive approach to uncertainty and prediction than the other two firms, and then analyzes their approach to relationships and their strategies of managing uncertainty through relationships, before revealing how this enables the firm to organize internally without relying on billable hour targets and strict time management. Chapter 8 discusses these findings in detail across the relevant literatures before summarizing and synthesizing the thesis's contributions, contextual conditions, and suggestions for future research. It closes with a summary for practitioner audience and concluding reflections by the researcher.

Chapter 2

Theoretical motivation

This chapter develops the theoretical framework motivating the overarching research question of this thesis, and the three sub-questions that the empirical chapters address. It proceeds in three parts. The first examines temporality in professional work and organizations, establishing how time functions as a medium of meaning, value, and control in professional contexts, and deriving the overarching research question. The second reviews research on the ideal worker norm, identifying the assumption of a singular ideal worker image that this thesis challenges; and outlines existing explanations for the persistence of overwork, highlighting a gap at the relational level that this thesis addresses. These two strands motivate the sub-research questions 1 and 2. The third part reviews what is known about how professionals manage temporal uncertainty to develop sub-research question 3 and situate the additional single case study included in this thesis.

2.1 Temporality in professional work

2.1.1 Professional work in organizations

Professional work is characterized by the application of specialized, abstract knowledge to particular, non-routine situations, with professionals possessing expertise acquired through prolonged training and credentialing (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). The professional judgment required to diagnose problems, make inferences, and develop treatments forms the basis for professionals' jurisdictional claims over specific domains of work (Abbott, 1988). As professional identity, norms and standards transcend specific organizational contexts, occupational communities play a central role in professional work and form the basis for self-regulation (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). While the classic sociology of professions focused on traditional professions such

as medicine, law, and accounting, contemporary research on professional work has expanded to examine knowledge-based work more broadly, treating characteristics such as expert knowledge, autonomy, community-based norms, and high status as dimensions of variation rather than defining features (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011).

When professional work is embedded in organizations, controlling and coordinating it poses a particular challenge. The combination of professionals' claims to autonomy based on their specialized expertise (Freidson, 2001) and the difficulty of evaluating and measuring quality and performance creates problems for traditional organizational control mechanisms. Professional work resists direct supervision because neither behaviours nor outputs can be reliably measured – quality depends on context-specific judgment that clients and managers often cannot fully assess (Ouchi, 1979). Ouchi argues that under these conditions, organizations rely more on clan control, which operates through informal social agreements based on shared values and symbolic mechanisms. This clan control system includes selecting individuals with appropriate training and dispositions, as well as intensive socialization that cultivates implicit values, rituals and ceremonies. Such peer-based control becomes powerfully coercive as professionals collectively create and enforce normative rules (Barker, 1993).

Organizations actively cultivate and maintain these control systems through various practices. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) theorize how organizations use systematic socialization tactics to transmit and align behaviours, perspectives and conventions with organizational norms and role expectations, often taking the form of cohort-based entry, collective induction programs and fixed, sequential training timetables (Jones, 1986). Kunda (1992) demonstrates how engineering organizational culture provides an important means of controlling professional activity by shaping professional identity and commitment. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) later highlight identity regulation as a medium and outcome of organizational control, showing how organizations target and shape certain aspects of professionals' self-images to direct their "(self-)identity work" (p. 625) towards managerially defined objectives. Following this emphasis on socio-ideological control in professional organizations, Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) show how these modes work in tandem with technocratic controls, with control over identity and subjectivity compensating where direct behavioural control is loosened.

Under these conditions, professional organizations have developed distinctive organizational forms. Mintzberg (1980) characterizes them as 'professional bureaucracies' wherein standardization of skills, rather than work processes or outputs, serves as the primary coordinating mech-

anism. The archetypal form is the professional partnership, wherein senior professionals are simultaneously owners, managers, and client-facing practitioners (Greenwood, Hinings, & Brown, 1990; Greenwood & Empson, 2003). This organizational form aligns ownership, control, and expertise, creating governance structures that prioritize professional values and peer control – addressing the control challenge by ensuring those who govern the organization share professional norms and understand the work being coordinated.

In practice, these organizations exhibit several distinctive characteristics. Because the core assets of professional organizations – human capital – are highly mobile, firms compete not only in markets for services but also in markets for talent (Maister, 1982). They are characterized by hierarchical structures with 'up-or-out' promotion systems and tournament-based advancement, creating leverage models wherein senior professionals' work is multiplied through junior professionals who aspire to partnership (Maister, 1993). These hierarchies thereby combine apprenticeship-based development with competitive selection mechanisms. While partnership represents the traditional form, many professional organizations have undergone transformation through processes of corporatization in recent decades, with managed professional businesses exhibiting more extensive managerial hierarchies and greater standardization (Cooper, Hinings, Greenwood, & Brown, 1996; Empson & Chapman, 2006; Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011). A context-oriented body of literature examines these organizations as Professional Service Firms (PSFs) – knowledge-intensive firms that trade mainly on the expertise of human capital to develop and deliver intangible solutions to client problems (Morris & Empson, 1998; Empson, Hinings, Muzio, & Broschak, 2015). Beyond this core activity, PSFs are characterized by specialist technical and client knowledge, governance structures emphasizing individual autonomy with contingent managerial authority, and shared professional identity among practitioners (Empson et al., 2015).

Across professional work and organizations, relationships and interactions play a central role. While collegial relationships are crucial in controlling and developing professionals, client relationships are key strategic assets of professionals and professional organizations (Maister, 1993; Broschak, 2015). The service character of professional work inherently requires interaction and co-production with clients, with more customized solutions demanding greater levels of interaction and relationship investment (Mills & Margulies, 1980; Greenwood & Empson, 2003). Each stage of professional work – defining the problem, analyzing it, and developing solutions – relies on context-specific information, making it fundamentally relational. Despite this, firms differ in their approaches to relationship management, with some taking more relational and others more

transactional approaches, and their ability to form and maintain client relationships remaining an important determinant of firm performance (Broschak, 2015). Pakarinen and Huising (2023) argue that, in the face of increasing capabilities of technology and AI, the relational dimension of professional work will remain a central and increasingly important differentiating element, because expertise is itself relationally constructed – generated, applied, and recognized through ongoing interactions. Relationships thus function simultaneously as mechanisms of organizational control, sources of professional development and socialization, and strategic assets to be managed in professional organizations.

2.1.2 Temporality in organizations

While management and organization studies have been preoccupied with time since the early scientific management approach (Taylor, 1911), it was only later that temporality – how we relate to time – became an explicit object of theoretical engagement. Drawing on anthropological work that documented variation in how cultures relate to time (Hall, 1959, 1983), researchers came to recognize that the underlying conception of time in management had been exclusively that of clock time (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988). Clock time assumes time to be objective, linear, and homogeneous – progressing uniformly and independently of context or experience, and therefore measurable and divisible into quantifiable units where each unit is equivalent and interchangeable (Clark, 1985; Starkey, 1989). Time had been predominantly regarded in management as a resource to be "measured and manipulated in the interest of organizational efficiency and effectiveness" (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988, p. 303), a scarce commodity that must be used economically and rationally (Zerubavel, 1981; McGrath & Rotchford, 1983) – also expressed in the familiar metaphor of time as money: something that can be spent, saved, wasted, invested, or borrowed (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In contrast, event time – rooted in anthropological observations of cultures that organize time around social and natural events (Hall, 1959, 1983) – assumes time to be subjective, context-dependent, and heterogeneous; the value or meaning of time lies in the event (Clark, 1985). Events take place when and as long as they take, and rather than measured against a clock or calendar, time is managed in relation to the quality and nature of the experience (Blount & Janicik, 2001). In this conception, time is therefore viewed as qualitative and unequivalent rather than being measurable in uniform units (Starkey, 1989; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Tang et al., 2020).

Clark (1985) was among the first to introduce this conception into organizational research, pointing out that event-based and cyclical temporalities may also play an important role in organizational life alongside clock time. Subsequent sociological work reinforced that individuals and organizations perceive and manage time differently based on their social and cultural context (Adam, 1994; Zerubavel, 1981; Perlow, 1999). Following calls for more research on the subjective experience of time in organizations (H. Lee & Liebenau, 1999; Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence, & Tushman, 2001; Bluedorn, 2002), this perspective has since gained considerable attention, with a particular surge in empirical studies in recent years (cf. Tang et al., 2020; Shipp & Jansen, 2021; Bansal, Reinecke, Suddaby, & Langley, 2022). Yet the assumption of time as objective and measurable remains prevalent in most research and practice of management and organizations (Shipp & Jansen, 2021; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Cuganesan, 2022), and scholars have often assumed either one or the other conception of time rather than addressing how they interact or coexist.

A more integrative approach emerged with Orlikowski and Yates's concept of temporal structuring, which highlights how people experience time through the temporal structures they enact, and how temporality is therefore both produced and reproduced through everyday practice (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Temporal structures, such as calendars, schedules, break times, deadlines, or business cycles (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Holt & Johnsen, 2019; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Oborn & Barrett, 2021; Lupu, Ruiz-Castro, & Leca, 2022), are thus neither objectively given nor purely subjectively experienced. Instead, this view bridges the dichotomy by foregrounding that "people may experience time as clock-based or event-based (or both) depending on the ... temporal structure being enacted in practice at that moment" (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002, p. 690). While scholars typically exemplify rather than define the term, temporal structures are understood here as constructions that capture and shape the temporal parameters of human action; in other words, they *structure* activities and behaviour with regard to timing, duration and rhythm.

Beneath these surface-level structures, temporal orientations and conceptions encompass the underlying values and assumptions about time (Rowell, Gustafsson, & Clemente, 2016; Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019). Beyond clock time and event time (or objective/subjective time), these orientations may reflect a range of other dimensions, including temporal horizons (short vs. long-term orientation), future vs. past orientations, or monochronicity vs. polychronicity (whether multiple activities are experienced as naturally simultaneous or sequential) (Bluedorn, 2002; Tang

et al., 2020; Shipp & Jansen, 2021). From a practice-based perspective, temporal orientations are both expressed and reinforced through the temporal structures people enact – shaping, and being shaped by, everyday practice (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Hernes & Schultz, 2020; Oborn & Barrett, 2021). Throughout this thesis, the term 'orientation' is used primarily for the individual level, referring to how professionals relate to time or other concepts, while organizational-level approaches to time are described in terms of structures, focus, or organizing principles rather than orientations.

This mutual relationship between temporal structures and orientations is reflected in how differences in temporal orientations have been documented along multiple dimensions and across different levels. At the occupational level, studies find differences in temporal orientation between professional groups working together – between biologists and administrators (Dubinskas, 1988), managers and scientists (Dougherty, Bertels, Chung, Dunne, & Kraemer, 2013), medical specialties (Oborn & Barrett, 2021), consultants and healthcare professionals (McGivern et al., 2018), and emergency service units (Dille, Söderlund, & Clegg, 2018). Within this body of work, certain occupations are consistently associated with particular temporal orientations – managers, for instance, tend toward clock time orientations across multiple settings (Dubinskas, 1988; Dougherty et al., 2013; McGivern et al., 2018). Other research has revealed variation across or within organizations (Gersick, 1994; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Slawinski & Bansal, 2012). Here too, orientations map onto the temporal structures of work characteristic of particular roles or organizational units, with clock-based structures associated with market-facing, outcome-oriented functions and more process-oriented temporalities with developmental or discovery-based work (Gersick, 1994; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015). Slawinski and Bansal (2012) extend this to the organizational level, showing how different time perspectives across organizations shape their responses to sustainability challenges. Together, these studies suggest that the temporal structures of work shape how those working within them come to understand and relate to time. Yet how temporal orientations are actually formed within organizations remains unexamined, and studies of differences or conflicts within organizational groups or units are notably scarce. Reviews of temporality research have explicitly identified this as a gap, noting that we know little about the factors and processes through which different ways of relating to time actually emerge and develop (Tang et al., 2020; Shipp & Jansen, 2021).

This thesis examines temporality through the concept of *temporal meanings* – the meanings professionals attribute to time in their daily work. These interpretations can be understood as the

building blocks of the values and assumptions professionals hold about time – underlying the temporal orientations through which temporal structures are enacted and reproduced in practice. Temporal meanings take different forms across the empirical chapters. The first two examine temporal meanings as interpretations and expectations about temporal commitment: how time relates to performance, how workload should be managed, what balancing of private time is legitimate, and how accountability for temporal efficiency is understood. The third examines temporal meanings as understandings about how time relates to value, examining in particular what happens when temporal parameters (duration, timing, recurrence) are uncertain or difficult to predict. Based on this, the remainder of this chapter will motivate and formulate the overarching research question and sub-questions in turn.

2.1.3 Temporality in high-performance professional organizations

Time plays a particularly central role in professional organizations. The classic ethnographies by Coffey (1994) and Anderson-Gough et al. (2001) show how the management and use of time form a central part of the socialization of junior professionals in accounting firms. These accounts demonstrate that time functions not only as a resource and unit through which work is organized but also as a symbol of commitment and performance (see also Feldman et al., 2020). In a more recent study, Lupu and Rokka (2022) extend this view by illustrating how professionals continually negotiate between competing demands of client time, firm time, and personal time, revealing the constant pressure and strain involved in seeking to 'feel in control'. Taken together, research in professional settings has highlighted that temporality not only shapes everyday practices and experiences of professionals, but serves as a medium through which commitment, performance, and professional identity are both expressed and controlled.

The system of billable hours equates time directly with economical value.[2] Through this system, time provides the basis for accounting, revenue, remuneration and resource management in professional organizations. Studies have examined how professionals navigate and internalize this financialization of time across a range of professions (Yakura, 2001; Evans et al., 2004; Alvehus & Spicer, 2012; Pitts, 2022). They each reveal how individuals strategically structure their use and recording of time to meet organizational expectations and client demands. Notably, these studies document how professionals navigate discrepancies between time and perceived value, and engage in various translation processes between time worked, time recorded, and

[2] For a detailed explanation of this system, see Chapter 4 (Section 4.1 on p. 53).

time billed, such as 'padding', 'discounting', 'overbilling', 'underbilling', or even 'double billing' (charging the same time to several clients) (Yakura, 2001; Alvehus & Spicer, 2012; Pitts, 2022). These accounts show how systems that measure and price time continually reproduce the link between time, value, and performance.

In professional organizations, time thus functions internally as a signal of professionals' commitment and worth to their organizations, and externally as the basis for pricing client work. Yet, across this research, the meaning of time is largely implicit, and how these meanings are constructed remains less understood. Existing work examines how professionals learn and experience temporal norms and how they navigate time-based billing systems but provides limited insight into the relational processes through which these valuations – both symbolic and economic – are determined, sustained, or adjusted.

Understanding the construction of temporal meanings in these contexts is particularly relevant given the broader field of structural tensions within which professionals must navigate temporal demands. Scholars have documented that the boundary between work and personal life has come under increasing pressure over recent decades: Driven by career models built around long working hours, organizational practices enforcing responsiveness, and intensifying demands of personal obligations, navigating work-nonwork boundaries and achieving work-life balance has become a defining challenge in professional contexts (Bailyn, 1993; Perlow, 1998; Hochschild, 1997). Underlying this tension throughout, creating and sustaining the systematic encroachment of work on personal time, is the logic of time-as-commitment – that performance and dedication are expressed and evaluated through time (Coffey, 1994; Feldman et al., 2020). The organizational and institutional norms producing this tension and sustaining this logic are acknowledged and assumed here as pervasive structural constraints within which professionals must navigate the meaning and management of time. In high-performance environments – understood as organizational contexts where temporal expectations, performance pressure, and intensity are continuously demanding – these constraints become particularly visible. As demands intensify, the meanings professionals construct around time become particularly consequential and contested. This makes high-performance professional organizations a revealing site to examine how professionals construct temporal meanings. Taking that as a point of departure, this thesis asks: *What shapes how professionals construct the meaning of time in high-performance professional organizations?*

2.2 Ideal worker image

2.2.1 Singular ideal worker image

The notion of the 'ideal worker' has long provided a central lens for understanding how professionals perceive and enact expectations of time, commitment, and performance within the broader challenge of navigating work and personal demands. The concept has its roots in feminist scholarship that identified a structural incompatibility between the demands of professional work and the obligations of personal and domestic life. Acker's (1990) foundational analysis of gendered organizations demonstrated that the very concept of a 'job' presupposes a disembodied worker whose time is fully available for employment. This supposedly universal figure is, in fact, modeled on a male life course, with traditional role allocations in which domestic and caregiving responsibilities are handled by a woman. Building on this insight, Williams (2001) introduced the term 'ideal worker norm' to describe how workplaces explicitly and implicitly expect employees to work full time (and often overtime), remain geographically mobile if required, and delegate all or nearly all caregiving responsibilities. More recent work shows that the ideal worker continues to be defined by work primacy – total commitment and availability for the job – and that this expectation remains highly relevant in professional organizations, where it also acts as a central driver of overwork (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Gascoigne, Parry, & Buchanan, 2015; Hassard & Morris, 2022; Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020; Lupu et al., 2022; Heaphy & Trefalt, 2024).

In this body of work, the ideal worker norm is generally assumed to take one single form, representing a dominant and uniform set of expectations centered on long hours, constant availability, and total devotion to the firm. Even when scholars explore how professionals navigate or resist such expectations, the underlying ideal remains treated as monolithic – a single, uniform set of expectations admitting no legitimate variation in form. For example, Reid (2015) analyzes how consultants cope with tensions between their expected and experienced professional identities, yet still conceptualizes the expected identity in terms of a single, undifferentiated ideal worker image. Similarly, while Heaphy and Trefalt (2024) identify a parallel 'sustainable worker schema' being enacted, they continue to assume the classic ideal worker image as the dominant and only legitimate norm, describing how consultants perform sustainable practices within a hidden network to avoid stigmatization.

Yet, in recent years, organizational rhetoric has increasingly shifted towards wellbeing and balance. Survey data reflects this by showing that in 2018 only two in five UK employers reported having a standalone wellbeing strategy, often framed as employer branding (CIPD, 2018), whereas by 2025 a majority (57%) had adopted such a strategy and nearly three-quarters placed wellbeing on senior leaders' agendas (CIPD, 2025). Similar trends are visible in flexible working: in 2016 fewer than one in ten regular jobs in the UK were advertised with flexible options, compared to almost one in three by 2023 (Timewise, 2016, 2023), showing how flexible working has moved from a marginal exception, "provided by only the most forward-thinking employers" (Xoxoday Blog, 2025) to a mainstream offering and expectation. Commentators increasingly describe flexibility, mental wellbeing, and autonomy as emerging priorities for professional organizations, with one observing that "gone are the days when mental health was a taboo topic", and noting, "companies have realized that supporting their employees' well-being isn't just good for people – it's good for business" (Business Matters, 2025). This echoes arguments by Kelly and Moen (2020), who show that organizations have come to recognize unsustainable hours as a liability for retention and wellbeing, making it in their interest to experiment with new initiatives.

Taken together, these developments produce two competing narratives about time in the professional context: one valorizing total devotion and long hours, the other emphasizing balance and well-being. The first empirical chapter therefore addresses the following research question: *How do professionals manage temporal demands given co-existing narratives about temporal commitment in high-performance organizations?* (**Sub-RQ 1**)

While earlier accounts of the ideal worker norm remain ambiguous about by whom it is articulated, I conceptualize images of the ideal professional – in line with more recent work (Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010; Heaphy & Trefalt, 2024; Lupu & Rokka, 2022) – as perceived constructions, i.e. coherent sets of expectations and interpretations as they are understood by employees (rather than what may be projected by employers). In the first empirical chapter, I analyze associates' accounts to develop an understanding of how competing ideals are interpreted and enacted by junior and mid-level professionals, before complementing and contrasting them with their partners' perspectives in the second empirical chapter. The ideals examined here are specifically about temporal commitment – how time is valued and managed in professionals' daily work. A *temporal ideal* thus encompasses a coherent set of interpretations and expectations about temporal commitment, including how time relates to performance, how workload should be managed, what protection of private time is legitimate, and how accountability for

temporal efficiency is understood. As developed earlier, organizational and institutional norms create strong structural constraints in the contexts studied here. Time functions as a primary signal of commitment in high-performance professional organizations (Coffey, 1994; Feldman et al., 2020), and it is *within* this time-as-commitment logic and the structural tensions and challenges it produces that professionals must navigate what is expected of them.

Although the ideal worker concept originated in gender scholarship, emphasizing how organizational structures privilege a male model of full-time, unencumbered work supported by a wife (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2001), my study does not focus on gender differences. Instead, I use the ideal worker norm as a lens to examine how temporal demands are managed in contemporary professional organizations.

2.2.2 Persistence of overwork

Why overwork persists has been the focus of a wide range of scholarship. Existing work can be grouped into three strands: those that focus on individual-level explanations, those that foreground organizational-level structures, norms and practices, and those that highlight the role of relationships in sustaining overwork or allowing for deviations.

Individual-level explanations Research at the individual level has paid particular attention to professionals whose autonomy would seem to allow for containing overwork, and revealed what has become known as the 'autonomy-control paradox' – the tendency for professionals to sustain overwork precisely because of their freedom to control when and how they work. Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates (2013) show how mobile email devices are initially viewed by professionals as expanding personal flexibility and autonomy, yet how they use them quickly reproduces collective expectations of constant availability – by choosing to work "anywhere/anytime", professionals ended up working "everywhere/all the time" (p. 1377). Similarly, Michel's (2011) nine-year ethnography of investment bankers demonstrates how professionals internalize organizational control through the body: long hours become habitual and even desired, such that many bankers experience even 120-hour weeks as voluntary. In both cases, professionals' framing and experience of autonomy constitute the very mechanism through which overwork is sustained, as extreme commitment appears self-chosen rather than externally imposed.

Extending autonomy paradox research, Lupu and Empson (2015) show how senior professionals, who notionally enjoy even greater autonomy, persist in overworking because they are captivated by the symbolic stakes of the game. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of 'illusio', they demon-

strate how overwork becomes embodied and normalized as a route to symbolic capital and recognition. Related is the notion of the 'insecure overachiever' (Berglas, 2006; Empson, 2017) widely recognized in practitioner circles, which describes highly capable yet insecure individuals whose drive to prove themselves is reinforced and exploited by firms through mechanisms such as 'up-or-out' promotion and continual peer comparison. All of these accounts illuminate why professionals comply with extreme demands, as overwork becomes internalized and reproduced by the individual. Yet, this perspective places less emphasis on understanding variation across individuals and how this is shaped by the organizational and relational environment.

Organizational-level approaches Another body of work has focused on the persistence of overwork in the context of organizational initiatives intended to promote flexibility. This literature has introduced the concept of 'flexibility stigma' to capture how employees who make use of such arrangements are judged as less committed. Williams, Blair Loy, and Berdahl (2013) show how flexibility use violates the cultural 'work devotion schema', marking professionals as insufficiently dedicated and exposing them to reputational costs. Stone and Hernandez (2013) demonstrate how this stigma plays out in practice: professional–managerial women who reduced their hours saw their status and assignments deteriorate, describing an 'all-or-nothing workplace' where part-time work was incompatible with serious careers. Based on survey data across a large Fortune 500 organization, Leslie, Manchester, Park, and Mehng (2012) add evidence that employees who use flexible work practices indeed frequently incur career penalties in terms of pay and promotion, especially when supervisors attributed use to personal or family rather than work reasons. Together, these studies highlight that persistence of overwork is not explained by lack of formal policies but by how its uptake is penalized through informal norms and stigma throughout the organization.

A further line of research foregrounds the temporal organization of professional work as a source of overwork persisting. Blagoev and Schreyögg (2019) show how firms can become locked into accelerated temporal regimes that continue even when their costs are recognized. Through positive feedback loops between organizational success, client expectations, and internalized temporal norms, these firms develop what the authors term 'temporal lock-in' – an inability to dislodge from a high-intensity rhythm once it has become embedded in structures and routines. Lupu and Liu (2025) similarly highlight the self-reinforcing nature of organizational time, but connect it more directly to professionals' embodied experiences. They show how individual rhythms and emotions become entrained to the fast-paced tempo of the firm, creating cycles of

synchronization, desynchronization, and resynchronization through which overwork is continuously renewed. Together, these studies illustrate how organizational temporal structures reproduce themselves over time, locking professionals into a rhythm of fast pace and long working hours.

Across these studies, overwork is conceptualized at the organizational level – attributed to structures, norms, and temporal regimes that apply firm-wide rather than examining how such dynamics might vary, be reinforced, or contested within specific team contexts. While the role of relational processes is acknowledged, whether in the enactment of stigma or feedback, these interactions are treated primarily as mechanisms that enforce organizational norms and thus leave within-firm variation across individuals unexplained.

Relational turn in boundary and identity work Underlying both the autonomy paradox and flexibility stigma is the broader expectation of the ideal worker, which continues to provide a powerful explanation for overwork. Feldman et al. (2020) review the function of time-use as proxies of dedication, performance, and identity, and highlight how the enduring pervasiveness of time as a signal of commitment sustains long working hours, particularly in professional contexts. In an older review, Gascoigne et al. (2015) map institutional, organizational, occupational, and individual drivers of extreme work and explicitly identify the ideal worker norm as the overarching force. Yet, their review notably omits the relational level as a site where ideals are constructed, reinforced or reinterpreted which suggests that this has received little attention in previous research.

More recently, Lupu et al. (2022) examine how professionals distance themselves from the prescribed ideal worker role centred on long working hours by 'role apprehension' – recognizing the role as provisional – and 'role redefinition' through which they adjust their work practices privately or publicly. While they identify supervisor support as one of the key factors facilitating such redefinition, they do not examine these dynamics directly: relying on one-sided accounts, the study infers support or lack thereof from professionals' perspectives, without interrogating how both sides project and perceive it. Similarly, research on work redesign has demonstrated the importance of the relational environment in enacting sustainable alternatives to the ideal worker norm. Kelly and colleagues' (Kelly et al., 2014; Moen et al., 2016) intervention studies based on the conceptual analysis of Perlow and Kelly (2014) demonstrate that initiatives around schedule control and outcome-based management can improve well-being and reduce turnover, but require team-wide adoption and visible managerial support. Yet here, too, supervisors are

treated as facilitators or gatekeepers of change, where endorsement is static rather than a dynamic, ongoing relational process through which expectations are projected, interpreted, and misinterpreted by both sides.

Other studies on boundary and identity work have begun to foreground the relational level in understanding how professionals navigate expectations (Trefalt, 2013; Reid, 2015; see also Conzon & Huising, 2024). Trefalt (2013) shows that work–nonwork boundaries are not solely matters of individual preference but are set and sustained in workplace relationships, often constrained by power asymmetries between supervisors, peers, and clients. Reid (2015) demonstrates how consultants respond to the ideal worker image through identity work strategies of 'embracing', 'passing', or 'revealing', depending on how their choices are received by colleagues and managers. Along with the study of Heaphy and Trefalt (2024) discussed before, this work makes clear that relationships are central to how professionals navigate the ideal worker norm, and thereby in understanding professionals' relationship with overwork. Yet this literature continues to assume a singular and dominant ideal worker image, and focuses on how relationships help individuals cope with its demands rather than how ideals themselves are constructed, reinforced and fragmented at the relational level.

Overall, prior research has illuminated individual and organizational explanations and recognized the importance of the relational level for the persistence of overwork, particularly centred around the ideal worker image. Yet the dynamics of how expectations and ideals themselves are constructed, reinforced, and interpreted or misinterpreted in the immediate relational environments within these structures remain unexamined. In particular, the relational dynamics between junior and senior professionals working together warrant further examination, as existing research highlights the facilitating role of the hierarchical environment yet relies predominantly on one-sided accounts, or treats it as static rather than a dynamic immediate relational context. The second empirical chapter therefore addresses the following research question: *How do professionals construct temporal ideals in their immediate relational environment, and what are the implications for the persistence of overwork?* (**Sub-RQ 2**)

2.3 Managing temporal uncertainty in professional work

The literature reviewed thus far has addressed how professionals manage temporal demands *within* professional organizations: how expectations around time emerge and compete, why

overwork persists, and how relationships shape these dynamics. Yet the meaning of time also has external dimensions: As professional work involves delivering services to clients, professionals must not only assess the value of their own time but also account for, justify, and price work in client relationships. Organizations rely on time to construct this value, yet when work is novel and bespoke, the temporal development of work itself can be uncertain. This introduces a fundamental tension as professionals construct and manage the meaning of time under conditions of temporal uncertainty. The following section will develop and address this challenge.

Definitions of uncertainty Across disciplines and time periods, uncertainty has been defined and approached in various ways. One of the earlier well-known characterizations comes from Knight (1921) who differentiated 'risk' – the unknown that can be quantified and expressed in probabilities – from 'uncertainty', which is unmeasurable and cannot be reduced to calculation. In the 70s, management and organization theorists such as Duncan (1972) and Galbraith (1973) conceptualized uncertainty as incomplete information about environmental and organizational variables and their impact on the organization. Later, March (1994) and Weick (1995) treated uncertainty more generally as a lack of information that can, in principle, be overcome by collecting more factual data, and contrasted this with ambiguity being a lack of clarity or plurality in meaning that requires more context or intersubjective understanding in order to be resolved. Broadly, these approaches share the assumption that uncertainty represents some form of epistemic limitation – a constraint on knowledge that can theoretically be reduced by gathering more information. While some explicitly mention the passage of time as a factor through which information unfolds (e.g. March, 1994), most do not limit uncertainty to the future but understand it as spanning multiple time frames, i.e. encompassing unknowns that may lie in the future, in the present, or potentially persisting from the past.

Professional work as inherently uncertain Professional work is widely recognized as inherently indeterminate. As elaborated above, Abbott (1988) describes professional activity as the application of expert judgment to human problems that are ill-defined and evolving, arguing that professionals must continually diagnose, infer, and act under conditions of incomplete information. Building on this view, Alvesson (2001) characterizes knowledge work as "ambiguity-intensive" (p. 882) by illustrating how ambiguity is a defining feature of what counts as knowledge, what knowledge workers do, and how the outcomes of knowledge work are evaluated. More recently, Alvehus (2022) reaffirms how ambiguity is inherent and constitutive to how professional service work is organized and managed, as both problems and outcomes remain open to interpretation

and negotiation. Such lack of clarity inevitably introduces uncertainty into the unfolding and eventual outcomes of professional work. Dealing with such indeterminate conditions through judgment and expertise is precisely what distinguishes professional from routine or standardized work.

Billing time as a response to uncertainty As described earlier, time plays a central role in organizing professional work: it structures daily practice, underpins systems of evaluation, and provides the basis on which value is assigned (Coffey, 1994; Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Yakura, 2001; Alvehus & Spicer, 2012). This centrality reflects the inherently uncertain and ambiguous character of professional work, where neither outputs nor behaviours lend themselves to reliable measurement (Ouchi, 1979). In response, firms have turned to *time* as a practical, quantifiable measure of effort and value (Smith, 1940; Woolley, 2005; Pardau, 2013). Temporal units provide a shared proxy through which indeterminate professional work can be represented, compared and valued. Internally, time-based metrics serve as a management tool to coordinate, evaluate and administratively manage resources. Externally, hourly billing makes services financially chargeable and economically exchangeable. In this way, measuring value through time has long enabled firms to make professional work commensurable and governable.

Notably, this system of time measurement initially emerged to account for effort as it unfolds, and then provide a basis for compensation retrospectively. Recording time allows to document, rationalize, and justify work that has already been performed. Historically, hourly billing spread both for its ease of use and because clients appreciated the detailed time records for purposes of transparency and accountability (Leblebici, 2007; Cobb, 1988; Kritzer, 1994; Pardau, 2013). At the same time, changes to procedural law in the U.S. made legal effort more unpredictable (Shepherd & Cloud, 1999; Kuckes, 2002; Pardau, 2013). Thus, 'counting' and billing time as work occurs offered a practical way of managing uncertainty from the firm's perspective, as it ensured compensation despite indeterminacy in how long tasks would take or how they would unfold. The system was thus designed to cope with uncertainty by charging for time reactively, not predicting it.

Limitations in temporal uncertainty Across the professional services sector, clients are increasingly demanding ex-ante estimates and budget certainty for projects and services (Bloomberg Law, 2021; BigHand, 2021; Apperio, 2022). This trend mirrors a broader shift in organizational governance, where budgeting, accounting, and reporting practices have become increasingly predictive and forward-looking, seeking to anticipate future outcomes rather than documenting

past performance (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000; Beckert, 2016). More recently, the growing use of data-driven analytics and predictive modelling has reinforced this move, promising ever-greater forecasting precision, reliability and control (Kitchin, 2014; Beckert, 2016). As professional organizations have become larger, more global and 'corporatized', these developments have gained increasing relevance for professional work (Angel, 2007; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2009; Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011).

This approach rests on the assumption that uncertainty can be reduced through accurate prediction based on additional information. However, while more information may help to reduce some forms of uncertainty, it cannot resolve uncertainty that concerns the unfolding of events that are not yet knowable. This is understood here as *temporal uncertainty*, the irreducible uncertainty about the temporal development of events – in other words, what happens when and how long it takes. This form of uncertainty cannot be eliminated by any amount of data but only through the unfolding of time itself. In such cases, attempts at prediction are no effective way of managing uncertainty but merely create an appearance of control. This distinction marks a critical boundary for predictive approaches to uncertainty management.

Uncertainty management in professional work Where uncertainty management has been studied in professional work, attention has focused primarily on epistemic and evaluative dimensions – how professionals learn to exercise judgment under incomplete information and tolerate not-knowing. In the medical field in particular, a significant stream of research developed based on Renée Fox's early studies on uncertainties experienced by medical students and physicians (Fox, 1957, 1959), with tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity subsequently studied as an important state and trait for medical professionals (cf. Strout et al., 2018). While the original work was ethnographic, most subsequent research has relied on quantitative methods, and interpretive accounts of how professionals actually navigate uncertainty, or develop such tolerance or resilience in practice remain limited (cf. Stephens, Rees, & Lazarus, 2021).

Temporal uncertainty has received considerably less attention in this context and tradition. Project management research has addressed scheduling uncertainty and prediction more directly (Turner & Cochrane, 1993; Pich, Loch, & Meyer, 2002), but primarily through operational and practical lenses focussing on planning and managing timelines and budgets rather than on the meaning-making processes through which professionals navigate unpredictability. How professionals and organizations manage temporal uncertainty thus remains under-explored in interpretive research

– a gap that emerging literature on uncertainty in innovation and creative contexts begins to address, making this the closest relevant conversation.

Inspiration from innovation research: reframing uncertainty In other domains of knowledge work, particularly innovation and creative processes, scholars highlight a different way of managing uncertainty. Here, temporal uncertainty is often recognized as generative – a source of novelty and creativity to be embraced rather than reduced (Austin, Devin, & Sullivan, 2012; Lifshitz-Assaf, Lebovitz, & Zalmanson, 2021; Fayard, 2024; Otto, Schuessler, Sydow, & Vogelgsang, 2024). Austin et al. (2012) describe this as 'valuable unpredictability', showing how innovators deliberately design processes that remain open to accidents and serendipity, while Lifshitz-Assaf et al. (2021) show how temporal ambiguity – letting temporal structures emerge rather than imposing them – supports accelerated innovation. Similarly, Fayard (2024) and Otto et al. (2024) show how organizations balance structured and emergent forms of time, 'interweaving clock time and event time,' or 'reframing chronos to seize kairos', to enable adaptive collaboration and creativity.

More broadly, these studies highlight the importance of acknowledging uncertainty and adapting to it, remaining open to temporal indeterminacy and allowing for unexpected developments as work unfolds. They foreground how actors and organizations recognize the limits of prediction and manage temporal uncertainty without attempting to 'predict the unpredictable'. This perspective offers an alternative conceptualization of how uncertainty is understood and managed in research on knowledge work, which may serve as a useful lens for reconsidering established assumptions in professional settings.

Research Question While innovation research illustrates how uncertainty can be accommodated through acknowledgement and adaptation, professional work remains largely organized around systems that seek to measure, account for, and increasingly predict time. Yet these systems reach their limits when faced with irreducible temporal uncertainty. While parts of professional work may be sufficiently routine and standardized to plan and predict the temporal development of tasks and projects, temporal uncertainty persists particularly in those areas that are novel, complex, and bespoke. Surprisingly little research has examined how professionals and organizations manage such unpredictability. It thus remains unclear how professionals manage and adapt to uncertainty when the course and duration of future work cannot be known in advance. Focussing on such contexts, the third empirical chapter therefore investigates: *How do professionals manage temporal uncertainty in their work?* (**Sub-RQ 3**)

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological choices underpinning this thesis. It begins by establishing the interpretive research approach and its epistemological foundations, before discussing the selection of setting, sites, and interviewees. It then addresses questions of positionality and access, describes the data collection process, and explains the analytical approach taken across the empirical chapters. The chapter closes with a discussion of ethical considerations.

3.1 Research design

3.1.1 Research approach

This research is grounded in the understanding that social reality is constructed through ongoing social interactions and meaning-making practices (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Applied to this study, time and temporal structures are socially constructed through professionals' practices and interpretations. As such, while billable hours appear as an attempt to objectify time through clock-based measurement, their experience and enactment remain fundamentally subjective and situated. Following Orlikowski and Yates's (2002) concept of temporal structuring, I understand billable hours as structures that both shape and are shaped by professionals' temporal practices and meanings. They are not simply objective measurements but are constructed, reproduced and reconstructed through the ways people interpret and enact them.

Interpretive research acknowledges that the researcher is not a neutral observer but brings theoretical assumptions, prior experiences, and interpretive frameworks to the research process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). As discussed in more detail below, my background in professional

services influenced both what I noticed and how interviewees engaged with me. Theoretical preconceptions shaped research questions, sampling decisions, and interpretation. Rather than viewing this as a limitation to be minimized, reflexive research recognizes that all empirical material is constructed through the researcher's interests, choices, and interpretive work (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). The goal is not to eliminate subjectivity but to maintain awareness and transparency of how it shapes the research process.

To investigate how professionals experience, interpret, and navigate temporal structures and demands, qualitative interviews provide the most appropriate method. Interviews offer access to how professionals articulate their experiences, interpretations, and enactments of temporal structures (Weiss, 1994). However, interviews are not a medium that simply mirrors an external world or for extracting pre-existing meanings. Rather, they are sites where meanings are actively constructed and performed, wherein both interviewer and interviewee participate in co-construction (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). As such, the interview itself is an instance of meaning-making and social performance (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011), shaped by the specific situational context, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and interviewees' efforts at self-presentation and identity work. Interview accounts are therefore always situated, constructed, and performative. What professionals say in interviews reveals not simply what they 'think' about time, but how they construct and perform their temporal experiences in the specific context of the research conversation.

I chose a focused multi-site interview design over a dispersed interview study with individuals across many firms or an ethnographic approach. The system of billable hours is so deeply embedded and intricately linked with various parts of the organization that it requires a holistic understanding of the context. At the same time, comparing how temporal structures are experienced and enacted across different market positions, work types, and team configurations enables a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. In a non-site-specific interview study, differences in organizational policies, structure and culture could not easily be grasped for a wide range of organizations. An ethnographic study would have enabled greater depth but – apart from the particular challeges of gaining access[3] – would have concentrated data collection to a limited number of firms and teams. Anchoring the interview study in three organizations therefore offers the appropriate balance of depth and breadth for this research. It allows developing

[3]Gaining ethnographic access to client-facing legal work in law firms is practically challenging due to client confidentiality requirements, with ethnographic studies remaining rare (Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012) or taking place outside the fee-earning departments and confidentiality constraints preventing full publication (E. Lee, 2021).

contextual understanding alongside individual interviews while enabling comparison across different firm types and team structures.

Finally, while this research is not designed as a case study of law firms *per se*, one empirical chapter (Chapter 7) does employ a single case study design. Case studies are particularly well-suited for understanding and interpreting a phenomenon with its complexities and experiences from multiple perspectives in its context (Creswell, 2007; Simons, 2009). Extreme, deviant, or revelatory cases can offer theoretical insight as single case studies by clarifying boundary conditions and revealing mechanisms that may be obscured in typical cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2003). As I will explain below, Firm 1's distinctive approach to time, operating without billable hours internally while handling highly uncertain work, warranted this focused case analysis alongside its contribution to the broader cross-firm findings.

This research makes interpretive rather than causal or predictive claims, treating empirical material as a critical dialogue partner for theoretical development (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). The goal is not to verify predetermined hypotheses but to develop plausible, theoretically-informed interpretations that illuminate how professionals construct temporal meanings within specific organizational contexts (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). The findings are not statistically generalizable but provide theoretical insights that may be transferable to similar high-performance contexts where temporal structures shape professionals' daily work (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Instead, the quality in interpretive research rests on depth of engagement with empirical material, reflexive awareness of interpretive choices, coherence of theoretical framing, and capacity to generate novel insights (Weick, 1995; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

3.1.2 Selection of setting

Law firms in the City of London provide a particularly rich empirical context for investigating how professionals construct meanings about time and navigate temporal demands. The time-based system is highly institutionalized in law firms and continues to be the dominant model for pricing, remuneration, and control across the sector (Leblebici, 2007; Pardau, 2013). The use of billable hours imposes a rigid relationship between time and a certain value, making time the key medium through which performance is both experienced and evaluated. This promises

a particularly revealing setting for studying how the meaning of time is constructed, contested, and how resulting tensions are navigated in professional work.[4]

The selection of City law firms specifically reflects the temporal intensity characteristic of high-performance professional environments. London's legal market represents a highly competitive market for law firms in Europe, with particularly pronounced demands around performance, client service, and career progression. In such settings, 'high-performance' refers not only to expectations of technical excellence but regularly manifests in long hours, constant availability, and continuous measurement of time and output. These conditions thereby amplify the demands and tensions around time, providing empirical richness for studying temporality.

Law firms further offer analytical advantages through their clear hierarchical structures. Most firms follow a pyramid structure, with juniors ('trainees') in the U.K. completing a two-year training programme rotating through several teams before qualifying as a lawyer and progressing through varying seniority levels as 'associates' before potentially reaching 'partner' status. Legal professionals often have internal titles or qualifiers for each seniority level that refer precisely to the number of years of post-qualification experience. Traditionally, partnership has been the only available trajectory beyond a certain tenure, i.e. if the candidate is not deemed suitable for promotion, departure would be the only alternative – so-called 'up-or-out' promotion system (Galanter & Henderson, 2008). Partners function simultaneously as owners and managers of the firm (Greenwood & Empson, 2003), with remuneration based on criteria linked to financial performance and seniority. Associates, by contrast, work towards partnership while being evaluated on billable hours and other performance metrics. This clear structural distinction between partners (as evaluators) and associates (as evaluated) provides analytical clarity for examining how temporal expectations and demands are experienced, interpreted, and enacted within hierarchical relationships. As partners hold both managerial authority and evaluative power over associates' career trajectories, these hierarchical relationships are also characterized by marked power asymmetries, making relational dynamics particularly consequential, and therefore especially visible.

[4] Further context about the use of chargeable and billable hours in legal practice is provided in Chapter 4 (Section 4.1 on p. 53).

3.1.3 Selection of sites

Site selection followed purposive sampling criteria designed to provide variation across upper-market law firms while ensuring firms to be comparable in their organizational structure and institutional environment. I ultimately selected large, traditional corporate law firms in the City of London that offer a wide range of work types. These criteria will be developed below.

Sampling criteria Legal work can be categorized along different dimensions, e.g. knowledge domains (expertise of certain areas of law or industries), client types (corporate vs. private), or service types (advisory, contentious, transactional). In practice, law firms structure their people into teams called 'practice groups' which blend different dimensions but have proven to work effectively. While the details of practice group structures vary across firms, groups for 'Corporate/M&A' (or transactions) and the ones handling 'Disputes' (litigation, arbitration, and investigations) are typically among the largest and most important ones in corporate full-service law firms. Other typical groups include 'Financing/Financial Regulation', 'Real Estate', 'Tax', or 'Employment' (Chambers and Partners Ltd, n.d.). Within that, work varies in degree of standardization, from highly bespoke complex matters to more commoditized services (Susskind, 2017), with the most elite firms typically handling the most bespoke, high-complexity work.

These differences in work types entail differences across a range of characteristics such as predictability and control over projects, level of experience and expertise required, value to the client, etc. Understanding how temporal meanings are constructed across a range of such patterns enables a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the relevant dynamics. Therefore, sampling required firms to cover a wide range of practice groups, particularly both transactional and contentious practice, as these represent opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of work characteristics.

The requirement to cover a wide range of work types also has implications for the required firm size. Notably, only relatively large firms can also offer services ranging from bespoke to commoditized. Smaller firms typically lack the resources to cover this full spectrum. Therefore, only large firms that cover the major practice areas and offer the client a wide range of service levels met the criteria for this study. The Top 50 UK law firms by headcount (Chambers and Partners Ltd, 2022) served as an initial orientation in this regard, with specific features such as specialization or number of offices reviewed to confirm the criteria.

Beyond size and service range, sampling focused on corporate law firms operating at the upper end of the market rather than high-street practices serving private clients or mid-market firms. Following Starbuck (1993), studying firms at positions of market leadership is more insightful than examining average cases, as contexts of exceptional performance reveal dynamics more clearly. To enable comparison across different organizational contexts and market positions, three firms were sampled to represent different tiers within the upper market in terms of salary levels and market status.

Finally, firms needed to represent traditional law firm structures characterized by clear hierarchies and seniority levels, beginning with recruiting juniors for a training programme, and firm ownership and management being held by the partnership. Organizations that had only recently entered the market or were entirely based on a different or innovative service model (so-called Alternative Legal Service Providers, ALSP) were excluded to ensure all firms are similarly institutionalized and subject to the industry standard of charging for work based on time. Based on these criteria, I expected selected firms to operate with the system of billable hours internally as well.

Site sampling evolution As typical of qualitative research, the research design finalized and evolved during fieldwork (Silverman, 2022; Cloutier, 2024). As such, early interviews at the first firm (Firm 1) revealed that the organization was neither formally nor informally operating with a time-based performance system despite its position as a highly institutionalized top-tier practice. I had continued access negotiations despite key contact persons mentioning that they did not measure bonus payments according to targets, because I assumed that the number of chargeable hours would still be experienced as an informal criterion in performance evaluation. It was not until I interviewed associates that I concluded, for the most part, this was not the case either. This discovery prompted re-consideration of the further approach: changing the research design and goal to compare this firm with a comparable Tier 1 firm that operated *with* billable hours, or adapting the research focus. After attempts to secure access to an alternative Tier 1 firm proved unsuccessful (cf. Section 3.2.2 below), I chose to adapt the research focus and organization of the thesis in two ways.

First, I broadened the research focus from billable hours specifically to time as a measure of commitment more generally, encompassing both billable hour targets and other forms of temporal expectations such as working hours norms. Second, I recognized Firm 1 as a case of particular theoretical interest, warranting analysis as a single case study examining how professionals con-

struct temporal meaning in the absence of billable hours which represents a separate empirical chapter (Chapter 7). With this adapted frame, I resumed the original sampling plan for Firms 2 and 3, selecting large, traditional, diversified firms at different market positions.

Final sample The final sample comprises three firms representing Tiers 1, 2, and 3 within the City corporate law firm market, all being large organizations with traditional hierarchical structures, institutionalized partnerships, and intense performance expectations and temporal demands. While the third firm offers a more industry-focused service profile, it is comparable to the others in size and structure but its salary levels and market status place it in the third tier. This variation enabled examination of how temporal meanings are constructed across different organizations and positions in the market hierarchy while maintaining focus on upper-market contexts. Further descriptions of the three sites and their temporal expectations and demands are provided in Chapter 4 (Section 4.2 on p. 55).

3.1.4 Selection of interviewees

Selection of interviewees followed a purposive sampling strategy designed to provide maximum variation across two key dimensions, teams and hierarchy levels, while also adding certain role-based criteria that I anticipated would yield richer, more multi-faceted perspectives.

As explained earlier, the firms' teams called practice groups provide a useful proxy – both theoretically and practically – to cover different characteristics of legal work, which is important for understanding how the focal phenomena unfold under different conditions. Different hierarchy levels not only perform different types of work but also hold different perspectives on temporal structures. Partners function as evaluators and hold responsibility for team management and client relationships, while associates are evaluated on their performance as they work towards partnership, and trainees complete their two-year qualification period. The sampling strategy therefore deliberately included partners, associates at varying seniority levels (senior, mid-level, and junior), and trainees to examine how temporal meanings and expectations are constructed, interpreted, and experienced across these different hierarchical positions. Beyond these core groups of interviewees, I also selected professionals in other distinct roles to enrich contextual understanding.

The final sample is summarized in Table 3.1. It comprises 80 professionals across three firms, with four having been interviewed multiple times. The criteria and achieved sample for each role are detailed below.

	Firm 1	Firm 2	Firm 3	Total
Main interviewing period	Aug 2023 - Feb 2024	Aug 2024 - Oct 2024	Oct 2024 - Nov 2024	Aug 2023 - Nov 2024
Total interviewees	**37**	**21**	**22**	**80**
Partners	20	9	11	40
Associates & trainees	14	10	8	32
Other*	3	2	3	8
Partner-associate pairs working together†	**14**	**7**	**9**	**30**
Teams represented	**10**	**9**	**9**	**28**

**Other interviewees include management professionals (e.g. commercial/pricing department, work allocation managers) and mezzanine-level professionals such as Counsel, Senior Counsel, Of Counsel.*

†Includes partner-trainee and partner-counsel relationships where appropriate.

Table 3.1: Sample overview

Selection of partners Practice group variation was the primary criterion for partner selection. In each firm, I sampled partners from every team. In some cases, multiple partners were interviewed from particularly large teams. Across the three firms, this yielded a total of 40 partners that covered 28 teams.

I sought partners who were actively and regularly involved in pricing tasks and projects in their everyday work. I additionally prioritized partners who held or had held management positions within the firm (e.g., managing partner, practice group head), as they are involved in decision-making around evaluative criteria and presumably hold particularly salient roles as evaluators based on their seniority. At the same time, the emphasis on senior partners involved in management meant that I purposefully selected several particularly junior partners to ensure variation across seniority levels within the partnership. In the final sample, 43% of partners were holding or had at some point held such management positions. Tenure among partners ranged from 4 to 37 years at the firm (average 21 years), and years as partner ranged from 1 to 28 (average 14 years).[5] I sought gender diversity among partners, though this was constrained by the male dominance at senior levels, yielding 73% male in the final partner sample.

Selection of associates & trainees Associates and trainees were primarily sampled to be from the same teams and regularly working together with the respective partner interviewees. This was done to enable paired analysis of how temporal structures, expectations and demands within the same team context and working relationship are experienced from different perspectives. The

[5] 11 partners had worked at another firm as partner or associate previously.

final sample contains 32 associates and trainees, of which 30 qualified as working together close enough with an interviewed partner to form a pair.

I paid specific attention to achieving wide variation across all seniority levels, from newly qualified to senior associates standing just before partner promotion. As explained earlier, seniority levels of associates and trainees are finely grained and cover a wide range up to partnership, with responsibilities, experience and temporal expectations evolving across these levels. I specifically sought associates who had had previous work experience at other firms and prioritized them in the selection in order to benefit from their contextualized and comparative perspectives. Trainees (n = 6) were by definition junior recruits within their first two years at the firm. Among associates (n = 26), tenure ranged from 1 to 11 years (average 5 years), with 50% having previously worked in a different team or locations or at a different firm at some point in their career (not counting team rotation as a trainee). Finally, I aimed for gender balance insofar as possible. Notably, among associates, this was slightly constrained by the female dominance particularly in one firm, yielding a final split of 55% female and 45% male among associates and trainees.

Selection of other interviewees At each firm, I selected two management professionals to interview first. These interviews provided context on organizational structure (including levels and practice groups), systems for performance evaluation and promotion processes (including target and bonus policies), as well as basics of top management and organizational decision-making. Conducting these interviews avoided using valuable interview time with partners and associates for covering these organizational fundamentals. This group ultimately comprised four Commercial Directors/Chief Commercial Officers, one Head of Pricing, and one Work Allocation Manager.

In a small number of cases, I also interviewed professionals with distinct roles, such as counsel-level lawyers, or partners managing branches of the organization that were offering services through alternative models to enrich understanding of these particular roles or the respective team contexts.

Interviewee identification Throughout this thesis, interviewees are identified using a coding system that ensures non-identifiability while indicating their organizational context and working relationships. The identifier format is [Firm number]-[Relationship code]/[Level], where level is indicated as P (partner), A (associate), T (trainee), C (counsel), or M (management professional). The relationship code (one to three letters) indicates working relationships within the sample. Single letters denote unpaired interviewees, two-letter codes indicate professionals working to-

gether (typically partner-associate pairs), and three-letter codes indicate three professionals in the same working relationship (for example, a partner, associate, and trainee or counsel). So '1-AB/P' and '1-AB/A', for instance, represent a partner and associate working together at Firm 1, while '1-C/P' indicates a partner at Firm 1 who was not paired with other interviewees. When multiple pairs were interviewed within the same larger team, each working relationship is assigned a distinct code and the team context will be noted where relevant.

3.2 Access and positionality

Particularly in qualitative research, the researcher's prior experiences, theoretical assumptions, and interpretive frameworks inevitably and fundamentally shape the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This positioning influences both access to research sites and the co-construction of empirical material. Rather than a limitation to overcome, awareness of and critical engagement with this positioning are central elements of reflexive methodology (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). This section addresses my positionality as a researcher and its implications for the research, followed by an account of how access to elite research sites and interviewees was negotiated in light of this.

3.2.1 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

Reflexivity – awareness of how the researcher's position, assumptions, and interpretive choices shape the research process – is central to quality in interpretive research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). This involves recognizing, clarifying, and interrogating my positionality as a researcher and how this shaped my research focus, design, process and outcomes. Adapting the framework by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), I structure this reflection along three key stages: first, how my positioning shaped the research topic and design decisions; second, how it influenced interactions with interviewees during data collection; and third, how it required active management during analysis and interpretation, while discussing in particular the issue of closeness and distance in the field (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006; Davis, 1973).

Positionality in relation to research focus and design Before undertaking this PhD, I qualified and practised as a lawyer in Switzerland. My education and practice having taken place primarily in business-focused contexts, I developed an interest in issues of management and efficiency when starting to work in large law firms. Throughout my training and practice, I engaged with

topics around law firm management, the potential of legal technology, business models and innovation in the legal sector through seminars, conferences, and practitioner literature, and ultimately decided to pursue a PhD.

This prior knowledge and limited practical experience ultimately guided my choice of research topic and focus of research questions around billable hours. The prior engagement had highlighted its complexity and was helpful in finding a theoretical angle that could be insightful before collecting data. However, it also meant that I initially approached the topic through a practitioner lens shaped by efficiency concerns and normative evaluations of 'good' or 'bad' practice. A significant part of the early stages of the PhD involved shifting from practitioner questions (why doesn't the billable hour system change?) to research questions oriented towards understanding practices and meaning-making processes (how do professionals construct meanings about time?). This required moving from evaluative critique to interpretive inquiry – learning to treat familiar professional practices not as problems to solve but as phenomena to understand.

This shift was not merely intellectual but entailed having my way of thinking delegitimized as an identity deficit. This sensebreaking process of being stripped of my practitioner identity (Empson, 2013) was painful but necessary for my transition to becoming a researcher. Yet a particular challenge during this period was discerning which aspects of my practitioner identity remained useful and which were problematic for my research. Through intensive engagement with methodological literature – reading extensively on research traditions, research design, and qualitative methods – I learned to bracket solution-oriented thinking while drawing strategically on my knowledge of law firm structures and operations. For instance, recognizing the significance of distinctions between practice groups, hierarchy levels, and work types shaped the sampling strategy in a useful way from the outset, and my familiarity with the basic architecture of legal cases and projects enabled me to understand which domains of daily work are affected by billable hours and deserve examination.

Positionality in relation to research participants and data collection In relation to the interviewees, I was simultaneously an insider in some ways and an outsider in others (Herod, 1999; Mercer, 2007). Mainly, I had been socialized in the values, norms and patterns of behavior of the legal profession, and was familiar with the type of work and the typical internal organization and environment of law firms, though only from a junior perspective. Yet I was foreign to the cultural and professional context of the UK and the London market, and therefore unfamiliar with and an outsider to the specific firms and people I studied.

While there are both benefits and disadvantages to either position (Adler & Adler, 1987; Hammersley, 1993; Lofland et al., 2006), my positioning proved particularly beneficial for data collection with elite interviewees. As Mikecz (2012) notes, the researcher's knowledgeability and positionality are especially important to gain trust, establish rapport and elicit useful and trustworthy information from such interviewees. My specific topic knowledge and familiarity with the interviewees' culture and norms of behaviour thus enhanced my credibility and reduced the status imbalance between researcher and researched (Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen, 2002; Mikecz, 2012). In this regard, my formal status as a qualified lawyer was an additional advantage, given lawyers tend to make a dualistic differentiation between 'lawyers' and 'non-lawyers' (cf. Empson, Cleaver, & Allen, 2013).

In the preparation of data collection, my insider knowledge allowed me to design the interview guides using customary language, and address meaningful and relevant questions. During interviews, I could recognize and respond appropriately to 'lawyer talk' – the underlying assumptions, identity claims, and references to professional trends or opinions that structured interviewees' accounts. Understanding and engaging with these statements from a position of shared professional experience contributed to building rapport and making the interviewees feel at ease. As Empson (2018) notes, this is crucial to make the interview flow more like "an intellectual discussion" (Rice, 2010, p. 74), which allows the interview to "go deeper" (Empson, 2018, p. 59ff.). Senior professionals are looking for a conversation that is intellectually engaging and probe whether the interviewer is positioned for such an exchange; otherwise, the responses remain at surface-level, descriptive without further reflection shared.

This became particularly evident in one interview with a senior partner. I experienced the interviewee as unusually patronizing, often explaining the functioning of fundamental dynamics. The responses remained pedagogical and surface-level, lacking the reflective engagement characteristic of other interviews. When I reviewed the transcript, I noticed that I had omitted to introduce myself as a previous lawyer at the beginning of that interview in the way that I did in all the others. Meanwhile, among these others, several interviewees made comments like *"you'll get this, you've been a lawyer"* or *"you know this, you've worked in law firms..."* This contrast underlines the significant role of my positionality for the dynamics and depth of the interviews.

However, this positioning also presented challenges. Being perceived as a fellow lawyer made it more difficult to ask 'basic' questions, and some 'obvious' information would not always be articulated or explained (Hammersley, 1993; Holmes, 2020). To manage this, I emphasized the

limits of my experience and my unfamiliarity with the UK context during interviews. Particularly during the first round of interviews, I paid special attention during transcription to how I positioned myself and my experience during interviews. I reflected on my conduct after each interview and maintained a research diary which I reviewed before subsequent interviews. The interview dynamic and required positioning varied with every interviewee, requiring ongoing calibration (Empson, 2018) to the respective atmosphere and individual.

Positionality in relation to analysis and interpretation For the analysis and interpretation of the data, maintaining critical distance (Mikecz, 2012; Empson, 2018) was essential to avoid being guided by the interests or the persuasive arguments of the interviewees (cf. Welch et al., 2002), and identifying what was theoretically rather than practically interesting. The same 'lawyer talk' that facilitated rapport during interviews – statements about professional identity, assumptions about work, discussions about industry trends – needed to be examined with critical distance, as empirical material that revealed particular constructions of meaning and not accepted truths. This required foregrounding my identity as an academic researcher rather than a legal practitioner. To facilitate that, my supervisors placed particular emphasis on my socialization as an academic, and corresponding distance to the context. I made a deliberate effort of defamiliarizing myself from the field, taking a detached, 'estranged' viewpoint on my data to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). I strengthened my socialization by actively engaging with academic communities through conferences and seminars, spending time in faculty environments both at my home institution and during a research visit elsewhere, and participating in PhD workshops and summer schools. These activities provided opportunities to articulate and defend my research to academic audiences, reinforcing the shift from practitioner to researcher perspective. As a practical measure, I also found it helpful to maintain separate physical and temporal spaces for my 'lawyer' and my 'academic' selves to remain mindful of 'switching' between these identities (Empson, 2013).

This reflexive awareness remained crucial throughout the entire research process. The same positioning that brought me to the topic and facilitated rapport with the research participants required substantial identity work and active management from design through analysis to establish the interpretive sensitivity and analytical distance necessary for academic research. The following section will elaborate on negotiating access in particular.

3.2.2 Access negotiations

Positionality was especially crucial in enabling access for this research. For both framing my research project to firms as well as gaining credibility with key contact persons, my insider position was indispensable.

Gaining access to elite settings is particularly difficult (Welch et al., 2002; Mikecz, 2012; Empson, 2018). Besides well-thought out strategies, it also requires luck, connections and "a willingness to take advantage of opportunities as they arise" (Ostrander, 1993, p. 9). Following Empson (2018), my key steps included developing a "'sales' strategy", identifying who the influential people are and who has access to them, and facilitating opportunities by "placing yourself in the right place at the right time" (p. 61).

As I had no pre-existing connections to London law firms, I pursued strategic outreach to build a network within the legal market. I attended industry events, engaged with legal sector communities, and sought introductions through my personal and professional networks. One connection with a specialist law firm pricing consultant emerged from this who was particularly helpful and supportive in facilitating introductions and providing strategic advice as well as context about firms. Crucially, this created an opportunity to pitch my research project at a pricing forum for law firms, after which several firms signalled their interest in participating with the prospects of gaining insights to improving their pricing strategies. These connections formed the basis for identifying key decision-makers at firms and assessing sample criteria fit, which informed the selection of firms approached for formal access negotiations later.

To support access negotiations, I prepared a pitch document outlining research aims, participation requirements, and confidentiality protections (Jarzabkowski, 2022), and gathered feedback on this from personal and professional contacts. This document was subsequently tailored for the specific firm context and developed based on inputs received during initial conversations with first contact persons at firms. Throughout, having an affiliation with a well-regarded business school and an established supervisor proved helpful in establishing credibility with senior professionals (cf. Thomas, 1993)

Initial access (Firm 1) When one top-tier firm (Firm 1) registered their interest, I concentrated my efforts on this opportunity, assuming that securing access to a top-tier firm early in the research process would subsequently facilitate access to other firms.

After one meeting to discuss the collaboration took place, and support from the Managing Partner was secured, access was approved in July 2023, with data collection beginning in August. The firm had initially committed to a pilot of *"5-6 partner interviews"*, but this expanded significantly as internal key contacts became more supportive and interested in the research. The extent of access required continuous negotiation and recruitment (Burgess, 1984; Laurila, 1997), as interviewees needed to be persuaded individually given their considerable autonomy. With my support, this internal recruitment was conducted by the internal gatekeepers, which ultimately yielded 20 partner interviews, followed by 17 associate and other interviews. At this point, further associate interviews were yielding similar responses and not generating new codes or themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While partner interviews had revealed Firm 1's distinctive absence of billable hours, associate interviews were confirming patterns within this context without revealing new dimensions. I therefore prioritized negotiating access to comparative data in firms with billable hour systems over conducting more interviews at Firm 1 despite ongoing access. The gradual expansion of data collection at Firm 1 reflected both growing trust and the firm's interest in research findings, but also demonstrated the unpredictable nature of access.

Attempts to access an additional top-tier firm As mentioned earlier, after collection and emergent analysis of data at Firm 1, I initially pivoted to attempting access to another firm at the same top-tier level for comparison. However, one avenue closed when a very senior contact I had intended to approach left their firm. Efforts to secure access to a top-tier US-headquartered firm involved multiple meetings over several months, but the distance of top management and organizational decision-making structures ultimately proved insurmountable. Firm 1 had initially offered to support me in gaining access to a peer firm, but then recognized that this was too challenging without exposing their own participation. These challenges eventually prompted me to resume the sampling strategy for variation across tiers, while broadening my research focus from billable hours to time as a measure of commitment more generally. Ultimately, this adaptation also made the research more relevant to a broader context.

Access to Firms 2 and 3 Firms were generally open and interested in the research topic. One firm (alongside Firm 1) continued to approach me proactively about participation but was excluded as it did not meet the sampling criteria. Thus, to secure two additional firms, I approached five UK-headquartered firms that met the sampling criteria. I focused on approaching senior contacts – at minimum partner level – through either a direct pre-existing connection, or an introduction facilitated by my contacts. Having already worked with a top-tier firm proved advantageous

in these negotiations, lending credibility to the research. By this stage, I also had a clearer sense of the data needed, making it easier to justify and negotiate the scope of access.

One firm declined after an initial meeting, citing timing constraints due to internal restructuring. Another provided no response after an initial meeting and several follow-ups. Two of the remaining firms initially presented similar follow-up challenges. A nudge from my supervisor helped reinforce the research's urgency, after which both firms moved the internal approval process forward and granted access. A third firm also offered access after this period, which I maintained as a reserve but ultimately did not need to activate. Data access was granted in Firms 2 and 3 in July and May 2024, respectively.

Internal recruitment and scheduling Within all three firms, internal contact persons – typically based in pricing or commercial departments, or serving as managing partners – played crucial gatekeeping roles. These contacts often provided one of the initial context-building interviews and facilitated interviewee recruitment based on my sampling criteria (variation across practice groups and seniority levels; partners actively involved in pricing). They selected potential partner interviewees and invited them to participate. Associate recruitment followed different approaches: in Firms 1 and 2, I used snowballing at the end of partner interviews, asking for suggestions of associates they were working with and selecting among suggestions based on my criteria (variation, seniority level, lateral experience) to preserve anonymity. In Firm 3, the internal contacts handled associate selection based on my criteria.

The internal recruitment proved effective across firms, though it also underscored the importance of the relationships with internal gatekeepers, and meant limited control for planning and predicting data collection. As such, a significant practical challenge was the extended timeline between access approval and the start of interviews. In all firms, access was approved just before the summer, necessitating delays until September for interviewees to be available after the holidays. Firms also varied in their internal approval processes, which ultimately affected the timeline and sequence of data collection. Firm 3 had initially granted access before Firm 2, but sought confirmation from the entire sample before beginning interviews, while Firms 1 and 2 allowed scheduling as individual interviewees confirmed availability. This prompted me to switch the initial order and proceed with Firm 2 after the summer and delay Firm 3 until they were ready. A total of two interviews could not be rescheduled after cancellations.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Primary data: Qualitative interviews

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility to follow emergent themes while maintaining consistency across key topics. The interview guide was organized to cover characteristics of different work types and their implications, perceived expectations and experiences with temporal structures such as deadlines, time budgets, and billable hours as well as other performance expectations. The guide evolved mainly in that the importance of work allocation systems, working hours and individual time management became salient throughout data collection at Firm 1.

The interview approach balanced structure with the conversational style appropriate for interviewing professionals, particularly senior practitioners. As discussed earlier, building rapport and creating space for dialogue and reflection is essential when interviewing professional elites, treating interviews as an intellectual discussion rather than adhering to a consistent and strictly structured interview guide (Empson, 2018; Rice, 2010). I noticed early that particularly the opening moments were crucial for setting the scene. Typically, I arrived early and asked to access the meeting room before the interviewee's arrival to settle in and prepare logistics (Empson, 2018). After initial greetings and handshakes, I found that some brief small talk was needed to bridge the transition from arrival to formal interview. The phrase 'Busy day today?' proved a useful opener, as it was easy for the interviewee to answer while settling into the room, often gave me some context on their current state of mind, and sometimes even relevant context for the research topic. I would then transition to turning on the recorder, formal introductions of myself and the project, and then leave considerable time for the interviewee to introduce themselves and their type of work. This approach contributed to building rapport and making interviewees feel at ease before moving to substantive questions.

Interviews followed a two-part structure designed to ground abstract discussions of time in concrete work experiences. A crucial aspect of formulating interview questions is to ask respondents to "particularize" (Weiss, 1994, p. 71), which means to "always aim to ask about a specific moment, not a general pattern" (Lareau, 2021, p. 107). Rather than asking about general patterns or typical experiences, I asked interviewees to walk me through specific cases or client matters. After introductions and initial rapport-building, I asked interviewees to describe a recent case in detail: how the case landed on their desk, their involvement in pricing (where relevant), how time was managed and recorded on the case, what challenges arose, and the outcome. Inter-

viewees were asked to contextualize each case (typical, unusual, particularly challenging, etc.). Where time allowed or interviewees offered, we discussed two or three cases representing different types of work. If not covered through case discussions, I explicitly asked interviewees to share specific situations that were challenging with regard to any of the time-related aspects we had discussed, and how these were navigated.

The second part of the interview shifted to interviewees' individual relationships with time. I asked about their typical day and week, and their personal approach to time management. For associates I asked about their experience of billable hours: what role they played personally, what role they played in evaluation, and what made a good associate. For partners, I asked how billable hours affected their work, including how they perceived associates' responses to billable hour targets. Throughout both parts, I used probes to explore tensions, challenges, and interpretations of temporal demands. If time allowed, or interviewees were occupying particular management positions, I added some broader questions about developments at the firm. If interviewees had previous work experience at other firms, I asked them to draw comparisons throughout.

Data collection yielded a total of 86 interviews with 80 individual interviewees. The 86 interviews comprised 73 formal semi-structured interviews with legal professionals, 6 context-building interviews with management professionals (2 per firm), and 7 unrecorded conversations and exchanges with key contact persons. Formal participant interviews lasted around 61 minutes on average, context interviews 82 minutes, and unrecorded exchanges 40 minutes. No interviewee declined recording. Total interview transcripts comprise nearly 900,000 words. 81% of interviews were conducted in person at the respective firm's site, 19% were conducted online. 2 days of interviewing took place in person at a firm's regional offices.

3.3.2 Supplementary data: Online recruitment materials

Supplementary data in the form of internal documents (e.g. time sheets or financial data, internal policies and communications) or observations (e.g. internal capacity meetings) were not accessible given the highly confidential nature of client work and firm operations. Some internal documents were offered at certain points during data collection but follow-ups remained unanswered. However, to complete data analysis for Chapters 5 and 6, online recruitment materials were reviewed to understand how firms publicly construct and communicate temporal expec-

tations and work culture. These materials are described here in aggregate form to preserve non-identifiability.

Career websites of the three firms comprised between 7 and 14 general web pages and sub-pages each, plus a range of testimonials from current employees in the form of a standalone reports, quotes, full interview or video format. I considered only static web pages, and not current job adverts, and excluded pages that were targeted specifically at non-legal professionals. The general pages of each firm covered topics such as culture, benefits, and application process and requirements. All of them contained an extensive section about the training programme, making up more than half of the materials on two of the firms' career websites. The availability of testimonials was also heavily skewed towards the training programme and summer internships. Two firms provided around one dozen testimonials each, one featuring half trainees and half non-trainees, and the other featuring testimonials of varying lengths and forms only from trainees and summer interns. The remaining firm offers a blog archive with over 50 posts about employee-related topics of which 15 were selected to be relevant to the research topic. These included half a dozen testimonials of summer interns, and 5 that were listed under the topic 'well-being'. Total word count of the materials of the three firms ranged between 17,000 and 30,000 each.

3.4 Analysis

3.4.1 General analytical approach

The analytical approach followed the principles of inductive analysis and grounded theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2015), using iterative coding, memo-writing, and systematic comparison. The analytical process prioritized plausibility and theoretical insight over verification of predetermined hypotheses (Weick, 1995). Analysis moved iteratively between empirical material and theoretical frameworks, engaging with empirical material as constructed accounts that could provoke theoretical reflection, challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, and enable reinterpretation of existing concepts (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). This involved systematic attention to variation, contradictions, and instances where empirical material resisted straightforward interpretation, treating such deviations as productive for theoretical refinement rather than as anomalies to be explained away.

The analytical process was fundamentally shaped by emergent findings from the field. As detailed earlier, the discovery that Firm 1 was operating in an unconventional way prompted adaptation

of both the research focus and analytical strategy. The focus broadened from billable hours specifically to temporal meanings and time as a measure of commitment more generally, and warranted separate attention to Firm 1 as a case. This generated two complementary analytical strands: the main analysis (Chapters 5-6) examined how temporal meanings in the form of interpretations and expectations about temporal commitment are relationally constructed within partner-associate working relationships across all three firms, while the case study analysis (Chapter 7) studied Firm 1 as a revelatory case for understanding how professionals manage temporal uncertainty in the absence of billable hour systems, examining temporal meanings as understandings of how time relates to value. Together, these strands address how different forms of meanings about time are constructed in different contexts.

I used MaxQDA to transcribe, code and manage all my data. Every interview was initially open coded line-by-line immediately after conducting the interview. As the code structure grew throughout data collection, early interviews were later reviewed and re-coded after each round of interviews. These detailed first-order codes in MaxQDA remained essential throughout analysis, making it effortless to retrieve, compare, and contrast quotes as patterns emerged and theoretical frameworks developed. The supplementary archival data was analyzed through focused thematic coding, examining how firms formally communicate around specific topics relevant to the research focus. Further analysis of all data extended beyond coding software, using analytical memos to document interpretive decisions, emergent patterns, and theoretical connections, as well as numerous comparative tables and matrices (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021) in Excel, and detailed project documentation (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in Notion. Regular supervision meetings provided opportunities to present emerging findings, test interpretations, and refine analytical directions.[6]

3.4.2 Main analysis: Associate experiences and dyadic comparison

Phase 1: Associate focus My initial analysis after data collection focused on interviews of all associates and trainees[7] (N=31 across three firms) to understand their experiences with temporal structures and demands. Early engagement with the data had revealed a vast variation in how associates exhibited their relationship with targets, time pressure, and working hours which I

[6] In writing up this research, generative AI tools were used for language-related assistance in line with City St George's guidelines for doctoral research, e.g. proofreading, synonym searches, and cleaning up rough notes into more legible working documents.

[7] Trainee interviews (N=6) were considered along with associates in the early phases of analysis, but soon turned out to form their own group (see below) and became less relevant for the core analysis. For readability purposes, I will refer to the whole group as associates.

wanted to understand. Even within the same organizational context, some were intensely preoccupied with hitting their numbers (*"it rules my life"*), others seemed unconcerned (*"I don't really worry about targets"*) and focused on balance (*"it has to be sustainable"*). Moreover, many individual associate accounts contained what appeared at first as internal contradictions and incoherences.

Following Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) principle of treating such inconsistencies as analytically productive, I engaged closely with these apparent contradictions to systematically decompose what exactly associates were addressing in different segments of their accounts. This proved generative as more granular distinctions emerged, revealing that what seemed inconsistent actually reflected distinct aspects of their relationship with time at work. For instance, an associate might describe feeling pressure to both maximize their hours and minimize chargeable time on a client matter – what initially appeared contradictory (maximize or minimize?) revealed distinct aspects of expectations: annual target achievement versus efficiency on individual matters. Similarly, another associate might meticulously track hours but express no concern about reaching annual targets, revealing differences between their relationship with targets vs. time recording.

These nuances helped build a systematic comparison framework: through focused coding (Charmaz, 2006), I charted how each associate related to each of emerging aspect – their relationship with targets, time recording, working hours, and many more. By abstracting from and comparing these concrete empirical aspects, more theoretical dimensions emerged. In particular, this brought the concept of control over time (how associates exercise and perceive agency over temporal demands) to the foreground, based on which associates clustered broadly into four groups: one agentic, managing temporal demands sustainably while being confident about achieving targets; one reactive, fulfilling external demands relentlessly alongside continuous self-monitoring; one taking a more instrumental approach, exhibiting a form of internal resignation without long-term commitment; and one still-forming without clear patterns, consisting mainly of early-stage trainees.

I initially developed a typology and examined an early working theory that these types might represent a developmental journey with increasing seniority. However, this pattern did not hold consistently across the dataset. Apart from the trainees (who formed a pre-pattern group not yet mapping onto the three main types), associates at similar career stages exhibited different approaches to temporal demands, and each of the three main approaches appeared across various seniority levels. Though the progression model proved inadequate, this analytical attempt

had brought associates' paths and transitions between types to the foreground. Rather than describing fixed ways of managing temporal demands, associates recounted conditions, events, or relational shifts that had prompted them to change their approach. These transition narratives suggested that associates' relationships with temporal demands were not stable individual traits but responsive to contextual factors.

This refocused analysis on how organizational and relational conditions facilitated the emergence of each type. Crucially, observations such as one associate noting that *"many people don't realize they are pushing an open door"* (regarding work-life balance) suggested that agency was not simply an individual attribute but was perceived differently under similar conditions. This reframed the question from what agency associates possessed to what shaped their perceptions of what was possible, pointing towards the need to analyze the associate accounts in conjunction with matching partner accounts directly.

Phase 1 had thus established that systematic variation existed in how associates understood and managed temporal demands, with associates clustering broadly into four types based on their sense of control and agency over time. This variation was not simply a function of wider firm context, career stage or individual disposition, but rather associates' approaches appeared responsive to relational and contextual factors. To examine this further, relational dynamics were analyzed more directly in Phase 2.

Phase 2: Comparison with partner data The second phase of analysis brought partner interviews into systematic comparison with their respective associates' accounts. I deliberately analyzed the data of partners and associates working together side by side to examine how temporal expectations and meanings were interpreted, negotiated and constructed within working relationships.

Early comparative engagement revealed four aspects of professionals' daily practice where partners and associates interact in their daily work, and where temporal meanings are negotiated and constructed: performance evaluation, work allocation, balance with private time, and accountability distribution. These are thus sites where relational dynamics play out. I initially termed these 'domains' and used them as an organizing framework for comparing how partners and associates understood temporal meanings and expectations. For this dyadic analysis, I worked with detailed comparative matrices in Excel. I created data tables comparing partners' and associates' understandings in rows, with additional columns describing the relational dynamics in

each domain. These tables were then consolidated into meta-tables that enabled pattern analysis across cases and domains.

My initial analytical framework distinguished three types of relational dynamics: alignment (where partners and associates shared understandings), active enablement (where partners explicitly created conditions for associates to exercise agency), and shared long-term horizons (where both held similar developmental orientations and commitment levels). Among these, the cases of misalignment were the most puzzling: partners and associates working together fundamentally misunderstood what the other experienced, expected, or valued. For instance, an associate perceived performance to be evaluated primarily based on chargeable hours (*"it's just time"*), while their partner explicitly stated *"I would never assume that somebody is a good associate because they have high hours."* In particular, a consistent pattern was that associates were experiencing more pressure and perceiving less agency around temporal demands than partners intended, interpreted, or expected them to. Examining these cases, I noticed that the alignment/misalignment dynamic revealed the most about how temporal meanings were constructed and thus how associates managed temporal demands – when enablement was misinterpreted due to underlying misalignment, it proved ineffective. Understanding what produced alignment or misalignment was analytically prior to understanding the other relational dynamics. The three-dynamic framework therefore evolved into a more focused examination of how and where interpretive alignment and misalignment emerged, and its role in the relational construction of temporal meanings. Comparing cases of alignment against cases of misalignment revealed distinct patterns in how meanings were communicated, signalled, and reinforced. This comparison identified practices and mechanisms that explained how alignment and misalignment were produced and why they persisted.

Phase 3: Theoretical iteration As the concept of agency became central to my analysis, I engaged with literature on temporal agency (Flaherty, 2003, 2011) and control over time (Lupu & Rokka, 2022). This led me to scholarship on control and autonomy, and subsequently overwork and long working hours in professional work (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Michel, 2011; Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019; Beckman & Mazmanian, 2020). Throughout, the concept of the 'ideal worker' appeared repeatedly as a central explanatory construct. However, I noticed a striking misfit between how the ideal worker is theorized and what appeared in my data. The literature predominantly conceptualizes a homogeneous ideal worker image centred on unlimited availability, regular priority of work over personal life, and maximum time commitment. Yet the

majority of partner interviews emphasized something quite different: concerns about retention and team stability, efforts to communicate that associates should *"balance a bit"* rather than overwork, expectations that associates would set appropriate boundaries, and assumptions that sustainable pacing was both expected and valued.

Following Alvesson and Sandberg's (2011) approach of challenging underlying assumptions in the literature, I returned to the data with a refined question: rather than a singular temporal ideal, was my data suggesting multiple fragmented, potentially competing ideals? The ideal worker lens prompted me to decompose partners' and associates' accounts more precisely. My phase 2 analysis had focused on alignment and misalignment – whether partners and associates 'shared understandings' within each domain. However, this could mean sharing underlying interpretations of meaning, interpretations of behaviour, perceived expectations, or values, and did not fully explain variation in associates' agency. By narrowing the analytical focus to interpretations of what was expected of the ideal professional, a pattern emerged: within each of the four domains, two contrasting underlying interpretations of temporal meanings (e.g. whether time itself constitutes performance, or whether performance is multi-dimensional) could be distinguished. These were not discrete expectations but rather interpretive frameworks that shaped what professionals perceived was concretely expected. These sets of underlying interpretations clustered coherently across domains, forming two distinct and internally coherent images of the ideal professional: one closely aligned with the classic formulation in the literature (time as performance, busyness as recognition, private time subordinated, time pressure to be absorbed), and another centred on ownership, professional judgment, and sustainability (performance as multi-dimensional, workload management as professional responsibility, pacing as essential, accountability bounded).

Revisiting the associate typology from Phase 1 in light of these two ideals revealed an important reframing: the three main types reflected different interpretation-response patterns based on the two ideals. Rather than three distinct approaches, these enactments were different combinations of which ideal associates interpreted as dominant, and how they responded to it. The agentic type interpreted the sustainable ideal as dominant and enacted it accordingly. The reactive type interpreted the classic ideal as dominant and enacted it accordingly. The third type also interpreted the classic ideal as dominant but internally rejected it, enacting it publicly but privately withdrawing commitment, resulting in an instrumental approach. The three types are thus different ways of enacting the two ideals.

This clarified how the key elements connect overall: temporal ideals are relationally constructed through partner-associate interactions, interpreted by associates as dominant expectations, and enacted in distinct ways depending on whether associates accept or reject their interpreted ideal. Specifically, which ideal associates interpret as dominant is structured by how temporal meanings are relationally constructed across four dimensions, each pertaining to a specific aspect of professionals' daily practice (performance evaluation, workload negotiation, balance with private time, and accountability distribution). Partners' messaging, practices, and subtle cues in these dimensions reinforce one ideal or another, resulting in interpretive alignment or misalignment. Then, associates' individual responses to their interpreted ideal – aspiring to or rejecting it – shapes how they enact it and how they relate to time and manage temporal demands more broadly.

Organization into Chapters

This integrated analysis is presented in two complementary empirical chapters:

Chapter 5 presents the two temporal ideals and three enactment patterns, focussing on the perspectives of associates and trainees entering the organization. It first establishes co-existing narratives in the specific research setting by drawing on the firms' recruitment materials. It then shows how trainees draw on various signals to make sense of expectations but without coherent images forming at this stage. The core part of the chapter then presents how the two temporal ideals manifest in interpretations and perceived expectations across four key dimensions, and how associates respond to and enact these two interpreted ideals, resulting in three different ways of managing temporal demands. Finally, the chapter analyzes patterns across the dataset and individual transition accounts pointing to the role of the immediate relational environment in shaping which ideal is perceived as dominant.

Chapter 6 presents the relational dynamics through which temporal ideals are reinforced by examining paired accounts of partners and associates. After describing patterns of misalignment across firms, the core of the chapter focuses on analyzing differences between misaligned and aligned pairs, demonstrating how interpretations are projected, formed and reinforced across different forms of relational interaction.

3.4.3 Additional analysis: Single case study

As mentioned earlier, data from Firm 1 was subjected to separate analysis as a single case study. During fieldwork, I discovered that Firm 1 was operating without billable hours internally, despite

	Chapter 5	Chapter 6	Chapter 7	Overall
Research question	*How do professionals manage temporal demands given co-existing narratives about temporal commitment in high-performance organizations?* (**Sub-RQ 1**)	*How do professionals construct temporal ideals in their immediate relational environment, and what are the implications for the persistence of overwork?* (**Sub-RQ 2**)	*How do professionals manage temporal uncertainty in their work?* (**Sub-RQ 3**)	*What shapes how professionals construct the meaning of time in high-performance professional organizations?*
Unit of analysis	Associates across firms	Partner-associate pairs across firms	Single organization	Professionals in City law firms
Data basis	Online recruitment materials, 40 interviews of 3 firms (32 associates & trainees, 8 other)	67 interviews of 3 firms (28 partners, 31 associates & trainees, 8 other)	37 interviews of Firm 1 (20 partners, 14 associates & trainees, 3 other)	86 interviews of 3 firms

Table 3.2: Research focus and data used per chapter

being a traditional, highly institutionalized top-tier law firm and despite the system's entrenchment across the legal sector. Offering services at the highest end of the market among the three firms means that Firm 1 handles particularly bespoke, novel, and complex work characterized by high temporal uncertainty – work that is non-standardized and inherently unpredictable (when 'no one has ever done this before'). This creates a striking paradox: As discussed in Chapter 2, the system of billable hours has historically functioned as a way for law firms to manage temporal uncertainty, and become deeply institutionalized as such. Yet Firm 1, as the firm facing the highest degree of temporal uncertainty in its daily work, has rejected this approach internally by neither setting targets nor basing bonus payments and salaries on these.

This combination positioned Firm 1 as a unique and revelatory case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2003) for understanding how temporal uncertainty is managed and how temporal meanings are constructed in the absence of the direct financialization of time (Alvehus & Spicer, 2012). Analyzing Firm 1 as a single case enabled examination of how temporal structures operate without the dominant institutional system, offering insights into boundary conditions and making dynamics visible that may be obscured in typical contexts. The analytical approach to the case study material was inspired by Siggelkow (2007), who suggests to treat cases as both inspiration for theoretical development and illustration of theoretical mechanisms. The case thus functioned as a generative site for identifying theoretical relationships, with the goal being to develop conceptual arguments that could stand on their own internal logic. However, the case does not serve as proof of theoretical claims but as illustration how these dynamics play out in organizational reality.

Initial analysis during data collection began with focused coding based on existing literature on time and temporality in professional work. However, early engagement with the data revealed

that Firm 1's approach to time differed significantly from patterns identified in previous studies of similar contexts (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Lupu & Rokka, 2022). This prompted more extensive and inductive open coding to understand the dynamics more broadly. Partner interviews proved particularly dense and complex, regularly yielding 150-200 codes per interview as they discussed pricing decisions, project estimation, and time management.

Two analytical themes emerged as dominant through this process. First, the extent and candidness with which interviewees discussed their inability to predict tasks and projects accurately was striking – rather than portraying mastery and control, professionals openly acknowledged and emphasized uncertainty as inherent to their work. Second, the centrality of relationships emerged as a consistent theme in how professionals discussed their work, pricing approaches, and organizational processes. Iterative engagement between coding and theoretical reading on uncertainty tolerance and management across disciplines suggested a connection between these themes: increasing confidence and certainty in relationships may enable greater comfort with uncertainty.

While this analytical understanding of Firm 1's approach developed during initial data collection and analysis, its theoretical significance was sharpened through subsequent comparison with Firms 2 and 3. As I collected and coded interviews from firms operating with billable hours, the distinctiveness of Firm 1's approach became increasingly pronounced. Acknowledgment of uncertainty and attention to relationships appeared to some degree across all firms, but these themes were markedly more pronounced and explicitly articulated at Firm 1. This comparative insight helped frame Firm 1's approach as an analytically interesting alternative to managing uncertainty, and prompted me to return to the data with more refined questions around how relational approaches to work and pricing contributed to managing temporal uncertainty. Several practices that were prevalent at Firm 1 – pricing based on client value, measuring profitability per client relationship rather than per project, and 'locking in' through specific relationship knowledge – emerged as strategies of decoupling value from time. The same decoupling of time and value occurred by not using billable hours in their internal operations. This decoupling allowed Firm 1 to reduce reliance on temporal parameters overall, and temporal predictions specifically, making the firm less dependent on temporal uncertainty. This case analysis is presented in **Chapter 7**.

3.5 Ethics of conduct

Overall, this project was classified as low risk in terms of research ethics[8]. The main ethical issues to consider in conducting this research were around confidentiality and anonymity of the participating firms and individuals. Law firms and lawyers are generally cautious and concerned about confidentiality due to their own professional socialization and ethics. Moreover, they can be very diligent in regulating and understanding the detail of any agreement or cooperation. Therefore, careful thought and preparation went into the design and phrasing of confidentiality measures before approaching firms to negotiate data access.

I committed to maintaining individual privacy and full confidentiality with regard to the participating firm(s) and all interviewees at all times. Thus, in any published or written data resulting from the study, information is and will be disguised to ensure individuals and firms are not identifiable. I anonymized all data records at raw data stage already by keeping two separate databases. All collected data was transcribed using code names and stored on the university IT infrastructure which is in line with data protection regulation. It is protected by multi-factor authentication and accessible only to the principal researcher. Any files that contain identifiable information about firms or interviewees (e.g. overview of practice groups or case description) are additionally password-protected.

Consent was obtained verbally and confirmed on record. Interviewees received the approved information sheet and consent form upon scheduling of the interview. It was explained therein, that they give their consent[9] by participating in the interview. On the day before the interview, I typically sent an email in which I thanked the interviewee in advance, summarized the content of the documentation while pointing out that 'I will not go through this in detail during the interview' and provided the opportunity for questions. At the beginning of the interview, I asked interviewees to confirm that they have received, read and understood all documentation, advised them of the recorder being turned on and confirmed this verbally on the record. The rationale for not obtaining consent by signature on a paper form was that this may prompt lawyers, in particular, to take time for detailed reading or discussion of specific issues. Therefore, they were provided with the information and opportunity for questions beforehand. As interviewees were

[8]The ethics application was submitted to the Bayes Research Ethics Committee on 6 June 2023. It included participant information sheet with consent form, and an explanation of how consent would be obtained. It was approved on 12 July 2023 for collecting audio-recorded interviews with up to 90 interviewees.

[9]The scope of the consent was detailed in the consent form. Beyond the minimum required content (e.g. audio recording), it includes agreement to the use of direct quotes, and to reuse of the data for future studies, for example.

knowledgeable on legal issues and there were no specific risks involved, they did not require particularly extensive protection in this context. This was in line with City's guidance on verbal consent and was confirmed through the approval process.

Reflecting on the research process, no interviewees expressed concerns about recording or transcription in any of the interviews. The verbal consent process proved effective and unproblematic. One interviewee asked whether the recorder was still running when our conversation continued beyond the formal interview, after which I turned it off. Several interviewees sought assurance about how non-identifiability would be ensured given that their practice group might be identifiable in combination with their firm. I assured them that practice group information would be disguised in any combination with firm details. As stated earlier, associate interviewees were selected from among a range of partner suggestions specifically to preserve their anonymity, avoiding situations where a partner could identify their own associate's participation.

My background as a qualified lawyer means that I am highly attuned to confidentiality obligations, and strategies for preserving confidentiality are deeply engrained in my practices. Throughout interactions with firms and interviewees, this professional socialization contributed to maintaining trust and credibility around confidentiality commitments. As such, several interviewees made remarks that they felt comfortable speaking candidly given my understanding of professional obligations and the legal sector's confidentiality norms.

Chapter 4

Research Context

4.1 Chargeable hours in legal work

Chargeable hours in law firms The number of 'chargeable hours' denotes the amount of time that a professional has worked on a project chargeable to the client. The system of chargeable hours is the dominant economic model of law firms, fulfilling various functions across the organization. Externally, chargeable hours provide the basis for the pricing arrangement between the firm and the client. Internally, firms typically set chargeable hour targets or target bands for their professionals, and the achieved number serves as a measure of performance which influences bonus payments and promotion decisions.

The relevance of chargeable hours means that professionals account for their work in 6-minute increments. This implies recording what tasks have been worked on for which client for every six minutes of the working day. The resulting time sheets can range from a few phrases listing the activities undertaken in the same project for one client for the whole day (common in big projects like often in consultancy), to extensive lists of meticulous time periods and task descriptions when switching frequently between projects and clients (more typical in law firms).

Chargeable hours, billable hours and working hours In order to achieve 2000 chargeable hours per year, for example, approx. 8-8.5 chargeable hours per day are required (assuming professionals take holidays). Yet this typically translates into at least 12-13 working hours per day, since not all hours are chargeable. Non-chargeable activities regularly take up 2-3 hours daily (administrative and internal tasks, breaks, etc.) and can quickly increase significantly when professionals additionally engage in business development, training or internal projects that contribute to the team or firm, like mentoring, support with recruitment or organizing social events. A general rule of thumb is that one third of working hours is non-chargeable (Fortney, 2000;

Muir, 2007). Beyond that, discrepancies between chargeable and working hours are also amplified commonly from professionals not recording all their time (under-recording) due to pressures to remain within fee quotes or to appear efficient.

Professionals often use the term billable hours (or 'billables') synonymously with chargeable hours. Some use it more specifically to refer to the portion of chargeable hours which are ultimately billed to the client. Partners typically scrutinize time sheets for inefficiencies, redundancies, and congruence with previous fee quotes, such that 'writing off' time is a widespread practice. In some firms, targets are explicitly based on these billed hours rather than chargeable hours. The latter is more common in US practice, and thus the term is found more commonly in US-oriented press and literature (e.g. Yakura, 2001; Evans et al., 2004; Pardau, 2013), whereas 'chargeable hours' is more frequently used in UK firms and by interviewees in this thesis.

Chargeable hours and partnership track As discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.1.2 on p. 27), law firms are highly hierarchical organizations, with partnership traditionally being the only available trajectory after a certain tenure ('up-or-out'). The promotion process and criteria vary widely across firms. Chargeable hours usually form part of the evaluation but other factors are also considered to varying degrees. The process generally entails some form of internal application and assessment which professionals often describe as very intense. The length of the 'partner track' – that is expected years from qualification to promotion – also varies considerably across firms, where 7-9 years would be considered relatively short, and 13-15 years comparatively long. In recent years, firms have increasingly introduced long-term non-partner roles. These are often referred to as 'Senior Counsel', 'Counsel' or 'Of Counsel', and made available on a case-by-case basis, e.g. for specific subject matter experts. Some firms are formalizing 'tracks' for such counsel roles or creating roles that explicitly form a temporary intermediate stage or long term mezzanine-level between associate and partner.

Pricing based on chargeable hours Pricing and billing the client based on chargeable hours is the dominant practice in legal services. The bill is traditionally issued retrospectively, and time is charged in periods of six minutes multiplied by hourly rates for legal professionals varying according to their title and expertise. Pricing arrangements can vary from open- to close-ended depending on the extent to which the overall price is pre-agreed at the outset of the mandate. A purely open-ended pricing arrangement would thus be to pre-agree only the hourly rates and determine the overall cost retrospectively. Fully close-ended arrangements entail that the parties agree on a 'fixed' or 'capped' fee for the total effort upfront. Alternative fee arrangements that

are independent of time input can be contingency-based or value pricing. While contingency-based arrangements entail part of the price being determined by the outcome of the case, value pricing is a loose term for any pricing method that relies mainly on the value of the output delivered to the client. In practice, the majority of pricing arrangements are time-based and involve some combination of an upfront estimate based on a set of assumptions, and a retrospective bill based on the actual hours incurred (Thomson Reuters Practical Law, n.d.; Bloomberg Law, 2021; BigHand, 2021).

4.2 Research sites

Each of the three firms is a large corporate law firm with between 2000 and 5000 employees and various office locations globally.[10] All offer a wide range of services, including advising, supporting and representing mainly corporate clients in areas like M&A, finance, tax, real estate and large disputes and litigation. While two of the firms offer these services across a wide range of industries, one is more sector-focused with regard to their clients. The firms can broadly be placed as tier 1, 2, and 3 in terms of their salary levels and market status, although the latter can also vary between practice areas where firms have particular strengths or weaknesses (e.g. Firm 3 may have certain areas in which in competes with Firm 1, or Firm 2 may have areas where it competes with Firm 3 rather than with other tier 2 firms). All firms are mainly structured along traditional hierarchy levels with trainees, associates of varying seniority levels, partners and a few isolated alternative or intermediate roles.

There tends to be a connection between firms' market position, the salary levels they pay, and their expectations around chargeable and working hours. Accordingly, there is a slight slope across firms with regard to average expected working hours and chargeable hour targets. As such, typical chargeable hours and targets per firm range from 1600 to 2000 annually, but with considerable variation around and beyond these thresholds within each firm. Beyond the dynamics examined in this research, the type of work also contributes to these differences. Different areas of law tend to have different rhythms and pace, e.g. teams doing corporate transactions tend to work longer hours with a faster pace throughout, and teams working in regulatory areas typically have more moderate hours and timelines. Notwithstanding, associates across nearly all teams in the sample tend to work at least around 10-11 hours daily, with the vast majority of

[10] Details about firms are kept to a minimum and presented in aggregated form for all three firms to preserve non-identifiability.

interviewees reporting to regularly do at least around 7 chargeable hours per day. Most interviewees report occasional or regular evening and weekend work, and many mention 60-80-hour work weeks during busy periods. All three firms can therefore be considered high-performance environments, as temporal expectations, performance pressure and intensity are continuously demanding.

Chapter 5

Interpretation and enactment of temporal ideals

This chapter explores how professionals manage temporal demands given co-existing narratives about temporal commitment in high-performance professional organizations (Sub-RQ 1). As established in Chapter 2, high-performance professional organizations have increasingly signalled commitment to balance and well-being, creating what appear to be competing narratives about temporal expectations. While high-performance professional organizations have traditionally emphasized excellence, client dedication, and status, current messaging to employees now also highlights well-being, inclusion, and 'work-life balance'. It is within this context of co-existing narratives and a pervasive time-as-commitment logic that professionals must make sense of what is expected of them.

This chapter addresses this first sub-question by examining temporal meanings in the form of interpretations and expectations that make up temporal ideals – coherent images of the ideal professional with regard to temporal commitment. To address the overarching question of the thesis – how professionals construct the meaning of time in high-performance professional organizations – this chapter establishes the basis by identifying the temporal meanings professionals construct with regard to how time is understood to relate to performance, how workload should be managed, what balancing of private time is legitimate, and how accountability for client time is understood. The following chapter then examines the relational dynamics through which these meanings are constructed.

Professionals encounter signals about temporal expectations at multiple levels – organizational communication, peer observations, and their immediate relational environment. How professionals draw on these sources – and with that, what temporal meanings they construct – varies across stages of their trajectory within the organization. Novices entering the organization – 'trainees' – interpret expectations about temporal commitment primarily based on formal orga-

nizational communication and peer observation, and actively attempt to make sense of signals that do not always align – yet interpretations do not yet form a coherent image. It is beyond this stage, when professionals settle into stable team contexts as 'associates' that coherent temporal ideals emerge. The analysis reveals two such ideals: the Hyper-Performer ideal centred around total availability, routine priority of work over personal life, and maximum time commitment, and the Sustainable High-Performer ideal that values sustainable pacing, boundary-setting, and ownership. Specifically, each ideal is constituted of four dimensions that pertain to performance evaluation, workload management, balancing of private time, and accountability for client time. Crucially, both ideals are present across the firms studied, and individual associates perceive either one or the other as dominant rather than experiencing them as competing.

Based on associates' responses to these two ideals, three patterns of enactment emerge which reflect different approaches to managing temporal demands. These patterns not only shape how associates enact expectations across the specific aspects of their daily practice but how they more broadly relate to and enact agency over time itself. Associates perceiving and enacting the Hyper-Performer ideal manage temporal demands reactively, suppressing control over temporal demands rather than structuring time proactively. In contrast, associates perceiving and enacting the Sustainable High-Performer ideal sustain control over temporal demands and exhibit a strong sense of agency. A third group – Time Servers – perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant but reject it internally. These associates adopt an instrumental approach to managing temporal demands, and achieve a sense of agency through anticipated exit.

Apart from archival data, this chapter draws exclusively on associate and trainee accounts – junior and mid-level professionals. Partners' perspectives – and how these shape the ideals associates come to perceive – are examined in the following chapter. The analysis proceeds as follows. Section 5.1 examines how co-existing narratives about temporal commitment manifest in the specific research setting. Section 5.2 examines how novices encounter these narratives and make sense of early signals upon entering the organization. Section 5.3 develops the two temporal ideals and their constituent dimensions. Section 5.4 examines the three enactment patterns. Section 5.5 explores variation across the sample and considers several potential explanations for what may shape which ideal associates come to perceive as dominant. Pointing towards relational dynamics as a potentially crucial factor, this sets up the basis for the next chapter. Section 5.6 summarizes the chapter.

5.1 Co-existing narratives about temporal expectations

Professional organizations publicly communicate expectations about work and commitment through their recruitment and career materials, and these firm-produced narratives constitute the first layer of signals that professionals encounter when entering an organization. Recent years have seen a marked shift in organizational rhetoric towards well-being, balance, and sustainable working alongside traditional expectations of high performance and commitment. This shift is also visible in the City law firm context: a review of trade press and firm web materials confirms that most major firms now publicly promote well-being policies, mental health initiatives, and flexible working arrangements alongside continued performance-oriented messaging. To examine how these narratives manifest in the specific research setting, I draw on each firm's online recruitment and career materials – comprising approximately 20-30 web pages per firm, including 10-15 employee testimonials each – as a source of data on how firms publicly communicate expectations about temporal commitment to prospective and current employees.

Analysis of these materials reveals a consistent pattern of dual rhetoric across all three firms, as summarized in Table 5.1. Each firm emphasizes performance and intensity – drawing on vocabulary such as excellence, high performance, fast-paced – while simultaneously claiming commitment to balance through narratives of well-being, flexible working, and support. The relative weighting of these themes differs slightly across firms, as the table demonstrates: Firm 1 maintains a clear expectation of hard work and long hours but emphasizes breaks and the availability of sabbatical and flexible-working schemes. Firms 2 and 3 – both signatories to an industry-wide initiative promoting healthier working practices – foreground well-being, inclusion, support, and balance, with Firm 3 placing particular emphasis on mental health support. Despite these nuances, the co-existence of both narratives is consistent, with all three firms projecting an image of professionals who are both high-performing and able to maintain balance.

Several examples illustrate how this co-existence manifests in the materials.[11] In Firm 1's materials, one testimonial describes an intense transactional matter involving late nights and demanding deadlines, framing these as a source of excitement and team bonding – a challenging period made rewarding through camaraderie, and followed by a period of recovery once the deal closed. The same materials elsewhere reassure prospective recruits that long hours need not mean letting personal and social life recede, with one professional describing how personal

[11] Direct quotation from organizational materials has been avoided for reasons of confidentiality, as verbatim text would be searchable. Examples are paraphrased, drawing on the thematic keywords identified in the analysis.

Firm	Performance emphasis (keywords / examples)	Balance emphasis (keywords / examples)	Overall tone
Firm 1	Excellence, intellectual challenge, long hours, busy times as exciting, high quality	Camaraderie, no presenteeism, breaks between intense phases, well-being and flexibility initiatives	*Performance-dominant; balance implicit and achieved collectively*
Firm 2	High performance, innovation, adaptability, commercial mindset, handling pressure	Diversity, inclusion, wealth of resources, initiatives, focus on well-being and social life	*Mixed; high performance and balance co-promoted but weakly integrated*
Firm 3	Excellence, fast-paced, stimulating work, quality, drive	Mental-health support, authenticity, friendly people, self-care, family support, well-being priority	*Balance-dominant; performance framed as compatible with well-being*

Table 5.1: Organizational emphases on performance and balance in recruitment materials

commitments and physical activity remain a priority and supported by colleagues. Here, the tension between intensity and balance is framed as manageable, even energizing, through collective support and personal commitment. In Firm 2's materials, the co-existence is less reconciled. Descriptions of a typical working day feature team socials and after-work drinks finishing by early evening, sitting alongside repeated organizational statements foregrounding high performance, drive, and testimonials in which colleagues are praised precisely for their relentless availability and willingness to work through the night. The two narratives appear side by side without acknowledgment of the contradiction between them. In Firm 3, the tension appears differently: colleagues speak openly about personal experiences of depression and mental health struggles. The testimonials then focus on the ongoing work of managing these in a fast-paced environment through self-care, personal boundaries, and non-negotiable prioritizing of mental health. These materials thus foreground the individual's responsibility, taking the intensity of work as given.

Across firms, these materials portray that professionals are expected to perform at a high level, and their well-being is simultaneously foregrounded as a priority. These co-existing narratives are in tension as high performance traditionally demands a degree of sustained temporal intensity that is difficult to reconcile with balance and may encroach on well-being. It is within this context of competing narratives about temporal commitment that professionals must interpret what is expected of them, and what it means to be an 'ideal professional'. The following analysis examines how professionals interpret and enact these expectations – beginning with those entering the organization, before turning to associates settled in stable team contexts where coherent

ideals emerge. The analysis that follows cuts across all three firms rather than comparing them, with data in each section drawn from across the sample broadly evenly.

5.2 Novices: Making sense of early signals

Before professionals settle into stable working contexts, they must first navigate the organization as novices. As described earlier, trainees at all three firms rotate through four practice area teams over two years, accompanied by structured induction programmes and ongoing formal training. Entering an environment shaped by the co-existing narratives established in the previous section, trainees encounter various signals from multiple sources – organizational messaging, formal training, peer observation, and relational cues – and actively attempt to make sense of what is expected of them. As the following accounts illustrate, these signals are not always consistent, and at this stage interpretations are still being formed rather than settled.

One trainee at Firm 3, only two weeks into his first seat, illustrates how organizational messaging and formal structures become a primary source of guidance at this stage. When facing what he himself describes as insecurity about time recording, he relies on his formal training:

> *"You are thinking, oh, the other trainees spent that long on that ... but they do tell you ... as a trainee, your job is just to record it. That was taught to us in the induction, so I've tried to stick with that. And that's been reassuring."* (3-TH/T)

Alongside this, with no targets of his own, he actively uses associate billing targets as a reference point for his time management: *"I would always try and get as close to that as I can in the day"*. At this stage, he views the system of chargeable hours as transparent and fair *"because it really shows how much effort you put in"*, and considers expectations manageable. However, they have not yet been tested against sustained pressure or contradiction, and he himself notes that, as an associate, *"I'm sure [it] will be more tough"*. The trainee thus actively and thoughtfully forms an understanding of expectations based on formal training and structures yet he already anticipates that this may come under tension as demands increase.

One trainee at Firm 1 has been in her current seat longer and is already working 60-80 hour weeks. She similarly understands time as a signal of commitment, and describes how *"there is a lot of focus on enthusiasm"* (1-DQA/T) when recalling the evaluative framework from her reviews. As she interprets it, *"that's where the hours come in ... if you're doing very few hours, you're obviously not particularly enthusiastic, because you're not picking up enough work."* When

partners notice her long hours and suggest she take on less, she acknowledges this but does not adjust her workload:

> *"I've had several conversations with the partners in my group, where they've been like, You need to take on less. So it's definitely acknowledged ... But a lot of that is just my choice about how much work to take on."*

The relational signal is not entirely consistent with her interpretation of expectations. Yet as she continues to frame her hours as self-directed rather than externally imposed, she does not engage with the partners' comments as contradictory. At the same time, however, when looking ahead, she reflects that *"long term I probably wouldn't be able to continue with that ... that would probably take me towards going in-house or something."* She thus already anticipates that her approach may not be sustainable, yet in the present, the absence of external pressure means that inconsistent signals can co-exist unreconciled.

One more senior trainee at Firm 2 draws on peer observation alongside organizational messaging to construct her understanding of expectations. In her view, *"if you look busy, it looks better for you"* (2-A/T). She bases this on having heard stories of seniors being frustrated by trainees who declined work despite not being at capacity – *"I don't want to fall into that category"*. When a formal time management training contradicts her interpretation, advising trainees to manage their capacity and decline work when necessary, she discards the guidance as unhelpful and inapplicable:

> *"To tell people 'No' was like the thing. But then, like, we all know that you can't always say 'No.' As a junior lawyer, you don't want to make that impression that you're saying 'No' to work. ... Most of the tips I felt weren't applicable to a trainee. ... Because you want to be available."*

Here, the trainee actively navigates inconsistent signals by dismissing the ones that do not align with her interpretations, in this case privileging peer-level observations as a source over formal training.

Across these three accounts, trainees are actively engaged in making sense of what is expected, drawing primarily on organizational- and peer-level sources. Yet the signals they encounter are not always consistent, and while trainees attempt to reconcile these to varying degrees, the interpretations they form do not yet cohere into a stable understanding. It is once professionals move beyond rotation and into stable team contexts that such images – coherent sets of expectations and interpretations about temporal commitment – emerge which the following section examines as temporal ideals.

5.3 Interpreting temporal ideals

Beyond the novice stage, junior professionals settle into stable team contexts, and demands intensify as professionals' responsibilities increase and, in most firms, billing targets apply. The features of high-performance environments – continuously demanding temporal expectations, performance pressure, intensity – now become more pronounced. In practice, this means that across the settings studied here, long working hours are expected and client demands routinely take precedence over personal time. As established in the theoretical framework – and corroborated by the trainee accounts above – time serves as a medium through which commitment and performance are both expressed and evaluated. It is thus within this environment and the challenges that come with it that professionals interpret expectations and manage temporal demands.

The analysis reveals two coherent and contrasting sets of interpretations and expectations about temporal commitment – temporal ideals – that structure how associates understand and enact their relationship with time. These are termed the *Hyper-Performer* and the *Sustainable High-Performer* ideal. Each ideal is characterized by four dimensions which pertain to aspects of professionals' daily practice: performance evaluation, workload management, balancing of private life, and accountability for client time. These dimensions are interpretations and perceived expectations about temporal commitment: how time is valued and managed in professionals' daily work. This section develops each ideal and its constituent dimensions in turn. As the following chapter examines the relational dynamics through which these ideals are constructed, further data on each dimension will be developed there. The goal here is to provide an overview and illustrative definition of each ideal.

5.3.1 Hyper-Performer ideal

The Hyper-Performer ideal is characterized by four dimensions, encompassing underlying interpretations and perceived expectations in the domains of performance evaluation (*time as performance*), workload management (*busyness as a marker of recognition*), balancing of private time (*subordination of private time normalized*), and accountability for client time (*time pressure to be absorbed*).

Time as performance Associates perceiving the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant interpret performance evaluation and progression criteria as primarily based on chargeable hours. Viewing

this as the most important indicator of performance, one associate at Firm 2 notes: *"the vibe is definitely the more hours you do, the better."* (2-SB/A). Based on the assumption that greater hours reflect greater performance, associates interpreting this ideal aim to exceed targets and maximize chargeable time. Non-chargeable activities, in contrast, are perceived as less valuable and offering little recognition. As one associate from Firm 3 notes, *"there's no credit in that"* (3-SD/A). These associates consequently minimize time spent on such activities.

Busyness as a marker of recognition Within the Hyper-Performer ideal, associates interpret total availability as a demonstration of commitment and perceive repeatedly being allocated work as a sign of recognition. Long hours and sustained busyness are therefore understood as symptoms of meeting expectations and being valued. As one associate from Firm 1 observes:

> *"The stronger performers in the team, the people who are perceived to be the best associates – like I know who they are, everyone does – if people are busier than others then it's because people are better than others."* (1-QCT/A)

Based on this interpretation, associates perceiving the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant accumulate work by accepting all tasks. Pushing back or turning down work is perceived as illegitimate and risky. One associate at Firm 3 explains this pressure:

> *"A partner will just approach you and say, can you help me with this? And you just kind of make it work. The thing is, if you say no, they won't come back to you. So I have a real fear of saying no."* (3-AP/A)

Consequently, workload management for these associates means extending working hours to accommodate all demands rather than declining tasks that exceed capacity.

Subordination of private time normalized Associates interpreting the Hyper-Performer ideal view private time as generally and unconditionally subordinate to client and firm demands. Regularly extending work into evenings and weekends is normalized and unquestioned as part of the role. As one associate at Firm 1 describes:

> *"I tend to leave the office at 7/7.30ish and then continue at home. ... I'll record all my time at that stage and then when I do my work in the evening, I'll then before I go to bed just add in the additional time."* (1-OP/A)

Similarly, another associate at Firm 2 states, *"I don't make weekday plans anymore. If I do, 80% of the time, I have to cancel them"* (2-CE/A). These routinized approaches reflect how these associates have come to understand the intrusion and precedence of work over their private life as a regular and inevitable feature of the job.

Time pressure to be absorbed Associates perceiving this ideal internalize pressure and refrain from setting boundaries not only regarding their time use but also their time recording. Once

instructed on a project, they absorb responsibility for containing time within fee quotes and managing overruns individually, even when tasks take longer due to learning needs, complexity, or unrealistic estimates provided by partners. Rather than raising these issues, they manage the pressure by under-recording their time. One junior at Firm 1 explains this understanding:

> *"You're censoring your time because ... you're worried about [putting too much time on the clock] in case it feeds back to you and someone pulls you up on it and says, you spent too much time on that matter and now we need to write it off."* (1-NJE/T)

These associates thus perceive it as expected that they assume accountability for client time by internalizing time pressure rather than bounding it in accordance with their role.

5.3.2 Sustainable High-Performer ideal

Mapping onto the same aspects of professionals' daily practice, the Sustainable High-Performer ideal is equally constituted of four dimensions: *performance as multi-dimensional, workload management as professional responsibility, pacing as essential for long-term success,* and *accountability to be bounded.*

Performance as multi-dimensional Within this ideal, associates understand performance as multi-dimensional. They view chargeable hours and targets as only one criterion of evaluation, while features such as quality, efficiency, and reliability are seen as just as important. Moreover, they perceive non-chargeable contributions to the team and firm, such as helping with training, recruitment or business development, as valued. These associates meet their billing targets but do not aim to exceed them, and also allocate time to these broader contributions. One senior associate from Firm 2 illustrates this understanding:

> *"If you were to look at two say senior associates who they were considering for partnership and one has a lot more billables than the other but the other one still say met their target and then had all these other qualities, I don't think that higher billables would trump the other qualities. Like if the other one was better with clients or had better leadership skills or had brought in a couple of matters, I think that would be valued more highly than say if you've done 300 more hours that year."* (2-T/A)

Workload management as professional responsibility Associates interpreting the Sustainable High-Performer ideal perceive active and realistic workload management as a key part of professional responsibility. Viewing quality and reliable delivery as more important than total availability, they understand declining or redirecting work as legitimate and even expected when at capacity limits. A junior associate at Firm 2 explains his experience:

> *"[Partner X] always says that I have a very nice way of saying No to people. ... When I need to say No, I think as long as you approach it in the right manner, you do always have that ability."* (2-MG/A)

He elaborates how managing "upwards" is part of his approach to quality and responsibility: *"I always try to do above and beyond standard-wise ... and that is also effectively delegating upwards, downwards, left and right"* (2-MG/A). Associates within this ideal thus view active workload management and appropriate push back as being recognized to ensure reliable delivery across commitments rather than indicating lack of commitment or ambition.

Pacing essential for long-term success Associates perceiving the Sustainable High-Performer ideal see pacing and balance as compatible with and essential to long-term professional success. One associate at Firm 1 states this clearly:

> *"I've been at the firm now for seven years, and I feel I have a very sustainable existence, and me being well rested and able to think and do more than just churn is a prerequisite to the success in my career."* (1-NR/A)

Based on this understanding, these associates perceive active and sustainable balancing of professional and personal needs – aiming for 'work-life balance' – as legitimate, and assert boundaries accordingly. One senior associate at Firm 2 describes how he ensures productivity while also protecting personal time:

> *"I'm quite focused when I'm in the office, I want to get my work done and then have time to myself. I would rather get in really early as opposed to staying really late ... And actually very rarely would I take work home."* (2-T/A)

This stance reflects a view that balance supports rather than undermines performance by enabling a sustainable pace necessary for a long-term career.

Accountability to be bounded Associates interpreting the Sustainable High-Performer ideal understand their responsibility for managing client time as bounded according to their seniority and role. They perceive it as expected to raise unforeseen developments and overruns with partners, seek guidance when necessary, and record time fully and transparently rather than absorbing pressure through under-recording. An associate at Firm 3 explains her practice:

> *"When I've done something and thought, this isn't proportionate to be recoverable from the client, I will just put in capital letters "WRITE OFF" under the matter and then explain what I've done ... and then it's at the discretion of the partner to decide whether they're happy billing that to the client at the end of the day ... but in the meantime, I just keep recording the time."* (3-SG/A)

These associates thus enact accountability in accordance with their role and manage pressure through communication rather than internalization.

5.4 Enactments: Managing temporal demands

Based on their interpretations across the four dimensions, associates beyond the novice stage construct their temporal ideal – either the Hyper-Performer or the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. Crucially, they perceive only one or the other ideal as dominant. How associates respond to their perceived dominant ideal varies, producing different enactment patterns that structure how professionals manage temporal demands. These patterns reflect not only how associates enact expectations across the four dimensions but their broader relationship with time itself – how they experience temporal pressure, how they enact agency over their time, and how they envision their future trajectory within the firm.

The analysis reveals three such patterns in response to the two ideals. The first two patterns correspond directly to the ideals: *Hyper-Performers* enacting the Hyper-Performer ideal accordingly, and *Sustainable High-Performers* enacting the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. Beyond these, a third pattern emerges among a subset of associates who perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant but reject this model while remaining at the firm. These *Time Servers* exhibit a distinctive response characterized by complying outwardly while disengaging internally. The following sections develop how each group manages the temporal demands and pressures of professional work in high-performance environments.

5.4.1 Hyper-Performers

Interpreting and enacting the Hyper-Performer ideal, these associates suppress temporal control, reacting to external demands and internalizing pressure rather than structuring time around their own needs. One associate at Firm 2 describes her approach: *"I don't have much of a time management or structure for the week. I just go with the flow. ... I don't really do much planning"* (2-PL/A).

Hyper-Performers frequently exhibit a lack of control over temporal demands with direct implications for their private lives. One associate at Firm 1 notes, *"I often get matters put on me when I'm always really busy"* (1-QCT/A), where the passive phrasing – "put on me" rather than actively managed or negotiated – illustrates the absence of agency these associates experience. In seeking a sense of control, Hyper-Performers tend to engage in constant self-monitoring of their chargeable hours. One associate at Firm 2 describes how this shapes her thinking about time in and outside work:

"I see my time in chargeable hours. ... Even – this is going to sound really sad – but even when I'm trying to do life admin outside of work, I'm thinking, okay, well, I could put my washing on, but if I'm going to do a boring job anyway, maybe I should just do some work ... and at least then that's going towards my chargeable hours. ... And you can see the number going up. People look at that every day, their chargeable hours." (2-MI/A)

Hyper-Performers are still committed to a long-term career in the firm and pursue this goal relentlessly. Perceiving limited space to shape their role and path, Hyper-Performers typically view partnership as the only available trajectory. They see this path as predefined, and deviations, adjustments or alternatives as limited or harmful to progression. In combination with a model where performance collapses into time, recognition is earned through overextension, and pressure is internalized, the emerging pattern is one of sustained overwork. Indeed, effective working hours of Hyper-Performers typically fall at the higher end of their teams, with chargeable time amounting to around 1,900–2,500 hours annually[12] and few quiet phases.

Sustained primarily by the prospect of partnership, the long-term outlook for Hyper-Performers is therefore fragile. As such, one associate from Firm 1 concludes with this conditional commitment:

"I wouldn't continue if I had decided that that wasn't what I wanted. Then I would just leave, because I could do a far easier and more contained hours job for still good money. ... As long as I enjoy it and still want to be on that trajectory, I will stay here. But if either of those things change, then I would leave very quickly because it's very demanding." (1-QCT/A)

5.4.2 Sustainable High-Performers

Interpreting and enacting the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, these associates sustain control over temporal demands, taking ownership and actively managing their time to enable high performance on a sustainable basis. Grounded in self-awareness and reflexivity, they see it as their responsibility and develop strategies to preserve both productivity and personal needs. One associate at Firm 1 describes his approach:

"I used to block an hour out of my diary every Monday just to think about how am I managing my life? ... There are so many resources ... and one of the challenges is getting people to use it, because sometimes people don't realise they're pushing an open door. ... But ultimately it's important that people take a responsibility over their own well-being." (1-NR/A)

Another senior associate from Firm 3 describes how she structures her day to balance professional and personal priorities:

"I structure my day so that I'm there for [my son's] breakfast time and I pick him up from school every day. And if that means I have to log on at 5:30 in the morning, then so be it. It means that I can keep all of my plates spinning and be a good mum and be a good solicitor at the end of the day." (3-JF/A)

[12] Annual chargeable hours of 1,900–2,500 translate to approximately 50-70 hour working weeks. For a full explanation of this calculation, see Chapter 4.

Based on this exercise of agency, Sustainable High-Performers exhibit a sense of control over their time. They maintain a pragmatic relationship to chargeable hours by focussing on controllables, while maintaining a sense of certainty that the output will follow. As one associate from Firm 2 notes:

> *"The hours always come. So at the moment, I think my chargeables are literally the lowest it's ever been, but I don't feel that stressed about it because I know there's going to be something that will come along that will bump it back up."* (2-IA/A)

Enacting a model where contribution is not based solely on time, boundaries are viewed as responsible and legitimate, and pressure is managed through communication rather than internalization, Sustainable High-Performers pace themselves to achieve high but sustainable levels of working hours. Their effective working hours typically lie among the higher or around the average within their respective teams, with chargeable hours ranging from around 1,700 to 2,300. While they regularly report extended periods of demanding working hours, they make deliberate use of opportunities for recovery and seek guidance when they need to.

Combined with a sense of agency over their well-being, Sustainable High-Performers therefore have a positive outlook for their long-term trajectory in the firm. The associate from Firm 2 exhibits this through a committed yet realistic view towards partnership:

> *"It's one of those things where you want it, but then you have to assess it. You have to be quite honest with yourself about the difficulties and challenges that come with it. Because once you get there, it's not an easy ride. ... So it's definitely something I want but I'm very honest about the challenges that come with it and I'm very happy to take those on."* (2-IA/A)

Many of these associates aim for partnership but, perceiving space to shape their path, some also consider and arrange feasible adjustments to their role or alternative trajectories.

5.4.3 Time Servers

Time Servers perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant and enact it outwardly, yet internally they reject it and withdraw commitment for a long-term trajectory in their current environment. In doing so, they defer control over temporal demands, suspending control over their time in the present to comply with their perceived ideal but intending to re-claim it through exit in the future.

Time Servers reject different aspects of the Hyper-Performer ideal. One associate at Firm 3 explains how her considerations to leave are directly linked to time being the main criterion of performance:

> *"I like my job and I think it suits me and my skills but I just can't see a path to partnership. And the time recording is a big part of that. Because I really struggle with that being the metric of your success. I find it incredibly frustrating. ... I think I would like to be in a role where time wasn't a focus."* (3-AP/A)

Another junior associate at Firm 2, in turn, rejects the underlying premise of receiving more work as a marker of recognition: *"I genuinely think if you're good at your job, all you get is more work ... you just get penalized for being good"* (2-CE/A).

Based on their framing of a limited time horizon, Time Servers adopt an instrumental approach to managing their time in the present. While continuing to perform and enacting Hyper-Performer expectations, they privately go into 'time server mode' – focussing on short-term rewards and ceasing to attempt shaping their role or career trajectory. One associate at Firm 3 describes how he optimizes his approach to the bonus policy:

> *"I once did the maths. You've got to do another 100 hours across the year .... But when you work that out relative to financial reward, it's basically minimum wage. It's not worth it. So I want to bill about 1620 to 1650 every year. Any more than that, I feel like I've wasted my time."* (3-SD/A)

Time Servers' working hours resulting from this calculated approach vary widely across individuals. While chargeable hours of some cluster around their firms' bonus targets (approx. 1,600-1,900 per year) with minimal non-chargeable contributions, others may continue to log higher hours (e.g. 2,300) as they remain embedded in demanding projects, for instance, or maintain performance levels to avoid scrutiny.

A central feature of time servers is that they view their career trajectory within their current environment as limited to the short term. Yet, as long as they remain, they conceal their withdrawal and maintain appearances based on the assumption that partnership is the primary expected trajectory and deviating aspirations would be penalized. One senior associate at Firm 2 demonstrates this performance when asked about partnership:

> *"No. (whispering, shaking head vigorously) All anonymized, right? ... You don't totally want to give the game up. I think they've got the message that I'm still very ambitious. I want to do very well, but I'm not pursuing a partnership track. ... If you know what it involves, I think you're mad. I think you're absolutely mad!"* (2-AM/A)

Another associate notes, *"Honestly- No. I will jump through the hoops that I need to jump through as if I want to be a partner. ... But I just think it sounds terrible"* (3-SD/A).

Time Servers achieve a sense of control over temporal demands not through actively shaping their work or asserting boundaries in the present, but through the anticipation of future exit. This distancing relieves them of the pressure of enacting the Hyper-Performer image relentlessly and long-term, which allows them to take a conscious and calculated approach to their temporal investment.

5.5 Variation and transitions of ideals: Towards relational construction

The analysis above has identified how associates manage temporal demands based on their interpretation of the Hyper-Performer or Sustainable High-Performer ideal as dominant. This raises a fundamental question: what shapes which ideal each associate comes to perceive as dominant? The following section examines patterns of variation across the sample and three illustrative transition accounts to explore this question. In doing so, it examines the contributions of several potential explanations – firm culture, career stage, and individual predispositions – before pointing toward relational dynamics as a potentially crucial and under-explored factor for understanding variation in ideals, which Chapter 6 examines in depth.

First, both ideals are perceived as dominant by associates across all three firms, with no clear firm-level pattern – among the associates quoted in this chapter alone, each firm includes multiple associates perceiving the Hyper-Performer ideal and multiple associates perceiving the Sustainable High-Performer ideal as dominant. This pattern of variation suggests that organizational-level differences alone cannot explain which ideal associates come to interpret and enact.[13]

This raises the question about the role of individual-level differences in interpreting expectations. Transition account 1[14] provides insight to this by exploring the transition of an associate based on a personal shift:

Transition account 1: From Hyper-Performer to Time Server

"It's worked out quite badly for me so far in that the deals just get so busy that I'm basically drowned for six months. (...) I definitely feel like my hours being high have helped me get a better name for myself, which sounds toxic, but obviously word's got around that I've been really busy at some points, so it makes you look good. (...) I remember one week last autumn where it was the worst it's ever been in terms of busyness. And I remember I'd come home every night from the office at 3, 4 a.m. And it got to the weekend and I was like, I literally haven't spoken to my boyfriend all week ... and I remember, that's when I just had like an existential crisis of like, Oh my God, what am I doing? Like, this is - what's this for? (...) And then obviously the deal's closed. I had a bit of a break and then I was fine and ready to go. And then it all happened again. (...) What I've realized after two years of being so busy ... is that I value time as opposed to money. ... I just see how hard the partners work. I don't know if I want that for me. (...) Obviously, I wouldn't tell anyone downstairs that! (2-PL/A)"

The experience of this junior associate from Firm 2 illustrates a transition from Hyper-Performer to Time Server triggered by an experience of realization that culminated from sustained overwork. The associate initially interpreted and enacted the Hyper-Performer ideal, managing temporal

[13] More subtle differences between how the ideals are interpreted across the firms are discussed in Section 6.1

[14] For clarity and conciseness, the editing of excerpts within these transition accounts included reordering to present a coherent, chronological narrative.

demands reactively and sensing a lack of control over her workload, as she describes being *"drowned"* by it. She understands long hours and busyness as markers of performance and recognition, though her use of the word *"toxic"* indicates an emergent discomfort with the values embedded in this model. Eventually, an extreme episode of overwork where work encroaches heavily into her private life prompts a moment of *"existential crisis"* and she starts questioning the subordination of private time she had previously normalized. However, the pattern repeats itself and she comes to reflect and reject the partnership trajectory which had thus far driven her enactment of the Hyper-Performer ideal. Yet she conceals this rejection, maintaining outward appearances while privately withdrawing and operating in Time Server mode.

This first transition account demonstrates a development where a junior associate experienced a reflexive reassessment and individual reorientation of values and priorities. Yet, notably, her interpretation of the dominant ideal remains stable. Instead, she comes to reject this underlying model and transitions into time server mode. In other words, her change in personal orientation did not prompt a reinterpretation of the dominant ideal. This suggests that while individual-level preferences and values may contribute to the Time Server orientation, they may not alone account for which underlying ideal associates perceive as dominant.

Transition account 2 extends this view by examining another transition of an associate based on a personal shift, but in conjunction with a shift in his environment:

Transition account 2: From Hyper-Performer to Sustainable High-Performer

"Pre marriage and children, I've always hit the top targets. ... I just had work. (...) We used to have a sort of Excel spreadsheet that will be sent around where you can see where everybody was in terms of hours. And it was always nice to be at the top or near the top of that. So when you look at people, you go, You slackers! (...) Now I get pulled in all sorts of directions with home life and stuff. So, realistically, I don't think I can be clearing literally the top anymore. And that's just the reality of what my life situation is now. Different bosses. (...) That was sort of like a cultural thing, that's changed. ... It was just our team. ... When we did our team merger, it stopped. (...) The extra hours [beyond targets], where you then do more to get the bonus, I don't think is actually as valuable as I believed it was. ... Financially, it is ... but I don't think it necessarily translates to elevation. What I'm starting to realize, the extra time that you have, if you spend it doing other stuff, the BD stuff, the being visible in the team, the non-billable stuff, I think that is to sort of get advanced – to get a promotion. (...) The work can be all consuming – if you let it. (3-XP/A)"

The experience of this senior associate at Firm 3 illustrates a transition from Hyper-Performer to Sustainable High-Performer resulting from parallel shifts in his personal circumstances and relational environment. He initially equated maximized chargeable hours with performance, competing to be at the top of his team's circulated hour rankings. A significant change in his private life effectively required him to reduce his working hours. Simultaneously, the visible hour

rankings that had thus far reinforced his understanding of performance were discontinued in his team. The associate came to recognize that he had previously conflated short-term bonus incentives and long-term progression criteria, and revised his understanding about chargeable hours and non-chargeable activities, reinterpreting performance as multi-dimensional. He transitioned to a Sustainable High-Performer stance, investing in broader contributions, pacing himself to preserve professional and personal commitments, and maintaining a sense of temporal agency as he recognizes that work's consumption of time is something one can actively shape.

Unlike Transition account 1, this second transition account traces the transition of a senior associate who has reached a different stage in his life and career. This prompts the question whether seniority may facilitate the interpretation of the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. However, this does not reflect a general pattern: junior associates such as 2-MG/A, 2-FT/A, and 1-AJ/A perceive the Sustainable High-Performer ideal as dominant, while senior associates including 1-QCT/A, 2-AM/A, and 1-FS/A interpret the Hyper-Performer ideal. Instead, Transition account 2 highlights the role of team-level changes in facilitating reinterpretation. The parallel changes in his relational environment enabled the associate to reinterpret performance criteria when his personal capacity changed. This points to the potential role that team-level signals and structures may play in shaping associates' interpretation of dominant ideal.

Transition account 3 further indicates this importance of team-level factors, as it examines the transition of a junior associate from Sustainable High-Performer to a Time Server perceiving the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant following a team change:

Transition account 3: From Sustainable High-Performer to Time Server

"I was working directly with a partner, he could see the quality of my work and so there was less emphasis on my hours. ... I got lots of positive feedback, was never pulled up on strictly billing 6.5 hours, because he knew that I was doing a lot of training, or business development. ... Our conversations about my career did not just center around what was going on the time sheet. (...) Fast forward to moving to London ... Their only way of understanding your workload or value add is what you put down on your timesheet. ... In my first review when I joined this team, basically the messaging was, Oh, you work really hard. The clients really like you. You take charge of matters, like you're doing the job well. But you're not billing enough. (...) Here, you literally just are this number on a spreadsheet. (...) Which I've really struggled with. And it's probably the part of the job I hate the most. (...) This team does not take into account any non-billable hours recorded. I do a lot within the firm, I participate in trainee recruitment, I organise our team meetings and I am on a lot of different committees. And that's just not recognised at all, which is incredibly frustrating. (...) I'm not someone that's happy just coming in and churning and then leaving. ... One of the key things that I want to look for in my next role at a firm is the extent to which they do take that into account. (...) Financially, it's not worthwhile to be working constant late nights, so I generally just try and do my 6.5 hours a day and log off. (3-AP/A)"

The experience of this junior associate at Firm 3 illustrates a transition from Sustainable High-Performer to Time Server prompted by a team change within the same firm. She was previously in an environment where she perceived the quality of her work and multi-dimensional contributions to be valued. After relocating to another team, she experiences performance to be assessed solely based on chargeable hours, with other qualities and contributions not being recognized. This creates a fundamental clash with her preferences and values, prompting her to reject the Hyper-Performer ideal she now perceives as dominant and plan her exit. Rather than adapting to maximize hours, the associate adopts an instrumental approach to her time. She thus becomes a Time Server, complying outwardly with minimum billing requirements while privately having withdrawn from long-term commitment to the firm.

This third transition account thereby suggests a reinterpretation of the underlying ideal based primarily on a change of office location within the same practice area at the same firm. This further indicates the potential role of highly local, team-level dynamics in shaping which ideal associates interpret as dominant.

These patterns and transition accounts offer indicative evidence that variation in temporal ideals may be shaped more crucially by relational dynamics at the team and dyadic level than by firm culture, career stage, or individual predispositions. A few additional observations point in the same direction. As shown in Section 5.2 above, trainees who are still rotating through teams have not yet formed coherent ideals. It is only once professionals settle into stable working contexts that such ideals emerge. Furthermore, where multiple associates were interviewed from the same team, those working primarily with the same partners interpret the same ideal while those working with different partners interpret different ideals. This suggests that the relevant context may be even more immediate than team-level culture. However, these observations are suggestive rather than conclusive. The next chapter therefore examines the dynamics at the immediate relational level to explore how partners project temporal ideals, how associates interpret these projections, and how alignment or misalignment emerge and unfold.

5.6 Summary and conclusion

This chapter examined how professionals manage temporal demands given co-existing narratives about temporal commitment in high-performance organizations (Sub-RQ 1). The analysis reveals that junior and mid-level professionals do not experience these narratives as competing – rather,

they perceive one coherent ideal as dominant and manage temporal demands accordingly. Yet both ideals are present within the same firms, producing variation in how professionals manage temporal demands that cannot be explained by organizational context alone.

Two temporal ideals emerged from associates' accounts, each characterized across four dimensions of professional practice. The Hyper-Performer ideal encompasses the interpretations that chargeable time translates into performance, busyness is a marker of recognition, subordination of private time is normalized, and time pressure is to be absorbed. The Sustainable High-Performer ideal encompasses the interpretations that performance is multi-dimensional, workload management is a professional responsibility, pacing is essential for long-term success, and accountability is to be bounded in accordance with one's role and seniority.

Associates' perceptions of and responses to these ideals produce three enactment patterns that reflect how they manage temporal demands. These patterns not only structure how associates enact expectations across the specific aspects of their daily practice but their broader relationship with time itself – how they experience temporal pressure, how they enact agency over their time, and how they envision their future trajectory within the firm. Hyper-Performers perceive and enact the Hyper-Performer ideal – suppressing temporal control, they react to demands rather than structuring time proactively, and internalize pressure; yet they remain committed to the organization. Sustainable High-Performers perceive and enact the Sustainable High-Performer ideal – sustaining control over temporal demands, they actively manage boundaries and exhibit a strong sense of agency while maintaining a pragmatic relationship with chargeable hours and a positive long-term outlook. Time Servers perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant but reject it internally, enacting it outwardly while withdrawing privately – deferring temporal control in the present and achieving a sense of agency through anticipated exit, they adopt an instrumental approach to managing temporal demands.

Both ideals appear across all three firms studied, with no clear organizational-level pattern determining which ideal associates perceive as dominant. Associates at similar seniority levels within the same firm – and even working in the same teams – perceive different ideals as dominant. Individual transition accounts illustrate that these perceptions are not fixed but shift when contexts change, and that individual predispositions and career stage do not alone account for which ideal associates come to perceive as dominant. The patterns observed suggest that team and dyadic level dynamics may play a more crucial role in shaping variation in ideal perception – a question examined in depth in the following chapter.

These findings contribute to the overarching research question by revealing that temporal meanings are not uniformly shaped by organizational context or formal systems. Despite operating within similar systems of measuring and controlling time, professionals construct varied interpretations about temporal commitment. The similarity of these variations across and co-existence within each organization suggests that temporal meanings are shaped by factors beyond organizational and temporal structures alone.

Chapter 6

Relational construction of temporal ideals

As the previous chapter, this chapter examines temporal meanings in the form of interpretations and expectations about temporal commitment that make up temporal ideals – meanings about how time is valued and managed in professionals' daily work. While Chapter 5 explored variation and enactment of temporal ideals, this chapter investigates how professionals construct temporal ideals in their immediate relational environment and the implications for overwork (Sub-RQ 2). Through analyzing interactions between partners and associates across the three law firms, it reveals how relational dynamics shape associates' perceived ideal, and how this reinforcement systematically tilts perceived expectations and enactment towards overwork patterns.

This analysis builds on the findings of the previous chapter. Chapter 5 examined how professionals interpret and enact expectations around temporal commitment in high-performance environments. It showed that early-career trainees initially draw primarily on official organizational communication and peer observations, where they encounter co-existing narratives about performance and balance without yet forming coherent images of the ideal professional. Among associates, however, two distinct ideals emerged that shape how associates manage temporal demands – the Hyper-Performer ideal centred around total availability, regular priority of work over personal life, and maximum time commitment, and the Sustainable High-Performer ideal that values sustainable pacing, boundary-setting, and ownership.

Each temporal ideal is constituted by four dimensions which represent underlying interpretations and expectations about how time is valued and managed in professionals' daily work. Associates interpret either of these two ideals as dominant – this constitutes their perceived ideal. Based on associates' individual responses to their perceived ideal, associates across firms manage temporal demands by enacting the two ideals in three different ways. Table 6.1 summarizes the two temporal ideals and their constituent dimensions, along with the three enactment patterns,

Hyper-Performer ideal	Sustainable High-Performer ideal
Dimensions of temporal ideal	
Time as performance indicator	Performance as multi-dimensional
Busyness as marker of recognition	Workload management as professional responsibility
Subordination of private time normalized	Pacing as essential for long-term success
Time pressure to be absorbed	Accountability to be bounded
Enactments of perceived ideal	
Hyper-Performers: enacting ideal accordingly	**Sustainable High-Performers**: enacting ideal accordingly
Time Servers: enacting ideal outwardly while rejecting it internally	

Table 6.1: Dimensions and enactment patterns of temporal ideals as developed in Chapter 5

providing the starting point for this chapter. Critically, Chapter 5 demonstrated that these interpretations are neither firm-specific nor individually stable over time, but indicated that temporal ideals may be constructed within associates' immediate relational environments rather than being determined by organizational culture or individual predisposition.

This chapter therefore examines how temporal ideals are constructed through ongoing relational dynamics between partners and associates. In these hierarchical working relationships, the signals from partners who associates directly work with become a crucial source through which associates interpret expectations about temporal commitment within the organizational and institutional structures of high-performance contexts. Partners reinforce interpretations and expectations through their messaging[15] – verbal expressions and commitments about what they expect and value – and through their visible practices, including behavioural modelling, use of formal systems, and enactment of commitments. Associates interpret these signals to form their perception of which ideal is dominant, and respond to this through their enactment. Partners, in turn, observe and interpret associates' enactment and respond through their messaging and practices.

Through these ongoing interactions, interpretations and perceived expectations settle and stabilize within working relationships. Crucially, examining patterns across the three firms reveals that while partners' messaging predominantly reflects the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, substantial proportions of associates perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant. This chapter

[15] I derive partners' messaging from interview data. I assume that how partners articulate their views in the interview reflects the interpretive frameworks and narratives (e.g. examples, language) they draw upon when communicating with associates. Where there is misalignment between partners' stated frameworks and associates' interpretations, this is highlighted in the analysis.

examines how this misalignment emerges by contrasting and analyzing cases of alignment and misalignment across partner-associate relationships from all three firms. It reveals four forms of relational interaction through which interpretations are reinforced, and shows how these systematically tilt towards Hyper-Performer expectations, thereby reinforcing patterns of overwork.

The chapter proceeds in three sections. Section 6.1 examines patterns of misalignment in temporal ideals across the three firms, establishing the consistent misalignment while acknowledging firm-level differences. Section 6.2 examines how relational dynamics reinforce interpretations and expectations across four forms of interactions by analyzing cases of interpretive misalignment and contrasting these with alignment cases. Section 6.3 examines an additional asymmetry in associates' enactment patterns and its implications for the persistence of overwork. Section 6.4 summarizes the chapter.

6.1 Patterns of misalignment in temporal ideals

This section examines how temporal ideals manifest at the partner and associate levels across the firms. Chapter 5 demonstrated that narratives about high performance and sustainable balance co-exist in official organizational communication across all three firms. Official organizational communication contains carefully crafted narratives about values and expectations, often produced under the direction of senior members, and disseminated via recruitment materials, training programs, and internal communications. The previous chapter suggested that, while novices entering the organization primarily draw on such signals at the organizational level and peer observations, professionals who have settled into stable team contexts may construct their dominant ideal increasingly based on their immediate relational environment. As employees working in direct relationships with specific partners, associates thus interpret messaging and signals they encounter in these relationships to form a perception of the dominant ideal in their environment. Partners, as managers and owners of the firms, hold their own views and interpretations about temporal commitment based on longstanding professional experience, reflecting one temporal ideal or the other more closely. While the processes through which partners come to adopt their views and participate in crafting organizational communication are beyond the scope of this thesis, this analysis examines how associates' construction of their dominant ideal is shaped by immediate relational dynamics with the partners they regularly work with.

Firm	Partners' messaging	Associates' perception
Firm 1	Predominantly reflects **Sustainable High-performer**	The majority perceive **Sustainable High-performer**. Around one third perceive **Hyper-performer**.
Firm 2	Predominantly reflects **Sustainable High-performer**	Around half perceive **Sustainable High-performer**. Around half perceive **Hyper-performer**.
Firm 3	Predominantly reflects **Sustainable High-performer**	Slightly over half perceive **Sustainable High-performer**. Slightly under half perceive **Hyper-performer**.

Table 6.2: Misalignment patterns of temporal ideals between interviewed partners and associates

As ideals are constructed within these immediate relational environments, misalignment occurs between what partners convey and what associates perceive. Across all three firms, partners' messaging predominantly reflects the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. Nevertheless, substantial proportions of associates in each firm perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant, representing a systematic asymmetry in how temporal ideals are interpreted within relationships. While this pattern is consistent across firms, firm differences account for nuanced differences in interpretations across aspects of daily practice that entail dimensions about temporal ideals – performance evaluation, workload management, balancing of private time, and accountability for client time. Based on these, firms also differ in their degree of misalignment between partners and associates. The following sections present this additional context and patterns for each firm to illustrate these differences while also showing the common pattern of misalignment examined in the remainder of the chapter.

Partners' messaging and associates' perceptions of ideals are presented in this section as synthesized patterns from partner and associate interviews, supplemented with illustrative quotes for selected themes. Within the firm characterizations, consistency refers to the degree to which partners' accounts align among themselves in their interpretation and description of firm practices and expectations within each dimension, while variation indicates divergence in their framing. Table 6.2 provides an overview of temporal ideals at the partner and associate layers across the three firms, revealing both variation between firms and the consistent misalignment pattern tilted towards the Hyper-Performer ideal.

Firm 1 Firm 1 is a top-tier firm with a strong culture centred on excellence, high status and collaboration. The firm operates with limited formal structures and significant partner autonomy, yet partners are highly consistent not only in how they characterize the firm's culture and values but also in how they describe expectations towards associates across the specific dimensions that constitute temporal ideals. Partners' messaging at Firm 1 predominantly reflects the Sustainable

High-Performer ideal, with strong consensus particularly around performance evaluation and workload management.

Regarding performance evaluation, partners show consistency specifically in rejecting the equation of time with merit, emphasizing high-quality work, reliable client handling, and broader contributions as qualities of a good associate. Partners unanimously reject chargeable hour targets as a basis for evaluation, which relates to expectations around workload management where busyness is not seen as the associates' responsibility. One partner explains:

> *"In reality, you don't need chargeable hours targets because everyone works hard and if they don't work hard, that's frankly not their fault, that's ours. ... It's not for individual people to have to take responsibility for their own levels of busyness. That's our job as partners."* (1-DQA/P)

As such, work allocation systems vary across teams but often involve collective partner efforts and systems designed to keep associates at the *"right level of busyness"* (1-M/M) and support broad exposure.

However, some variation emerges in how partners frame the balancing of private time and availability. While long hours and client priority are culturally expected, many endorse a 'stop-and-go' approach where intense stretches are followed by recovery, and emphasize it is *"not a culture of presenteeism"* (1-DQA/P). Another partner describes this autonomy associates have in managing their time:

> *"One of the freedoms you get here ... is the basic instruction is, You do the job and you do it really, really well. Then you go home. Now, home, that might be 6:00. It might be 11:00. ... But you will not have people doing hours they don't need to do."* (1-NR/P)

Yet some partners also normalize client-first responsiveness and subordination of private time more explicitly, with one partner commenting *"Fundamentally, we do the work that's required by our clients. So the time element of it, we will just soak up. We get on with it"* (1-OP/P).

Regarding accountability for client time, most partners convey that associates should be shielded from time and fee pressures, with partners taking ownership of pricing and write-offs: *"if I get it wrong, I'll sort out the numbers"* (1-QCT/P). Yet one practice group takes a different approach, and involves associates more directly in commercial aspects, expecting greater responsibility for containing time within budgets and fee quotes.

Most associates at Firm 1 interpret expectations in line with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, especially in perceiving evaluation as multi-dimensional, workload allocation as participatory, and their accountability for client time as bounded. They particularly emphasize the absence of billing targets as allowing use of quieter periods without pressure, and perceive autonomy

in time use with no expectation of face-time when work is light. However, approximately one-third of associates interpret the Hyper-Performer ideal. These associates perceive an implicit expectation of total availability with little room to decline or redirect work. Associates in several teams also perceive pressure to manage or absorb fee constraints, reflecting stronger commercial accountability than partners' messaging conveys.

Firm 1 thus shows relatively high alignment, with roughly two-thirds of associates perceiving the Sustainable High-Performer ideal that partners' messaging reflects. However, around one-third of associates perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant. This represents the systematic mis-alignment pattern across all firms: a larger proportion of associates perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal than the proportion of partners whose messaging reflects it.

Firm 2 Firm 2 is a second-tier firm with global presence and growth ambitions. It marks itself as a modern, forward-looking and inclusive firm with a sustainable high-performance environment. Partners at Firm 2 predominantly convey interpretations and expectations in line with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, though in more varied ways than at Firm 1.

Regarding performance evaluation, several partners stress that associates *"don't need to worry"* (2-SB/P) about targets, and frame expectations as achieving targets rather than exceeding them and maximizing hours. One partner describes his approach:

> *"Every partner needs to have happy associates – how to keep them happy? ... My goal is to make sure ideally that every associate in the team ... [is] just on that bonus level. That's to me the perfect sweet spot. They're working hard enough for a bonus, a nice one, but not crazy because then they're probably overworking."* (2-FT/P)

Many partners express a strong commitment to valuing broader, non-chargeable contributions to the firm, and frame sustainable pacing and realistic capacity management as essential for both associate wellbeing and business success. One partner explains:

> *"The qualities I admire most in associates that I perceive to be successful is the ability to roll up their sleeves and take ownership at their requisite level and, importantly, manage upwards. So if they are too busy to do it, I need to know that. Because a tired associate is not a high-performing associate. It's an associate that's probably going to burn out and leave. And then we've all lost our investment value in each other. ... So I honestly would rather associates have the ability to push back as long as it's reasonable. ... I've then got a long term, stable team of happy people, which in the long run will bring me the best results for my clients."* (2-IA/P)

Concerning workload management and balancing of private time, many other partners also emphasize that continuous overwork is unsustainable, noting that *"you can't expect people to go full flog the whole time"* (2-MG/P). To support sustainable workload management, firm leadership has encouraged teams to introduce formal allocation systems with coordination by non-partner

resource managers, though implementation varies widely across teams. A specific training session is also dedicated to encouraging associates to negotiate their workload actively and push back when necessary.

However, there is some variation across partners. While most frame balancing private time as essential, one partner explicitly rejects this possibility, stating the role is *"inherently shit for work-life balance"* (2-PL/P). Regarding workload management, this partner openly circumvents formal allocation systems and expects associates to absorb overruns. Several other partners also explain that they do not use the resource managers as intended, particularly for large and high-value tasks and projects. More broadly, concerning accountability for client time, fee pressure and efficiency are salient concerns, with several partners noting they informally assess and select associates on this basis. Associates are generally expected to take on greater involvement in case management and budgeting compared to Firm 1 to build commercial awareness as part of their development.

Around half of associates at Firm 2 interpret the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, perceiving evaluation as multi-dimensional with non-chargeable work valued, and understanding they have scope to decline work when justified. However, an almost equal share perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant. Regarding performance evaluation, these associates perceive chargeable hours as the primary metric of evaluation, with the highest hours rewarded both formally and informally. Concerning workload management, they interpret busyness as a symptom of recognition, and being allocated work by partners directly *"almost like a compliment"* (2-PL/A) – particularly when partners bypass formal systems to work with them specifically. Many view work as being "*given*" without option to decline or consideration of their available capacity. Regarding balancing of private time, long hours and full-time commitment are taken for granted as signs of ambition. Concerning accountability for client time, efficiency is understood as an important criterion of evaluation, with associates internalizing expectations to remain within fee quotes and absorbing overruns.

Firm 2 shows the highest degree of misalignment between partners' and associates' interpretations. While partners' messaging predominantly reflects the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, associates split evenly between perceiving the Sustainable High-Performer and the Hyper-Performer ideal.

Firm 3 Firm 3 is a globally operating firm positioned third-tier in terms of market status and salaries. Described by one partner as *"run by accountants"* (3-C/P), Firm 3 is more corporatized in

terms of its processes and governance than the others. Meanwhile, its wide range of work types from commoditised to highly bespoke brings variation in team cultures and dynamics, creating a more fragmented environment with separate subcultures. Partners at Firm 3 predominantly project the Sustainable High-Performer ideal.

With regard to performance expectations, associates face uniform daily billing targets of 6.5 hours, which are salient across partners' and associates' accounts but without clearly defined, uniform consequences. Many partners frame meeting the target as expected but emphasize the absence of pressure when work is light. One partner explains:

> *"People are generally aware of the target, but the firm has quite a nice culture and atmosphere associated with it, and if you don't have the work to do, for whatever reason at that point in time, I've got zero interest in seeing you here past half five. We don't have a jacket-on-back-of-chairs culture. But equally, to be clear, when people are required to work hard, almost all of them do."* (3-SG/P)

Concerning workload management, work allocation at Firm 3 mainly happens informally through stable working relationships, with associates expected to build relationships with partners and clients, and to indicate capacity through both formal and informal means. Regarding accountability for client time, pricing and billing are largely centralized at Firm 3, leaving associates with less direct exposure to commercial pressures, and expected to simply record time accurately and comprehensively.

In balancing of private time, partners show notable consistency in framing boundaries: working late nights or weekends is expected when necessary but not the norm. One partner explains:

> *"As a firm, we're not paying people to kill themselves. We're not paying people to work 9.30 to 5.30 and then turn their phones off either. ... We're not going to make you work for the sake of it, but when there's stuff to be done, you need to do it."* (3-NT/P)

Career trajectories are understood as open-ended with no uniform timeline towards partnership, and alternative roles are relatively more common than at the other firms.

However, some variation also emerged among partners. Regarding evaluation of performance, one partner acknowledges that non-chargeable activities are not recognized in immediate rewards. However, she frames these instead as associates' own investment in their development, *"it's all part of the jam tomorrow thing"* (3-AP/P), valuable for future partnership rather than current performance evaluation. Concerning interpretations of workload management, some partners treat accumulating work as a visible signal of performance, while also considering the value of the work associates are entrusted with. Regarding balancing, a few partners remark that younger associates prioritize private time more than expected, while also acknowledging the limits given the salary levels at Firm 3.

Just over half of associates at Firm 3 interpret expectations in line with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, perceiving that meeting billing targets is expected but not the primary criterion for performance, and understanding that placing high value on private time and asserting boundaries is legitimate. However, slightly under half perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant. These associates perceive performance as measured primarily through chargeable hours, reporting pressure to hit daily billing targets even when these feel uncontrollable, and perceiving no recognition of non-chargeable activities. Regarding workload management and work allocation, they perceive that partners reward the busiest associates with more work, creating visible *"tiers"* (3-AP/A) of associates within the team. Some experience declining work as unacceptable and reputationally damaging. Concerning balancing of private time, a few note that the expectation of not working long hours is incompatible with reaching daily billing targets given administrative work requirements.

Firm 3 shows moderate misalignment, with just over half of associates perceiving the Sustainable High-Performer ideal that is predominantly reflected in partners' messaging. Yet a substantial proportion perceives the Hyper-Performer ideal, reflecting the same systematic pattern as in the other firms.

Cross-firm patterns While there are differences between firms, several common patterns emerge with regard to the misalignment between partners' messaging and associates' perceived ideals. Firm 2 shows the highest degree of misalignment with partner accounts showing variation across all dimensions of the ideals. Firm 3 shows moderate misalignment in comparison. While accounts suggest fragmented subcultures across practice areas in this firm, partners' consistency in framing boundaries around private time may contribute to reducing misalignment between partners' and associates' temporal ideal. Finally, Firm 1 shows the least degree of misalignment alongside both a unified culture and consistent partner messaging, particularly around rejecting chargeable hours as a performance metric. These differences in consistency across dimensions between the firms may partly explain the differences between their degrees of misalignment.

However, despite these differences in degree, all three firms share the pattern that substantial proportions of associates perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant despite partners' messaging predominantly reflecting the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. This represents a systematic asymmetry in how temporal ideals are interpreted within relationships, where more associates perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal than partners project it. Both temporal ideals coexist in each organization, and misalignment is systematically tilted towards the Hyper-Performer ideal. Even

in Firm 1, where alignment is highest, one-third of associates interpret the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant.

To understand this pattern, the following section examines how temporal ideals are shaped through relational dynamics between partners and associates – how partners reinforce interpretations and expectations such that associates interpret these as dominant. Analyzing and comparing cases of both misalignment and alignment, it identifies four forms of interactions between partners and associates where interpretations are reinforced, and reveals how relational dynamics operate.

6.2 Relational dynamics of reinforcement: Examining misalignment

The patterns of misalignment reveal that partners' messaging predominantly reflects the Sustainable High-Performer ideal while substantial proportions of associates perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant. This section examines how this gap emerges by analyzing the relational dynamics through which interpretations and expectations are reinforced.

Partners reinforce interpretations and expectations through their messaging and their practices. Associates interpret this reinforcement to form perceptions of which ideal is dominant, and enact these perceptions in their daily work. Partners, in turn, are responding to associates' enactment. These interactions shape the interpretations and expectations across the dimensions that constitute temporal ideals.

This reinforcement occurs through four forms of interactions between partners and associates. Within each of these, relational dynamics may produce alignment or misalignment depending on which interpretations and expectations are reinforced. The following analysis examines these four forms in turn. First, associates interpret partners' messaging – the explicit expressions and commitments partners communicate about what they expect and value. Second, partners provide and express support through various means, yet associates interpret partners' visible practices: their behavioural modelling, use of systems, and enacted commitments rather than verbal messaging alone. Third, partners interpret associates' enactment of ideals – their behaviour and signals about workload, commitment, and wellbeing – which in turn shapes their messaging and practices. In these first three variants, misalignment occurs when interpretations diverge. Yet fourth, even when partners and associates share the same understanding about problems – rec-

ognizing systems or practices as dysfunctional – partners' responses may reinforce misaligned interpretations if partners fail to act on this shared understanding.

Across these forms of interactions partners reinforce interpretations and expectations across the dimensions that constitute temporal ideals – regarding performance evaluation, workload management, balancing of private time, and accountability for client time. Through this reinforcement across dimensions, relational dynamics shape which ideal associates construct as dominant.

To reveal how relational dynamics operate and how misalignment emerges, I present cases from different dimensions where misalignment occurs, then contrast these with cases where alignment is achieved in the same dimension. These cases show that misalignment is not random but systematically tilts towards Hyper-Performer perception, including when partners may be attempting to reinforce Sustainable High-Performer ideals.

6.2.1 Associates interpreting partner messaging

Partners convey interpretations and expectations through explicit messaging about what they expect and value. Associates interpret this messaging to form interpretations and perceived expectations across dimensions that constitute temporal ideals. The following cases show how relational dynamics in these interactions can produce alignment when expectations are explicitly clarified, or misalignment particularly when partners' messaging is complex or conflicting.

The first case illustrates misalignment in the interpretation of performance evaluation. A senior associate at Firm 2 describes how she understands the firm's performance expectations, recalling a past evaluation framework that balanced hours with quality, but notes the shift towards a more one-dimensional focus:

> *"We had a matrix where along one line was hours, and along the next axis, it was quality. ... I really like that system because it reflected both quality and quantity of a lawyer. ... We don't do that anymore. It's just time."* (2-AM/A)

The partner she works with presents a more nuanced interpretation. On the one hand, the partner acknowledges that high hours are often associated with strong performance:

> *"The better performers are probably busier. ... I think that there would be a correlation between the people that we rate as highly and their hours."* (2-AM/P)

On the other hand, the partner also clarifies that performance evaluation is multi-dimensional and hours alone do not determine advancement:

"I would never assume that somebody is a good associate because they have high hours. ... There's like this whole host of other things that are required. ... So if someone had low chargeable hours in the year or two years before they were made up [to partner], it would be discussed and would need to be explained ... but it's not an outright bar at all." (2-AM/P)

The partner articulates a complex interpretation: hours correlate with performance but are neither sufficient nor necessary to qualify as a high performer, or for promotion. Nevertheless, the associate focuses on the most visibly measured criterion – time – and perceives it as the dominant, if not sole, basis of evaluation. This interpretation of performance evaluation contributes to her interpreting the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant overall. After having aspired to partnership for many years, she explains that these expectations are now misaligned with her values and withdraws her commitment to this trajectory and a long-term career at the firm, enacting the ideal as a Time Server.[16] This case demonstrates how associates may prioritize simple, measurable criteria even when partners' expectations are more nuanced and complex.

A contrasting case demonstrates that multi-dimensional messaging can also be interpreted in alignment. Another partner at the same firm articulates how he evaluates performance and illustrates this in concrete terms:

"Let's look at the hours they've done, and then let's look at the wider contribution they've made. What have they done in terms of training? Mentoring? Have they participated in our social activities? ... They're not going to be effective partners of the firm if the only thing they know is work. ... I am much more likely to want to give a bonus to the person who's done that all-round contribution than somebody who's just done the 1800 hours. ... It's a package, you know." (2-MG/P)

In comparison, the junior associate working with this partner formulates it like this:

"Do I care about hitting 2000 hours? No. I'd much rather be a very good quality associate that hits 1750 or 1800 ... than someone who hits 2000, 2100 at a bad quality ... I think it's a mix. ... I really try and make sure I do ... the HR team colleague side of things ... managing a trainee, helping the team function I think they see that, that was definitely how I felt it was rewarded – it wasn't just the numbers." (2-MG/A)

This partner and associate express their understanding in strikingly similar terms. Both articulate evaluation as a package that combines hours, quality, and non-chargeable contributions. Both emphasize that maximizing hours is not the goal, using similar examples and thresholds. This strong overlap suggests that the associate may be directly reflecting the partner's messaging. The associate interprets these expectations in line with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal and perceives this ideal as dominant overall. This case demonstrates that multi-dimensional expectations can be reinforced effectively.

[16] See Chapter 5, Section 5.4.3 on p. 70. Associates' dominant ideals referenced here are based on the analysis in Chapter 5 of their enactment patterns, interpretations, and perceived expectations across dimensions.

The above cases address how alignment or misalignment is produced within one dimension of the temporal ideal. A brief additional example illustrates a related dynamic: when partners' messaging across different dimensions interplay, associates may prioritize one over another. An associate at Firm 3 describes contradictory messages between billing targets and balance:

> *"I don't think they have an expectation that we should be working all hours. ... They don't expect us to be online after dinner unless we're working on something urgent. ... But at the same time, there's still an expectation that we're recording at least 6.5 to 7 a day, which is hard to do without then working late. So there is a disconnect there."* (3-AP/A)

Partners project boundaries around private time while also maintaining clear billing expectations. The associate experiences these as difficult to reconcile without guidance on how to navigate this tension. Both messages are concrete but one is more measurable than the other. This associate interprets the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant and reports regularly working late to achieve her target. She has thus resolved the tension by prioritizing the more measurable and visible expectation.

These cases show how interpretations and expectations are reinforced through partners' messaging. Associates interpret explicit communications by partners to understand what is valued. However, they may resolve messages asymmetrically, particularly when these are complex or inconsistent. The cases of misalignment suggest that when messages are ambiguous or multi-dimensional, associates focus on clear and visible criteria, and that even when messages are clear but conflicting, associates prioritize the more measurable expectation. In both misalignment cases, this asymmetric resolution tilts interpretations towards the Hyper-Performer ideal, even when partners may intend to convey expectations that reflect the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. By contrast, the alignment case shows the associate reproducing the partner's multi-dimensional expectations in remarkably similar terms, and without privileging a single criterion. The parallels in language and examples suggest that these nuances and how criteria relate to each other were explained and explicitly clarified through the partner's messaging. Comparing these cases thus indicates that, particularly when messages are complex or ambiguous, explicit clarification may prevent associates defaulting to simplified expectations which typically align with the Hyper-Performer ideal. Without such clarification, however, misalignment may emerge and subsequently persist. Partners and associates may each resolve messaging differently, and as interpretations settle and stabilize, neither party perceives the other as holding a different interpretation, or recognize misalignment that needs addressing.

6.2.2 Associates interpreting partner practices

Beyond verbal messaging, associates observe and interpret partners' visible practices and behaviours to understand what is valued and expected across the dimensions that constitute temporal ideals. However, these interactions may reinforce interpretations and expectations that differ from partners' own expectations and interpretations about what they are conveying. This is particularly evident in cases where partners may be providing support to associates – through protection, guidance, or encouragement – yet associates do not perceive this as reinforcing Sustainable High-Performer expectations. Examining such instances in particular, the following cases show how misalignment between partners' and associates' interpretations emerges when partners' support efforts remain invisible or are undermined by their visible practices, and how alignment is produced when partners' support is visible and proactive.

The following case demonstrates how misalignment occurs despite partners' support efforts. A partner at Firm 3 describes how he manages commercial pressures for the associates who work with him. He explains his approach to fee negotiations and time recording:

> *"I try to not put that on them ... All I want people that work for me to do is to do the best job they can on it. Record their time accurately and do as good a job as they can. So if I've agreed some wacky fee deal with somebody, that's my problem, not theirs."* (3-SD/P)

The partner actively shields associates from commercial pressures, assuming risk and responsibility himself. In line with Sustainable High-Performer expectations, he expects associates to focus on quality and record time fully rather than assuming accountability beyond their role and absorb overruns, for instance. However, a mid-level associate who works regularly with this partner experienced sustained uncertainty about these very expectations, describing longstanding concern about his time recording:

> *"I always used to be worried, Are people not telling me these things? Are people not saying you spent too long? ... And the not knowing made me worried that I was doing it wrong and they just didn't say anything. Only now having had more open conversations, that partner said he never interfered with my time. ... So I assume the partners are happy unless told otherwise."* (3-SD/A)

The associate describes how the partner's silence left him uncertain about whether his time management met expectations, interpreting it as potentially indicating unspoken criticism. This contributed to him internalizing pressure and perceiving Hyper-Performer expectations in this dimension until an explicit conversation surfaced the partner's approach. In this case, the partner protected the associate from commercial pressure, yet this remained uncommunicated to the associate. As the shielding lacked visibility, the associate could not interpret the partner's practices as supportive.

Another case shows misalignment when partners' practices contradict their verbal support. A mid-level associate at Firm 1 reports, *"my chargeable hours have been sort of 1900+ each year"* (1-QCT/A) and describes 70-hour work weeks and weekend work as routine. She explains a typical day:

> *"A 12 hour day [chargeables] normally actually means sort of 8.30 to midnight ... But I try and leave the office sort of before 7, get home, have dinner, and log back on because the food here isn't that nice."* (1-QCT/A)

The associate normalizes complete subordination of private time to work demands, as she views this as necessary and non-negotiable for partnership progression – a core dimension of interpreting and enacting the Hyper-Performer ideal. Yet, the partner she works with expresses a strong commitment to supporting associates' work-life balance:

> *"I genuinely believe that you have to have work-life balance in your career to make it sustainable long term. ... And we're absolutely aiming to give [associates] an overall balance ... But what we offer is availability to clients - that's our product. ... So what we have to do within that offering is staff ourselves so that people do have sustainable careers with some stop and start rather than constant go."* (1-QCT/P)

While acknowledging the structural challenges in a client service industry, the partner projects that pacing and recovery are essential for long-term success, in line with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. However, a counsel working in the same team provides an observation of how this partner actually manages his own work-life integration:

> *"If I look at the examples within the team, [interviewee 1-QCT/P] in particular, he's not really making concessions to spend more time with his kids. ... From the moment they [had] the child, he's always still been available all the time, and they had, you know, the whole support network – day nanny, night nanny, parents nearby, and he's always available."* (1-QCT/C)

The partner models continuous availability despite his stated commitment to balance. His behaviour thereby reinforces different expectations than his verbal messaging. In this case, the associate appears to interpret this modelling as a stronger signal and infers total availability as the dominant expectation. This case demonstrates how misalignment occurs when partners' own practices undermine their commitment to supporting Sustainable High-Performer practices.

A contrasting case demonstrates that alignment can be achieved through consistent modelling. A senior partner at Firm 2 describes his view on balancing private life in this career:

> *"It's a marathon, not a sprint – you're hoping that, whatever hours somebody is doing, ... that they're looking after their own personal life, relationships, interests ... I don't see it as a choice between high chargeable hours and not having a life. If you're doing 2500 hours, that's too much. But there's lots of people who are doing 17-1800 chargeable hours, which is a decent whack, and who are going off and playing rugby or performing in an orchestra or just got three kids, or have got all three, you know."* (2-MG/P)

Crucially, the partner also implements this in his own work-life integration:

> *"Shock you to hear that – but I do a lot of things outside of work. [elaborating on several competitive sports and children] I'm just pretty ruthless with my time. If I've got a client meeting, I do that client meeting. If I've got a social engagement, I'll do that social engagement."* (2-MG/P)

In addition to stating verbally that balancing high performance and private priorities is both possible and expected, this partner also visibly models and enables this in his own practice. The junior associate working closely with this partner describes a similar approach to managing balance:

> *"In an ideal world, I get up at 6, go to the gym two, three times a week. ... And then see my girlfriend in the evening, She's generally the one who cooks in the week. I cook at the weekend. ... There is always more time in the day, but I choose to play rugby, go for a run, see my girlfriend, live life."* (2-MG/A)

This associate actively structures his time to maintain commitments within and outside work. Echoing the partner, he describes his choices with agency, exemplifying the enactment of the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. Aiming to *"get as quickly from trainee to partner as possible"* (2-MG/A), he is highly ambitious, and views his approach as legitimate and compatible with success. In this case, the visible modelling by the partner strengthens his stated support, as it makes Sustainable High-Performer expectations credible through the practices of a successful partner. This case shows how consistent and visible supporting practices by partners produce alignment to reinforce the Sustainable High-Performer ideal.

These cases show how interpretations and expectations are reinforced through partners' visible practices and behaviours. They demonstrate that associates rely heavily on observing these behavioural practices by partners to understand what is expected and valued. The first misalignment case shows that when partners' practices remain invisible to the associate, the absence of supportive signals results in the associate internalizing uncertainty and pressure, reinforcing Hyper-Performer expectations. The second misalignment case illustrates that when partners' verbal commitments are inconsistent with their own practices – how they manage their time, availability, and boundaries – associates prioritize these visible behaviours as signals over verbal messaging. Partners' actions thus carry more interpretive weight than their words, and can reinforce Hyper-Performer expectations by overriding other support efforts. The alignment case demonstrates that Sustainable High-Performer expectations can be reinforced when messaging reflecting this ideal is strengthened by corresponding visible practices. Across these cases, partners expressed commitment to Sustainable High-Performer expectations, yet whether alignment or misalignment emerges appears to be shaped primarily by the visibility and consistency of their practices. This suggests that verbal messaging alone may be insufficient to reinforce the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, with proactive modelling and visible supportive practices play-

ing a critical role in making interpretations credible and legitimate. This practice primacy may also contribute to the persistence of misalignment as practices and behaviours carry more inertia than verbal messages which can be more readily stated, clarified, or revised.

6.2.3 Partners interpreting associate enactment

The relational dynamics reinforcing interpretations and expectations involve not only associates interpreting partners' messaging and practices, but also partners responding to associates' enactments of their interpretations. Partners observe and interpret associates' behaviour and signals about workload, commitment, and well-being, for instance, and may adjust their reinforcement of expectations accordingly in their messaging and practices. This ongoing cycle of enactment and response shapes which interpretations and expectations are reinforced over time, and which temporal ideal is constructed within the relationship. In this form of interactions, alignment occurs when partners' interpretations align with associates' experiences and misalignment when partners misinterpret associates' perspective. The following cases demonstrate that when partners misread the reasons underlying intensive work patterns, misalignment can sustain the Hyper-Performer ideal.

The first case demonstrates such misalignment. A partner at Firm 2 describes how she interprets associates' motivation and relationship to chargeable hours:

> *"I think most people who are in a firm like this are here to work really hard, get a lot out of it, you know, really stimulated, like the atmosphere, like the culture and I don't think they worry about hours unless they don't have enough. ... They just want to be fulfilled and busy."* (2-MI/P)

The partner assumes that associates work long hours out of intrinsic motivation and do not experience pressure or anxiety from their chargeable hour metrics and targets. However, an associate she works closely with describes how chargeable hours dominate her thinking:

> *"I do actually think all of my time – in work, outside of work – of the value of my time. ... It's crazy, I feel like it rules my life. ... Which is really sad when I need to do jobs for myself outside of work, and I can't bring myself to do it. But if it's work, I can do it because it feels like it's got value. ... It means that I put my work and the time I spend on that – I deem that as more valuable than my life outside of work."* (2-MI/A)

The associate reveals constant preoccupation with chargeable hours and how this shapes how she structures her time both inside and outside work. She interprets the Hyper-Performer expectations centred around chargeable time as dominant, and enacts this ideal accordingly. The partner's interpretation suggests she is unaware of the associate's experienced pressure, and would thus perceive no need to intervene or adjust her messaging to support the associate. The partner thereby reinforces the Hyper-Performer ideal not through direct pressure to maximize

hours but through an idealized image of what drives the associate's behaviour, which precludes recognizing strain or providing support. This case shows how partners' misinterpretation of the motivation and experience underlying associates' enactment can result in silence that reinforces the internalization of pressure and the Hyper-Performer ideal.

A contrasting case demonstrates how alignment can be approached when partners recognize the difficulty of interpreting associates' enactment. Another partner at the same firm, who heads a practice group, reflects on what he has learned about this challenge:

> *"If I turn up to somebody and say, how's things?, everyone wants to say, it's great. It took me a long time as a leader to realise I don't get the proper authentic answers from people. So I need other people to get that information ... Every Friday, I get a list [from my work allocation manager], and that's people who've had a shocking week or something in their personal lives that's affected their work. They need me to turn up so they know that I recognized that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. ... It gives me visibility on the team."* (2-IA/P)

This partner has experienced that associates tend to present a positive front regardless of their actual experience, and has responded accordingly. To ensure recognition of strain and need for support, he has introduced a system that relies on an alternative information channel – the team's work allocation manager who is not a partner and works closely with the associates – to obtain more authentic insights about associates' experiences. In contrast to the previous case, the senior associate working with this partner expresses tranquillity about targets and a sense of control over her workload, interpreting the Sustainable High-Performer ideal as dominant (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4.2 on p. 69). She experiences the team as particularly supportive around personal challenges such as managing childcare: *"Everyone acknowledges that children bring different responsibilities and demands on your time, and they will be flexible with it"* (2-IA/A). The case demonstrates how partners recognizing the limitations of face-value interpretations of associates' enactment and adjusting practices to increase visibility can prevent the misalignment that occurs when partners misinterpret associates' signals.

Another case underlines the severe consequences of misalignment at this site. A partner in Firm 2 describes an associate in his team:

> *"I've got one girl in my team ... She's just got an amazing attitude. Actually to the point where I think it could do her damage, if she doesn't take a step back."* (2-PL/P)

The partner interprets and praises the associate's commitment as enthusiasm. He acknowledges the potential risk of overextension but frames it as self-driven. Yet meanwhile, this associate reports experiencing a period of personal crisis (discussed as one of the transition accounts in Chapter 5, see Section 5.5 on p. 71). She perceives the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant and has been enacting it accordingly. Following a repeated cycle of overwork, crisis moments and

failed attempts to change, she ultimately rejects this ideal and transitions to becoming a Time Server. She now questions her entire trajectory within the firm while concealing this shift. The partner's interpretation of her overextension as self-driven enthusiasm prevents him from intervening, while his implicit rewarding of her approach reinforces her perceived ideal. Despite the partner's awareness of her risk, she receives no support and perceives no space to express her strain. This case shows how prolonged misalignment between partners' interpretations and associates' experiences can have consequences that extend beyond sustaining associates' immediate strain to their withdrawal of commitment as a whole, representing a potential loss of investment for both parties.

These cases show how interpretations and expectations are reinforced through partners' interpretation and response to associates' enactment. Partners interpret associates' behaviour and signals which can shape whether or how they adjust their messaging and practices, which in turn shape associates' interpretations. The misalignment cases show that where partners misread overwork as enthusiasm or intrinsic motivation, they remain unaware of associates' strain, preventing them from offering support. The second misalignment case additionally demonstrates that the consequences of misalignment through these relational dynamics can extend beyond immediate work patterns to associates' longer-term commitment and trajectory. In both cases, the partners' silence sustains Hyper-Performer expectations, as the absence of corrective action implicitly reinforces associates' practices. In contrast, the alignment case shows that where partners adjust their practices to actively seek reliable interpretation of associates' enactment, this cycle can be broken, and pastoral care reinforces that Hyper-Performer practices are not expected.

6.2.4 Partners responding to acknowledged problems

The previous three forms of interactions involved misalignment through divergent interpretations. However, misalignment in outcomes can also occur when partners and associates share the same understanding about a dysfunction. Both parties may recognize a problem or challenge, why it sustains tension, and even how it should be addressed. Yet when partners do not respond accordingly, this can implicitly reinforce the status quo. Even where interpretations align, the absence of supportive practices to address acknowledged problems thereby typically results in Hyper-Performer practices remaining dominant.

The following case demonstrates how outcomes can remain misaligned despite shared understanding. A junior associate working in a small team at Firm 2 notes the downstream impact of fee pressure on how client time is managed. She describes the tension this creates:

> *"I think that the partner just quoted it wrongly. ... That's not really a me-problem. ... They're the ones with 20, 30, 40 years of experience. ... But especially when you're in a room with a partner and you hear someone saying, 'Oh my God, they took five hours to do that,' you're like, Oh God, they actually do look at the time entries. ... There is pressure to stay within the fee."* (2-CE/A)

The associate understands the responsibility for pricing and cost management to lie with the partner. Yet, she experiences informal scrutiny around how she manages and records client time on tasks and projects, creating pressure to manage costs herself. A partner she works with acknowledges the same tension and articulates what he should be doing to address it:

> *"What you should do is, I expect this to take two hours, if you're going wildly over that or you're getting near that, come back to me, because there must be a reason why it's taking longer. I've missed something in my assumptions, or you're going off on a tangent. But when was the last time I did that? Not that often."* (2-CE/P)

The partner describes providing upfront estimates and check-in routines as an appropriate practice but acknowledges in the same breath that he does not actually do this. In this case, both parties share the understanding that partners are responsible for managing cost and accountable for overruns. However, because the partner does not enact this in practice, the associate finds herself without guidance, internalizing the pressure she experiences. She explains that this creates a team-wide culture of under-recording as associates interpret expectations to absorb overruns, even though she personally objects to it:

> *"There are a lot of associates in the team who have been like, Often I just won't record my time ... [But] we shouldn't be doing work for free!"* (2-CE/A)

The associate interprets expectations in line with the Hyper-Performer ideal but rejecting this internally, she enacts it as a Time Server. The case demonstrates that despite shared interpretation of a problem, the absence of supportive practices by partners tilts associates' perceived ideal towards Hyper-Performer.

Another case shows how shared recognition of a problem does not translate into changed outcomes when partners undermine the systems designed to address it. An associate at Firm 1 describes a recent change in his team:

> *"The team has a recently introduced work allocation system. ... You go to the work allocation team, they look at everyone's capacity and allocate it correctly. Doesn't work out as smoothly as that sounds. ... The partners can't be asked to go through it and still prefer to go out bilaterally to associates, and then it's quite difficult as an associate to push back if a partner says, Do this job. ... If you have a matter that's 5 hours or below, you don't have to use the allocation team. So they pitch 20–30 hour jobs as below 5 hours and then mission-creep it. ... So it's gamed."* (1-OP/A)

This associate's team has introduced the allocation system in response to recognized problems with overloading busy associates with work. Yet, the associate describes that partners routinely circumvent the system by exploiting its thresholds. Beyond having practical consequences for work allocation, this gaming sends signals about partners' priorities that associates interpret. As partners introduced the system to protect associate capacity, they undermine this commitment by not supporting it in practice. Instead, they de-legitimize capacity limits as a concern for work allocation, a key dimension of the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. This case demonstrates how partners reinforce Hyper-Performer practices by de-legitimizing the Sustainable High-Performer ideal when they disregard protective structures.

A contrasting case demonstrates that the opposite can be achieved when partners actively use and respect protective systems. A partner at Firm 2 reports using the team's central allocation system *"probably more than anyone in the team,"* adding, *"you've got to respect the system – it's there for a reason"* (2-FT/P). Unlike partners in the previous example, this partner consistently follows the formal process to ensure workload is allocated based on capacity and associates have room to negotiate. This partner is also the head of the practice group, and he recognizes his visible use and support of the system as an important signal for both other partners and associates. An associate working with this partner describes experiencing the system's protection: *"They'll check in with you and say, are you okay to take this on?"* He confirms that based on this, he has been able to *"avoid a situation where I had multiple deals all popping up at once"* (2-FT/A). The associate experiences the system as functioning, enabling him to set boundaries and prevent overload. Interpreting this as legitimate and responsible workload management compatible with success, he perceives the Sustainable High-Performer ideal as dominant. This case demonstrates that when partners actively and visibly support systems that address recognized problems rather than merely acknowledging them as such, Sustainable High-Performer practices are legitimized and reinforced.

These cases show how interpretations and expectations are reinforced through partners' responses to acknowledged problems. Unlike the previous forms where misalignment emerged from divergent interpretations, here both partners and associates recognize that certain practices or systems are problematic or that guidance is needed. In such cases, partners' action or inaction in response to these problems sends particularly strong signals shaping associates' interpretations. The first misalignment case shows that when partners acknowledge the need for guidance yet fail to enact this in practices, Hyper-Performer expectations are reinforced despite

shared recognition that alternatives would be preferable. The second misalignment case illustrated that when partners introduce protective systems yet actively circumvent them, this not only implicitly legitimizes the status quo but actively de-legitimizes the protection these systems were designed to provide. Particularly when the acknowledgement of a problem is visible or public – such as when new systems are introduced – partners' subsequent disregard signals that the underlying purpose – capacity protection, sustainable workload management – is not genuinely valued. These responses by partners thereby amplify the reinforcement of Hyper-Performer expectations as associates interpret partners' responses as particularly revealing. By contrast, the alignment case demonstrates that when partners actively use and respect protective systems, these can reinforce Sustainable High-Performer practices and expectations.

6.3 Construction of the dominant ideal and persistence of overwork

The previous section showed how interpretations and expectations are reinforced through relational dynamics between partners and associates across four forms of interactions. Partners convey expectations through explicit messaging, and where this is complex or inconsistent, associates prioritize clearer or more measurable expectations. Beyond messaging, associates interpret partners' visible practices and modelling. Where supportive practices remain invisible or practices contradict other support efforts, associates attribute greater interpretive weight to partners' visible practices which may override verbal commitments. Partners also interpret and respond to associates' enactment – their signals about workload, wellbeing and commitment. Where partners misread these signals, they do not recognize associates' strain and do not intervene, implicitly reinforcing existing patterns. Finally, even where interpretations align and both parties recognize problems, disregard for their solutions can actively delegitimize protective causes. Crucially, across these relational dynamics, a consistent pattern emerges: when misalignment occurs, it systematically tilts interpretations towards the Hyper-Performer ideal despite partners' messaging predominantly reflecting the Sustainable High-Performer ideal.

The preceding analysis showed how relational dynamics asymmetrically tilt interpretations and expectations towards Hyper-Performer within the dimensions of temporal ideals – how time translates into performance, how workload should be managed, what balancing of private time is legitimate, and how accountability for client time is understood. However, an additional pattern emerges in examining which ideal associates enact – their dominant ideal – in cases where their ideal is not entirely coherent across dimensions, and this further contributes to the asymmetric

tilt towards the Hyper-Performer ideal. Associates who enact the Sustainable High-Performer ideal interpret expectations in line with this ideal across all observed dimensions[17]. However, when associates' interpretations do not align completely across dimensions, and they interpret some dimensions in line with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal but also some dimensions in line with the Hyper-Performer ideal, then the Hyper-Performer dimensions override the others in shaping which ideal they enact. The reverse pattern – where Sustainable High-Performer dimensions override Hyper-Performer ones – was not observed in the data.

For instance, an associate at Firm 1 interprets performance evaluation as multi-dimensional and not measured through chargeable hours. Yet she interprets other dimensions in line with the Hyper-Performer ideal, and her overall enactment pattern is Hyper-Performer, maintaining intensive work patterns, managing temporal demands reactively, and internalizing pressure. Another associate at Firm 3 interprets expectations in balancing private time in line with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, understanding boundaries as legitimate and perceiving that working long hours was not expected. However, she interprets Hyper-Performer expectations in the other dimensions and this overrides the inconsistent dimension, leaving her enacting the Hyper-Performer ideal as a Time Server. In contrast, associates who enacted the Sustainable High-Performer ideal generally described interpretations aligned with this ideal across all observed dimensions.

This asymmetric enactment, combined with the relational dynamics examined in the previous section, helps explain the persistence of overwork in high-performance professional organizations. Chapter 5 established that associates' perceived ideal shapes how they manage temporal demands, with Hyper-Performer enactment characterized by intensive work patterns and subordination of private time. The preceding analysis showed that across dimensions, relational dynamics systematically reinforce Hyper-Performer interpretations when misalignment occurs. This section revealed an additional mechanism: even when associates interpret expectations in some dimensions in line with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, misalignment in other dimensions can tilt associates' overall enactment towards Hyper-Performer. Together, these dynamics sustain Hyper-Performer practices including overwork, even when organizational rhetoric and senior professionals may be emphasizing sustainable performance.

[17] Not all dimensions were observable across all interviewees; this pattern is based on professionals where interpretations across multiple dimensions could be identified.

6.4 Summary and conclusion

This chapter examined how professionals construct temporal ideals through relational dynamics in their immediate working relationships, and the implications for the persistence of overwork in high-performance professional organizations (Sub-RQ 2).

The chapter first examined patterns of misalignment in temporal ideals across the three law firms. While partners' messaging predominantly reflects the Sustainable High-Performer ideal – emphasizing multi-dimensional performance, reliable workload management, sustainable pacing, and bounded accountability – substantial proportions of associates perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant, interpreting expectations around chargeable hours maximization, total availability, subordination of private time, and absorption of time pressure. Despite some differences in degree and nuances of interpretation, this misalignment pattern is consistent across all three firms and represents a systematic asymmetry where associates' perception tilts towards the Hyper-Performer ideal beyond what partners' messaging reflects.

The analysis then examined how relational dynamics between partners and associates reinforce the interpretations and expectations that constitute temporal ideals. Through analyzing cases of alignment and misalignment across four forms of interactions, it revealed how these dynamics shape associates' perceptions of temporal ideals. The first form examined how associates interpret partners' messaging. This demonstrated that when partners convey complex or conflicting expectations, associates appear to prioritize clear and measurable criteria, which typically align with the Hyper-Performer ideal. Alignment occurs when partners explicitly clarify nuances and how criteria relate to each other. Without this, however, divergent interpretations may settle and stabilize. The second form examined how associates interpret partners' practices. This revealed that associates rely more heavily on partners' visible practices and behaviours than on their verbal messaging to understand what is expected and valued. When visible practices undermine verbal commitments or supportive practices remain invisible, associates attribute higher interpretive weight to what they observe and Hyper-Performer interpretations may override partners' supportive efforts. Consistent modelling, however, may be crucial in making Sustainable High-Performer expectations credible. The third form examined how associates' interpretations are shaped by partners' interpretation of associates' enactment – their signals about workload, wellbeing and commitment. It showed that when partners misread intensive work patterns as enthusiasm rather than recognizing strain, the absence of intervention implicitly reinforces

Hyper-Performer expectations, and that Sustainable High-Performer expectations can be legitimized when partners adjust their messaging and practices to provide pastoral care. The fourth form examined a particular form of partner practices: how partners' responses to acknowledged problems reinforce associates' interpretations. It revealed that when partners do not address acknowledged problems or actively disregard systems designed to address these, this not only legitimizes the status quo but actively delegitimizes the underlying protective cause, amplifying the reinforcement of Hyper-Performer expectations. Together, these relational dynamics show that misalignment systematically tilts interpretations towards the Hyper-Performer ideal, resulting in more associates perceiving this ideal than reflected in partners' messaging.

An additional asymmetry emerged in examining associates' enactment of ideals. When associates' interpretations are not entirely consistent across the four dimensions that constitute temporal ideals, Hyper-Performer interpretations can override Sustainable High-Performer interpretations, tilting associates' overall enactment towards Hyper-Performer. This asymmetric enactment, combined with relational dynamics tilting interpretations towards the Hyper-Performer ideal, thus systematically sustains Hyper-Performer practices.

These findings address the chapter's research question by revealing how temporal ideals are constructed through relational dynamics of reinforcement in immediate working relationships between partners and associates. Across four forms of interactions, these dynamics shape interpretations and expectations that constitute temporal ideals, and asymmetrically reinforce Hyper-Performer expectations. Additionally, asymmetric enactment – where Hyper-Performer enactment overrides Sustainable High-Performer interpretations – further contributes to the persistence of overwork patterns. Together, these dynamics explain why Hyper-Performer practices and overwork persist despite organizational rhetoric and partners' efforts to reinforce Sustainable High-Performer expectations. The discussion chapter will further elaborate on potential explanations for these asymmetries.

This contributes to the overarching research question – what shapes how professionals construct the meaning of time in high-performance organizations – by revealing relational dynamics in the immediate working environment as a crucial determinant of temporal meanings and work patterns. The findings demonstrate how these dynamics shape meanings about temporal commitment – how time is valued and managed in professionals' daily work – across four forms of interactions between junior/mid-level and senior professionals. This shows that professionals construct temporal meanings relationally rather than based on individual predisposition or or-

ganizational culture alone. Hierarchical working relationships thus serve as a crucial site where temporal meanings are interpreted, reinforced, and enacted within the structural constraints that characterize high-performance environments.

Chapter 7

Managing temporal uncertainty

The previous chapters examined how professionals interpret and enact expectations about temporal commitment in high-performance environments, revealing that temporal meanings are neither organizationally determined nor individually stable. Chapter 5 showed that associates take different approaches to managing temporal demands based on which temporal ideal they perceive as dominant. Chapter 6 demonstrated that these ideals are constructed through relational dynamics between partners and associates, with meanings fragmenting and stabilizing within immediate working relationships. This chapter takes a different approach in focussing on an unusual case where a firm decouples its internal organization from time, contrary to the industry's dominant time-based system. By building an understanding of how Firm 1 operates without billable hour targets or time-based performance metrics, this chapter illuminates how professionals construct temporal meanings – manifesting here as understandings of how time and value relate – when the time-based system is less pronounced.

As explained in the methodology chapter, Firm 1 emerged as a revelatory case in that it does not rely on time to organize and value work internally despite handling the most bespoke, novel, and complex work among the three firms. This presents a puzzle because, as developed in the theory chapter, the time-based system has historically functioned as the industry's primary mechanism for managing temporal uncertainty – the irreducible uncertainty about the temporal development of events, i.e. what happens when and how long it takes – that is inherent to professional work. This chapter therefore asks, how do professionals at Firm 1 manage temporal uncertainty without relying on temporal parameters? In doing so, it reveals not only an alternative approach to managing temporal uncertainty but also advances understanding of the construction of temporal meanings and how this is shaped by relationships.

The analysis shows that professionals at Firm 1 manage temporal uncertainty by decoupling time from value. Rather than attempting to predict and control temporal parameters in their work, professionals cultivate and focus on deep client relationships that provide alternative bases for determining worth. Through strategies that leverage relationship knowledge, offset returns over the long-term, and create lock-in effects, professionals reduce their reliance on predicting how long work takes, when it occurs, and whether it continues in the future. This enables a fundamental shift: time becomes less significant in determining value throughout the organization, allowing internal operations to decouple from billable hours. The case thereby demonstrates how relationships can replace time as a determinant of value, becoming a foundation for temporal meanings themselves. Throughout this chapter, I use the term *relationship focus* to refer to this organization-wide prioritization of building and cultivating deep client relationships, while the term 'orientation' remains reserved for individual-level conceptions.

The chapter proceeds in three sections. Section 7.1 establishes how professionals at Firm 1 experience temporal uncertainty and pressure from clients to make predictions in their work. Forming the largest part of the chapter, section 7.2 first examines the firm's relationship-centric approach, and then shows how their client-facing strategies enable professionals to defy prediction across three temporal dimensions, and how this decouples time from value, thereby substituting relationship focus for temporal prediction as an approach to managing temporal uncertainty. Section 7.3 demonstrates how this decoupling extends internally, shaping how the firm organizes work and evaluates performance without relying on time-based metrics. Section 7.4 summarizes the chapter.

While the analysis draws on all interviews from professionals at Firm 1, it relies predominantly on partner perspectives. As opposed to the previous chapters, which focused on internal relationships between partners and associates, the core of this chapter examines partners' experiences and practices in managing relationships with clients externally. Through partners' dual role as both practising professionals and firm managers, their temporal meanings translate into the internal organization of the firm and working relationships with associates.

7.1 Temporal uncertainty of work

7.1.1 Acknowledging temporal uncertainty

Professionals at Firm 1 recognize and highlight temporal uncertainty as an inherent and inevitable feature of their work. One partner at Firm 1 noted, *"unpredictability ... is always an inherent challenge for our work"* (1-IA/P) while another referred to a legal project as a *"fundamentally uncertain system"* (1-IM/P). Particularly in contentious work (litigation, arbitration and investigations), several interviewees pointed out that a legal case may take anything between a few months to several years. As one interviewee explained, the development of cases depend largely on *"acts of people who are not within your control"*, thus making it *"impossible to estimate"* (1-KB/P). Being notably explicit and consistent in this acknowledgement, Firm 1 stands in contrast to Firms 2 and 3 where professionals predominantly did not highlight temporal uncertainty as a salient challenge in their work.

Besides uncertainty about the temporal development of a project overall, professionals at Firm 1 also highlighted that the amount of work and therefore time that is required for each individual step involved is difficult to predict, even when the process or task is clearly defined:

> *"In some terms, the processes are all laid out in law and clear, but the reality is ... you rarely predict perfectly what they'll do and how much work that will mean."* (1-IA/P)

> *"Like- if you said to me, How many hours does an X exercise take? So say for an SPA, which is a classic document in Corporate, if you said to me, How many hours on average does that take to do? Absolutely no idea. Like literally no idea."* (1-DQA/P)

So while cases in contentious work may have wider duration ranges, professionals across practice groups at Firm 1 describe experiencing uncertainty as to how tasks and projects develop over time and how long they take. Another partner from the Corporate team, for instance, illustrates how even when many parameters are known, there are always unexpected developments:

> *"How many times have I sat down at a kick-off meeting, and I know the lawyer on the other side, I know the bankers around the table. You know everybody, basically. We've all said, we're here for the same reason, let's do this very sensibly. But it never works. Something gets thrown in, which gets somebody upset. ... Some piece of information comes up that nobody was aware of, or it's just human beings, people... ... There's always something that seems to come in."* (1-IM/P)

As this quote shows, partners consider human behaviour and information ultimate sources of uncertainty that make the development of projects unpredictable. As such, partners across interviews converged on several key drivers of temporal uncertainty in their projects: the number of parties involved, their positioning (aligned vs. opposing interests), familiarity with those parties from previous interactions and their competency; and the degree of control over the scope.

Firm 1's focus on the top segment of the market means that much of their work is not just complex and high value but also novel. As one management professional explained: *"The work that we do, it's anything complex difficult that has an innovative solution to it, that hasn't been done before"* (1-S/M). Or as one partner put it, *"Our USP is, if it's not been done before, we can think about it!"* (1-QCT/P). This novelty and complexity typically means that there are no previous similar cases to provide indications about the process and scope, making it even more difficult for professionals at Firm 1 to predict the work and time involved.

In sum, professionals at Firm 1 experience and emphasize their work as characterized by particularly high levels of temporal uncertainty. Despite their extensive experience, partners perceive the temporal development of tasks and projects as fundamentally unpredictable based on the novel and complex nature of their work, combined with dependence on multiple parties' behaviour and emerging information. This explicit acknowledgment of irreducible uncertainty distinguishes Firm 1 and shapes how professionals approach predictions and manage prediction demands, as the following section shows.

7.1.2 Rejecting prediction

Consistent with acknowledging temporal uncertainty, professionals at Firm 1 express a fundamental rejection of making predictions within their work. In the context of clients increasingly demanding budget certainty and upfront estimates, one partner comments on the idea of using data-driven tools to support pricing estimates:

> *"Sometimes I think it would be great to have some tool that says, you know, in the past 27 refinancing cases, we've spent this amount of time on ... dadada. I'm just not sure that that data would be any good. And that you get a better result. You pretend to have a better result."* (1-OP/P)

The partner holds that predictions would not be accurate and characterizes their attempt as pretence, potentially creating a false sense of confidence rather than adding useful information. Further underscoring this notion, another partner describes his own practice of managing client requests for estimates as containing a degree of deceit:

> *"So I would always resist it initially because I just don't think it's helpful, because I could be so badly wrong. Then they push back and then I literally – [laughs] no, this is recorded, I don't put my finger in the air, but- but it is a bit of that. I say to them – it is really a finger in the air."* (1-NR/P)

These accounts reveal that partners characterize prediction not only as unhelpful within their work but also misleading and potentially deceiving. In their view, predictions risk anchoring expectations in contexts where deviations are likely, creating an illusion of certainty that may prove harmful when developments diverge from estimates. Notably, the second partner openly

expresses these reservations to clients, attempting to resist prediction demands, yet ultimately complies with their request when pressed.

Partners' rejection of prediction permeated their discussions of pricing arrangements. The majority expressed a general dislike for upfront estimates and particularly for close-ended pricing arrangements involving pre-agreed fixed or capped fees based on predictions of the duration of time effort a project may entail. As one partner stated with regard to upfront estimates, *"we hate doing them"* (1-KB/P), and several specifically referenced an *"anchoring effect"* of predictions, or expressed preference for open-ended pricing arrangements such as hourly rates *"because if not, I can see us catching a cold, it being very difficult with the client"* (1-IM/P). In the face of temporal uncertainty, partners at Firm 1 thus reject prediction as fundamentally problematic within their work. Attempting to predict the unpredictable is viewed as misleading since it creates an illusion of certainty and anchors expectations, resulting in challenges when developments diverge. Professionals' conception of prediction as inevitably inaccurate also renders it an unreliable basis for managing resources and determining value internally, resulting in its rejection as an organizing principle more broadly.

This rejection of prediction reflects Firm 1's distinctive approach of acknowledging temporal uncertainty. In contrast, professionals at Firms 2 and 3 predominantly expressed confidence in their ability to predict time and effort rather than characterizing their work as inherently unpredictable, even in litigation teams (e.g. *"I know how long it takes ... Been there, done that. So you can price ..., and usually that does work."*, 2-MI/P). Yet despite their rejection and attempts at resistance, partners at Firm 1 acknowledge they regularly comply with client demands for price estimates and close-ended pricing arrangements where these are the industry standard. It is within this tension between rejecting prediction and facing pressure to predict nonetheless that professionals at Firm 1 develop alternative approaches to managing temporal uncertainty.

7.2 Managing uncertainty through relationship focus

Professionals at Firm 1 experience their work as characterized by high levels of temporal uncertainty and thus reject relying on predictions as fundamentally unsuitable to manage their work, regarding them not only as inaccurate but also misleading. Yet, pressure from clients and industry norms mean that professionals must nonetheless comply with demands to negotiate pricing upfront and provide estimates in their external service offering. Deeming those predictions inad-

equate for managing their work, however, professionals must find alternative ways to organize and value work internally.

The response at Firm 1 lies in their focus on cultivating and leveraging deep client relationships. While most professional organizations emphasize the importance of strong client relationships, Firm 1 maintains various practices through which relationship focus – an organization-wide prioritization of building and cultivating deep client relationships – is embedded particularly deeply and distinctively. Compared with Firms 2 and 3, relationships represented a more dominant theme across interviews at Firm 1, shaping decisions, priorities and values throughout the organization. The first part of the section will demonstrate how cultivating and prioritizing relationships serves as a central organizing principle at Firm 1 in their internal structure, their recruitment and socialization practices, and their partner selection process.

Based on their deep relationship knowledge and relationship-centric orientation, professionals at Firm 1 employ strategies to reduce reliance on three temporal parameters – the duration, timing, and recurrence of work. Their relationship knowledge allows value-based pricing independent of time spent. Taking a long-term relationship-level perspective on returns rather than focussing on discrete projects enables investing and assessing value across extended timeframes. And sustained investment in relationships – including through uncompensated work – builds depth and reciprocity, creating lock-in effects that stabilize future work flow. Across these strategies, the firm's relationship focus substitutes for temporal prediction as the basis for determining worth. This substitution achieves a fundamental decoupling of time from value in client-facing work, which in turn enables professionals to reduce reliance on predicting temporal parameters, and on temporal developments overall. The second part of the section develops these three strategies of defying prediction at Firm 1, before synthesizing how they decouple time and value and create resilience to temporal uncertainty.

7.2.1 Organizing for relationship focus

Professionals at Firm 1 pride themselves on their relationship focus. As one partner stated, *"we specialize in relationships"* (1-IM/P). Another one highlights as the main goal to *"build long term relationships and be trusted advisors"* (1-QCT/P). With reference to a recent client survey, one partner said:

> *"Obviously one of the things that the firm has always sold: the clients, we have very good relationships with clients. You'd think that every firm has good relationships with their clients but apparently they don't. Apparently we are standouts."* (1-NR/P)

Overall, the ways in which interviewees across Firm 1 emphasized relationships in various contexts supports its high significance and revealed it to be a dominant driver of partners' decisions.

Beyond rhetoric, this relationship focus is embedded through several distinctive organizational practices at Firm 1. The following subsections show how the firm's ways of structuring, socializing and selecting their professionals each contribute to professionals developing and prioritizing deep client relationships in their work. First, the firm's internal structure ensures professionals cultivate deep relationship knowledge. Second, the firm's approach to recruitment and socialization orients professionals towards making relationship-centric business decisions. And third, the firm's internal selection and promotion process secures strong relationship expertise among partners.

Structuring for relationship focus Firm 1's organizational structure enables professionals to develop deep client relationships and cultivate relationship knowledge through its approach to specialization. Rather than organizing lawyers and teams around technical specializations in particular areas of law or industry sectors, Firm 1 adopts a deliberately broad specialization approach, whereby professionals retain a breadth of expertise across legal domains. One partner illustrates what this means for his practice:

> *"I tend to follow my clients if they get into crises. So I've had a couple of clients that have gone through financial restructurings and I stayed close to those processes. I've got clients that have had big litigation cases and I've stayed close to those. There's a coverage model that we operate, which means that I'll stay involved in things that are outside my immediate practice area working alongside other team members."* (1-G/P)

The partner describes how the broad specialization approach allows him to sustain engagement with his clients by supporting them across various legal issues – his specialization is the client relationship rather than the practice area. Through this long-term engagement, professionals accumulate knowledge not only about isolated legal problems but also clients' wider contexts, priorities, and work patterns. As another partner noted, *"we've got a broader view of what clients are doing in their businesses and are able to help run them"* (1-DQA/P). By prioritizing relationship-building and client continuity over technical specialization, Firm 1 thereby ensures professionals develop both depth and breadth in knowledge about their clients.

In practice, the broad specialization approach manifests at Firm 1 in a relatively low number of large teams without further sub-division, except for loose, largely informal cross-cutting groups that build expertise in emerging areas. Professionals across the firm highlight this structure as a differentiating factor compared to other firms. One associate recalled identifying the broad specialization as something *"genuinely different about the firm"* (1-NR/A) when he was applying,

and that it has proven to make a meaningful difference in his daily work through the variety it introduces.

Firm 1's relationship-centric structure thus allows professionals to sustain client engagement over extended periods and across diverse legal projects. Without being confined to advising them only in specific technical domains, professionals' accumulated relationship knowledge extends to clients' broader business contexts and internal dynamics. Firm 1 thereby embeds relationship focus in its organizational structure through prioritizing relational over technical specialization to enable professionals' cultivation of deep client relationships and relationship knowledge.

Socializing for relationship focus Firm 1 ensures professionals develop a relationship-centric orientation through socializing them from the earliest stages of their careers. Like other professional organizations, and law firms in particular, Firm 1 recruits professionals directly from university and develops them through a highly structured training programme. The programme at Firm 1 begins with a two week induction course, followed by two years of rotating through different teams with ongoing training and social events. One trainee commented, *"it's very intense ... They really chuck everything at you in those first few weeks."* (1-KB/T). In addition, there are various mentor and buddy schemes in place to accompany professionals' socialization and development, or as one associate put it, *"chaperoning people's careers"* (1-DQA/A). This intensive socialization creates a foundation for transmitting organizational norms, values and practices.

What distinguishes Firm 1 though, is that it additionally limits lateral hires, i.e. it avoids recruiting professionals from other firms. While the term typically refers to moves at partner or senior level, at Firm 1 it applies even at very junior levels. As one management professional noted, *"if somebody comes in as an NQ from a different firm, they still call that person a lateral"* (1-S/M) – where NQ is someone who is newly qualified after having completed their training. This terminological distinction of new hires even at the junior level reflects how unusual it is for professionals to join Firm 1 from elsewhere at later career stages. As a result, as one professional noted, *"most people at the firm have trained at the firm, have been here since the first day of their careers and therefore frankly that's all they've ever known"* (1-DQA/P). This is particularly pronounced at partner level, with multiple partners explicitly noting that they had *"never worked anywhere else"*.

This hiring and recruitment policy effectively creates a silo, where the majority of professionals have been exposed exclusively to the norms, values and practices at Firm 1. As one management professional emphasized, *"they don't have any external influence, none"* (1-S/M), espe-

cially regarding the internal organization of work. Besides ensuring consistency in the orientations professionals develop at Firm 1, this insulation shields them from alternative frameworks prevalent elsewhere in the profession. The following shows how this is relevant to developing a relationship-centric orientation at Firm 1, in particular.

Professionals at Firm 1 characterize prioritizing business or commercial considerations vs. prioritizing the relationship as competing orientations. Several interviewees contrasted these foci, with one partner recalling a colleague stating that *"in some cases, we need to be able to say, We just need to do a really good job for this client and forget about recovery"* (1-QCT/P), and the commercial department reporting that partners were frequently *"putting the relationship ahead of the business"* (1-M/M). Both interviewees cautioned that prioritizing relationships can sometimes go too far, indicating the relationship-centric orientation is so pronounced at Firm 1 that it raises concerns about striking the appropriate balance.

Given this tension, it stands out that associates at Firm 1 are not involved in practices or decisions that concern the business aspects of client work such as pricing, billing or cost management. One associate, who had previously worked at another firm, specifically contrasts this:

> *"My experience at [other firm] was that everyone was much more aware of the business aspect of running the firm. Associates were conscious about how much they were billing, ... and being as efficient as possible to make sure that we were able to recover as much as possible. ... Whereas here, we're not as associates brought into any of that understanding of what partners earn, what profitability is, anything like that."* (1-FS/A)

Many other associates similarly report being *"completely removed from that process"* (1-NJE/T), or being told, *"billing isn't your responsibility"* (1-DQA/A). Even one senior associate awaiting decision on his partnership promotion noted: *"If I was to be made partner, you start in May and you basically had no exposure to how billing stuff works at all"* (1-IM/A). By shielding associates from commercial pressures and considerations, Firm 1 facilitates the development of a relationship-centric orientation among its professionals, as this protects them from a competing orientation as they conceive it.

Through its approach to socialization, Firm 1 embeds relationship focus as the prevailing orientation professionals adopt from the outset of their careers. Based on early recruitment, intensive training and limited external hiring, the firm creates both consistency in values, norms, and practices, and insulation from external influences that might compete with relationship cultivation. By shielding associates from commercial aspects, the firm thereby facilitates professionals' development of an orientation that prioritizes relationships.

Selecting for relationship focus The internal promotion process at Firm 1 ensures strong relationship expertise among those selected for partnership by primarily testing proficiency in building and managing relationships.

The so-called partner track at Firm 1 entails a two-year process of exposure and relationship-building throughout the firm. Candidates are required to work with a number of partners in other teams and achieve certain thresholds in their internal references. One senior associate currently on this track describes his experience and compares it with what he knows from peers at other firms:

> *"You have to prove a slightly different skill set. They're not judging you on your abilities as a lawyer, because they're not in your specialist field, so there's more of an emphasis on presenting properly and being proactive and that sort of thing. ... The partnership tracks at other places generally don't involve impressing people in unrelated groups as much as it does here."* (1-IA/A)

The candidate illustrates how the process evaluates interpersonal over technical skills. Several associates characterized this assessment as highly *"subjective,"* or *"opaque,"* indicating they struggle to identify the evaluation criteria. One mid-level associate, however, explicitly recognized the connection to relationship skills and competence:

> *"Ultimately, it's about common sense and people skills ... I have a short period of time to build a relationship with someone, to convince them that I'm competent and I'm someone that they want to work with. And that's exactly what you do with clients."* (1-NR/A)

As the associate explains, the requirement to build relationships and gather endorsements across the firm effectively tests and selects for candidates' relationship expertise.

Firm 1 ensures relationship expertise at the partnership level by prioritizing proficiency in building and managing relationships over technical and management competencies in partner selection. Given partners' role as both practitioners and owner-managers, this not only ensures strong relationship expertise within client-facing work, but also secures relationship focus through successive generations of firm leadership.

7.2.2 Defying prediction through relationship focus

The preceding analysis showed how Firm 1 cultivates relationship knowledge, relationship-centric orientations, and relationship expertise among its professionals through the organizational structure, socialization practices, and partner selection process at the firm. These capabilities form the foundation for strategies through which professionals manage temporal uncertainty in their client-facing work. Rather than attempting to predict temporal parameters, professionals draw on their relationship focus to reduce reliance on three dimensions of temporal uncertainty: how

long work takes (duration), when it occurs and generates value (timing), and that it continues in the future (recurrence). By reducing reliance on predicting temporal parameters in this way, professionals defy predicting – making their work substantially independent of these predictions despite the limited scope for avoiding prediction in client-facing work.

First, by relying on deep relationship knowledge, professionals can price work based on value to clients rather than predicted duration. Second, taking a relationship-centric orientation enables evaluating returns across extended timeframes rather than for discrete projects which reduces dependence on when specific work occurs and generates value. Third, through sustained investment in relationships like providing services underpriced or free of charge, professionals further deepen relationship knowledge and reciprocity, creating lock-in effects that ensure recurrence of work in the future. Across these three strategies, relationship focus substitutes for temporal prediction as the basis for determining worth, achieving a fundamental decoupling of time from value that fosters resilience rather than vulnerability to temporal uncertainty at Firm 1.

Defying predicting duration of work Professionals at Firm 1 reduce their reliance on the duration of work by determining prices based on value to clients rather than predictions how long tasks and projects take. Drawing on their relationship knowledge of clients' situations and priorities, professionals gauge what a specific piece of work is worth from the client's perspective and adjust their pricing accordingly. One partner illustrates how this manifests in her pricing:

> *"Then I look at the value to the client. It could be the same documentation, timeline, risks, complexity, time on the clock, but a different value, and then I would have two different prices."* (1-NJE/P)

Similarly, another partner emphasizes, *"there is no such thing as a pure time-based bill, because we always do a value check"* (1-W/P), and most partners identified *"value to the client"* as a key determinant of price. A senior partner explains what such value to the client means in practice:

> *"Value for the client is so important ... Where something is so premium, we could be adding value, adding a fee for what's beyond our cost. On the other hand, if it's something which is more compliance related, it's not a deal where they're going to make money out of, then it's cost to them. And so for that sort of work we may feel we need to not expect to make as high a recovery."* (1-H/P)

The partner differentiates between work that creates strategic or financial benefit for clients and work that is purely cost-bearing, and notes how this requires adjusting internal profitability expectations. Thus, rather than pricing and billing for legal work primarily based on chargeable hours, professionals at Firm 1 view time duration as one consideration among many, and treat the client's perspective on value as a major factor in their pricing.

To make these assessments, professionals rely on their relationship knowledge. Based on sustained engagement with clients through the firm's coverage model described earlier, individual

partners have deep and wide knowledge of clients' evolving business contexts and diverse legal situations. As part of this model, professionals also actively stay informed about clients' ongoing projects and developments – *"maintain contact with the client"*, as one professional put it, even when *"they're not doing anything which could be a number of years, we're always looking at ways to have conversations with them"* (1-S/M). This allows professionals to maintain understanding of internal dynamics and priorities that many interviewees identified as crucial in their pricing to gauge factors such as, *"how important is this to them?"* (1-GAJ/P), or *"get a sense of how much leeway there is within the client"* (1-V/P).

Professionals at Firm 1 additionally facilitate the assessment of value from the client's viewpoint by how they frame their positioning in relation to clients. Rather than viewing themselves as external advisors, professionals at Firm 1 understand themselves more like integrated team members working alongside clients:

> *"There's all sorts of reasons why they're intense, a lot of these jobs we do. (..) And in order to work successfully in these intense situations, you really need to feel part of the team. ... You want to feel that you're in the trench with the client, with your sleeves rolled up. You're literally in the trench with the client."* (1-W/P)

Another partner describes this positioning and notes the contrast and discomfort when having to adopt the service provider role:

> *"You spend your life being on the same side as your client, fighting for them, supporting them, helping them. And then when it comes to fees, suddenly you're sitting across the table from them."* (1-IM/P)

These quotes reflect the prevailing framing among professionals at Firm 1 where they position themselves in alignment with clients rather than pursuing distinct business interests. This framing is also distinctive at Firm 1 in that professionals very rarely made adverse comments about clients throughout interviews. With regard to pricing, positioning themselves deeply aligned and united with the client enhances professionals' ability to adopt the client's viewpoint and assess value. By *"putting yourself in their shoes"*, as one partner noted, *"we value it based on how you value it"* (1-C/P).

Through value-based pricing grounded in relationship knowledge and alignment, professionals at Firm 1 reduce their reliance on predicting duration of work. By assessing the value of work from the client's perspective rather than pricing and billing based on time spent, professionals rely on their relationship knowledge instead of temporal prediction to determine pricing. In other words, by replacing time with client value as the basis for prices, professionals substitute relationship knowledge for duration estimates to derive those prices. As time spent becomes less relevant in

pricing, Firm 1 thereby reduces its reliance on predicting how long tasks and projects take. This constitutes one way in which Firm 1 decouples time and value.

Defying predicting timing of work Professionals at Firm 1 reduce their reliance on the point of time at which specific work occurs and generates value by taking a long-term relationship-level perspective rather than evaluating profitability on a per-transaction basis. As described earlier, professionals' relationship-centric orientation is cultivated through organizational practices at Firm 1. A central element of developing this orientation is adopting a long-term time horizon on how relationships generate and professionals measure economic value to the firm. As one associate explains his understanding:

> *"The [Firm 1] model has been: We have longstanding clients, we keep those clients, that pays the bills. Other firms are more aggressive on acquisition, bigger turnaround of clients, that pays the bills. Very different approaches."* (1-OP/A)

This long-term relationship model has implications for pricing, as one partner explains:

> *"There'll be times where we're willing to pitch lower because of that relationship. ... We can build a much better long-term relationship by not just trying to get the highest we can get away with."* (1-H/P)

Indeed, most partners referenced the *"wider client relationship"* as a key consideration in their pricing and billing decisions. This was particularly pronounced at Firm 1 compared to Firms 2 and 3 where the broader relationship between the client and the firm featured far less in partners' accounts of pricing practices.

Adopting this long-term perspective enables professionals to evaluate financial returns from their relationships across extended periods. Rather than assessing profitability for each project individually, professionals at Firm 1 focus on overall profitability on a per-relationship basis. Depending on relationship context and value to the client, this may entail underpricing projects in the interest of the relationship, as the quote above indicates. However, another partner illustrates how the approach plays out over time:

> *"I do a lot of work for a client and the recovery is low, it's always hovering between 45 and 50%. So if you were to look at my team's figures in isolation, you say, what are you doing with this client? But then they had a big issue ... a few years ago, which resulted in significant litigation, and they made many multiples of millions at a great recovery out of that work. ... You can't look at things on a short term basis. You have to look at them on a longer term and see what the cross-selling opportunities and the firm-wide opportunities are rather than just looking at in your narrow silo."* (1-VK/P)

The example shows how professionals view lower returns on some types of work as offset by higher-value work in later periods, resulting in variable profitability across the relationship timeline. Notably, this approach extends beyond anticipating future returns, as another partner's consideration shows:

> *"Have we just charged them a huge amount of money and therefore we need to do this one in a more lean fashion, from a cost perspective?"* (1-DQA/P)

The partner moderates pricing with a view to recent billing history instead of exhausting return potential from each transaction, underscoring how professionals at Firm 1 conceptualize profitability as distributed over time rather than generated at specific points in time. Through this temporal distribution of profitability, they become less susceptible to the timing of when work generates value, as high and low returns balance across the extended timeline.

By adopting a long-term perspective, professionals at Firm 1 evaluate returns at the relationship level across extended timeframes rather than for discrete projects. They thereby draw on their relationship-centric orientation to replace points in time with longer periods for assessing value. As this approach enables balancing and offsetting higher and lower profitability work across time, the timing of specific returns becomes less critical. Firm 1 thereby reduces its reliance on predicting when specific work occurs and generates value. This represents a second way their relationship focus enables Firm 1 to decouple time and value.

Defying predicting recurrence of work Professionals at Firm 1 invest in relationships by providing underpriced or even uncompensated services to clients. This enables them to build reciprocity, gain additional relationship knowledge and embed themselves in client operations, creating lock-in effects to stabilize future work flow.

Accepting lower profitability work not only forms part of balancing long-term financial returns, but also serves an important function in cultivating relationship knowledge at Firm 1. Through maintaining ongoing engagement with clients, professionals access and further deepen their understanding of clients' business and legal context even when work is not necessarily profitable or chargeable. One partner illustrates what this *"free work alongside"* may involve:

> *"Like just today, I had somebody pick up the phone to discuss an issue. But I'm not doing a transaction for that person, I don't have a major matter on. ... It's part of the relationship where they call you up and ask you for your advice on a topic. But that ten minute call with the CEO doesn't find itself back into some crazy bill."* (1-DQA/P)

The partner further describes advising clients on such day-to-day queries free of charge as part of being *"at the heart of the relationship"* at Firm 1. Another partner reports uncompensated services involving substantial resources: *"We'll do some workshops on a no charge basis and provide them with a free secondee for a period of time"* (1-G/P). Whether through regular informal advice or embedding professionals via secondments, this engagement enables professionals at

Firm 1 to remain closely connected with their clients, creating both reciprocity and providing ongoing access to clients' day-to-day operations, internal dynamics, and evolving priorities.

Across interviews, the practice of providing uncompensated work was particularly evident when professionals were seeking to be instructed for specific new projects with clients. One partner explains this strategic approach in the context of pitching for a deal:

> *"We offer them 50 grand of free reading-in time as a kind of kicker ... it makes us look like we're offering something ... far better for us to get appointed and become embedded, even if I say, look, for the next two or three weeks we'll just work for free."* (1-C/P)

The quote demonstrates how professionals at Firm 1 seek to embed themselves early within the client's project. By offering substantial uncompensated work, professionals secure appointment for an initial scope assessment, positioning themselves with a foot in the door to the broader engagement. Besides building goodwill, this initial free work enables professionals to accumulate project-specific knowledge that makes it more costly for the client to later instruct a different firm. Together, the reciprocity and knowledge gained through this embedding approach thereby produce a lock-in effect for the full project.

This strategy of creating dependence through knowledge and reciprocity extends beyond the project level to the client relationship as a whole. One partner explains what he calls *"cementing"* the relationship through underpriced and uncompensated work:

> *"There's quite an important function for these smaller pieces of work at reasonable prices to lock in the relationship so that when the big deal comes along, there's absolutely no way they go anywhere else. We know all about their share plans, we know about their IP, we know about their tax. And then the Corporate partner says, And that will be 10 million pounds, please."* (1-QCT/P)

The partner demonstrates how client lock-in works at the relationship level by leveraging free and lower profitability work to access and secure relationship knowledge within the organization. The knowledge professionals accumulate through sustained engagement across legal areas uniquely positions Firm 1 to be instructed on high-value projects, as clients depend on the firm's depth and breadth of understanding for important work in particular.

In summary, Firm 1's approach to investing in relationships consists not only of strategic pricing but also developing strong ties via reciprocity and knowledge accumulation. One senior partner succinctly captures this investment logic:

> *"We sort of invest in you and give free advice and bond with you and, you know, then we do the transaction. But we hope we'll also get the next transaction, and the next one and the next."* (1-NR/P)

By providing underpriced and uncompensated work, professionals at Firm 1 cultivate goodwill and secure ongoing access to knowledge about their clients to bind clients to the firm, creating

lock-in effects. The resulting dependence stabilizes future work flow, reducing the need for temporal forecasting. This investment approach thereby substitutes certainty about continued client engagement for predictions about work recurrence, despite uncertainty about the temporal development of specific opportunities.

7.2.3 Decoupling time and value to manage temporal uncertainty

Across these three strategies, a common pattern emerges: professionals at Firm 1 substitute relationship-based assessments for temporal parameters in determining value. In pricing work, relationship knowledge of client context and priorities replaces predictions about duration of work as the basis for deriving value-based fees. In evaluating returns, their relationship-centric orientation enables a long-term perspective, which replaces point-in-time assessments with evaluation across extended periods. And regarding planning future work flow, the firm's relationship investment approach produces lock-in effects that create stability to replace the need for forecasting recurrence. Together, these strategies show how core elements of Firm 1's relationship focus – relationship knowledge, relationship-centric orientation, and their way of investing in relationships – substitute for temporal parameters as determinants of value.

This substitution achieves a fundamental decoupling of time and value. As relationship-based assessments replace temporal parameters for determining value, time becomes disconnected from value determination and thereby becomes less relevant to organizing and managing work. This, in turn, reduces reliance on temporal predictions as professionals price, evaluate and invest without needing to assess how long work takes, when it occurs, or whether it recurs. In essence, by drawing on the core elements of their relationship focus, Firm 1 replaces prediction with cultivating relationship-based certainty to manage temporal uncertainty.

Professionals themselves articulate this decoupling when describing how the firm operates. Partners explicitly contrast Firm 1's approach with the dominant time-based model. One partner states, *"we don't really work on a 'on the clock' basis"* (1-DQA/P), while another emphasizes the disconnect between time and value: *"at this place, not every hour is worth the same"* (1-FS/P). A third partner differentiates this from other firms: *"we're not wedded to the hourly rate or the seconds on the clock ... as other advisors"* (1-NJE/P). These statements reflect how decoupling time and value represents an underlying logic at Firm 1. Professionals conceptualize time and value as non-equivalent, and emphasize that time does not play as central a role in the organization as

it does at competitor firms. Instead, time and value operate independently, with professionals focussing on relationships rather than temporal measurement to determine worth.

Relationship focus thus constitutes an alternative approach to managing temporal uncertainty. Professionals at Firm 1 decouple time and value by replacing temporal parameters with elements of their relationship focus to derive value. This decoupling reduces reliance on prediction, as temporal parameters become less relevant. This, in turn, creates resilience to temporal uncertainty, as the firm can operate effectively without accurate predictions of duration, timing, and recurrence of work. Firm 1 thereby manages temporal uncertainty through cultivating relationship-based certainty instead of relying on prediction and control of temporal parameters. In doing so, it defies prediction as a way of managing uncertainty: while professionals cannot fully avoid making predictions in their client-facing work, they make their work and its value substantially independent of these predictions which fosters resilience at the firm level. As the following section shows, this approach to managing uncertainty through decoupling time and value also emerges as an organizing principle for the firm's internal practices.

7.3 Organizing for temporal uncertainty

The decoupling of time and value professionals achieve through their relationship focus in client-facing work extends to internal organizational practices at Firm 1. As a professional partnership, Firm 1's partners are simultaneously practising professionals, the firm's owners, and managers. This organizational structure means that partners' approach to managing temporal uncertainty is directly translated into the firm's internal management and organization. The principle of decoupling time and value – where time becomes less relevant because value is determined through relationship-based assessments rather than temporal parameters – manifests particularly in how partners manage associates' work and evaluate their performance. By adapting the internal organization to reduce reliance on temporal parameters, Firm 1 creates organizational resilience to temporal uncertainty at both the client-facing and internal levels.

Decoupling of time and value manifests first in how partners manage associates' work on client projects. If value is determined independently of time at the client-facing level, partners have less need to manage or predict the duration of time associates spend on tasks internally. Across interviews, professionals reported that associates are generally not given duration constraints for their work. When asked whether they provided indications on how long to spend on tasks, many

partners expressed surprise (*"That's an interesting question"*, 1-GAJ/P), had to pause to formulate responses (*"what would I say... Pff..."*, 1-OP/P), or reacted in ways suggesting they found the idea unusual. One partner stated firmly, *"I wouldn't personally* ever *say to associates that you've got 10 hours in terms of a time budget!"* (1-G/P), and an associate confirms, *"I would never, never get that. Like no one would ever tell me how much time I should spend on something"* (1-QCT/A). Instead, the general instruction reported across interviews is *"it takes as long as it takes (to get it right)"*. Some interviewees indicated that providing such time budgets would be *"countercultural"* (1-VK/P) or *"not consistent with our values as a firm"* (1-G/P). Rather than containing time duration within certain budgets, associates are expected and trusted to work thoroughly and deliver quality work.

While associates are not given constraints for the duration of tasks, there are deadlines to specify the timing for completing work. However, professionals at Firm 1 minimize temporal constraints where possible through managing client relationships. While some deadlines are less negotiable (e.g. court-imposed or regulatory deadlines), particularly client-set timelines can provide room for flexibility. As one senior professional explains with regard to deadlines, *"it's more about how you manage the client ... rather than the amount of time"* (1-QCT/C), reinforcing how relationship management replaces managing and predicting temporal parameters at Firm 1. As one partner put it, *"we don't do silly deadlines"* (1-KB/P), indicating they seek to avoid unnecessary temporal constraints. Consistent with this approach, deadlines are reported to be *"often quite generous"* (1-DQA/T) by one trainee, and one partner describes short, non-extendable deadlines as *"unusual"* (1-W/P). By focussing on their relationship management to minimize or negotiate temporal constraints, professionals at Firm 1 thereby maintain flexibility regarding the timing of work where possible.

Through these practices – not providing duration constraints and minimizing deadline restrictions where possible – professionals at Firm 1 reduce their reliance on predicting and managing temporal parameters more generally to organize their work. This maintains both openness regarding how long tasks take and flexibility in timing *"to do what needs to be done"* (1-V/P), enabling associates to focus on quality rather than time constraints. By organizing work without temporal constraints, the firm extends the logic of decoupling time and value from client-facing work into day-to-day internal operations.

The decoupling extends beyond managing daily work to how professionals assess performance at Firm 1. While controlling and incentivizing professionals based on their chargeable hours is

standard practice in the industry, Firm 1 neither sets targets nor evaluates performance based on time. As one partner emphasizes:

> *"We've never had targets. We don't have target for me, we don't have targets for the associate. So we don't have billing targets, we don't have hourly numbers, all of that."* (1-NR/P)

Another partner states: *"I think, as a firm, we have always recognised that billable hours is not a particularly good way to assess our time or assess our value"* (1-M/P). By not using time as a metric for performance evaluation, Firm 1 extends the most direct decoupling of time and value from client-facing pricing to internal evaluation of professionals' contributions. Just as professionals do not derive value charged to the client based on temporal parameters, they do not assess the value of professionals and their work based on time recorded.

Almost all interviewees highlighted this absence of targets as a distinctive and important feature of working at Firm 1. Professionals' time recording behaviour, in particular, evidences that the absence of chargeable hours in performance evaluation extends beyond formal policy. Although the firm does not set targets, professionals are still required to produce time records which are reviewed by partners for pricing and capacity allocation purposes. In spite of these reviews, professionals treat time recording as a purely administrative exercise without being concerned about career implications. As one mid-level associate states:

> *"I don't worry. It's just timers, it's just click, on and off... I would describe it as a purely technical aspect of my working life ... like the amount of time I record doesn't affect me."* (1-QCT/A)

Similarly, one trainee's account reveals indifference to gaps in her time records due to under-recording:

> *"If you have loads of little bitty things, things often just slip through the cracks, because you're not going to start a timer for every two minute thing that you do. So the time reflected in my time sheets is probably lower than I actually did."* (1-DQA/T)

Indeed, partners across the firm highlight under-recording as a particular challenge, with one complaining about a *"degree of laziness"* among associates *"because it doesn't really matter as they see it"* (1-NJE/P). One associate with lateral experience also notes, *"associates are much worse at time reporting here than at either of my other two firms because there's no incentive to do so"* (1-FS/A). This nonchalance about under-recording suggests that associates genuinely do not consider recorded time as relevant to their evaluation. This demonstrates that chargeable hours are not only excluded as a criterion of performance evaluation by formal policy but also not perceived as an informal criterion by associates.

Through minimizing temporal constraints and evaluating performance independently of time, Firm 1 reduces the significance of temporal parameters in how it manages and values work

internally. Defying temporal prediction externally – pricing independently of duration, evaluating returns independently of timing, and creating certainty in work recurrence – reduces the need for the firm to tightly manage or control temporal parameters internally. This enables professionals to maintain flexibility: partners can manage associates' work without imposing duration constraints, and maintain generous deadlines. This lack of need for temporal control in day-to-day work extends to performance evaluation, enabling the firm to assess professionals independent of chargeable hours. Conceiving and generating value without relying on temporal measurement or prediction – decoupling time and value – thereby extends from client-facing work at Firm 1 to both the task level and organizational level, fostering resilience to temporal uncertainty throughout the organization. This, in turn, allows professionals at Firm 1 to focus on producing high quality work and cultivating relationships rather than preoccupying themselves with time. As one associate concluded:

> *"You can spend so much time in this job wasting brain capacity on things that do not serve you ... and worrying about time is one of them.* (1-NR/A)"

7.4 Summary and conclusion

This chapter examined how professionals manage temporal uncertainty – the irreducible uncertainty about the temporal development of events – in their work (Sub-RQ 3). To address this question, the chapter focuses on Firm 1, a top-tier law firm handling novel and complex work that relies less on temporal parameters to value and organize their work than dominant industry practice – for instance, not setting billable hour targets for their professionals. Analyzing both client-facing practices and internal organization, the case study reveals that professionals at Firm 1 manage temporal uncertainty through relationship focus – an organization-wide prioritization of building and cultivating deep client relationships – and thereby defy predicting the unpredictable. The key mechanism through which relationship focus enables managing temporal uncertainty is to decouple time and value: by replacing temporal parameters with relationship-based assessments in determining value, professionals make time less relevant and thereby reduce reliance on prediction.

After establishing how professionals view temporal uncertainty as an inherent feature of their work, and prediction as an unsuitable response for managing it, the chapter showed how relationship focus is embedded through the firm's organizational practices of structuring, socializing and selecting their professionals. First, the firm's internal structure of broad specialization

enables a coverage model which allows sustained engagement with clients, ensuring professionals build deep client relationships and relationship knowledge. Second, the firm's approach to recruitment and socialization cultivates relationship-centric orientation among professionals through intensive formal training and shielding from competing commercial orientations. Third, the firm's internal selection and promotion process secures strong relationship expertise among partners by prioritizing proficiency in building and managing relationships.

Building on these foundations, the analysis identified three strategies through which professionals reduce reliance on temporal parameters in determining value. First, professionals price work based on value to clients rather than duration, drawing on relationship knowledge and aligned positioning to assess worth from the client's perspective. Second, professionals take a long-term relationship-level perspective to evaluate returns across extended relationship timeframes rather than per transaction, enabling offsetting that reduces reliance on the specific timing when work occurs and generates value. Third, professionals invest in relationships through underpriced and uncompensated work to build reciprocity and relationship knowledge, creating client lock-in effects that provide certainty about future work, reducing the need for forecasting recurrence.

Across these strategies, professionals replace temporal parameters with elements of relationship focus – their relationship knowledge, relationship-centric orientation, and together, their way of investing in relationships. This achieves a fundamental decoupling of time and value. By substituting relationship-based assessments for temporal parameters to determine value, professionals reduce reliance on duration, timing, and recurrence of work. This decoupling constitutes an alternative approach to managing temporal uncertainty: rather than attempting to predict and control temporal parameters, Firm 1 manages uncertainty through cultivating relationship-based certainty. While professionals cannot fully avoid making predictions in client-facing work, they make their work and its value substantially independent of these predictions, fostering resilience to temporal uncertainty at the firm level.

This approach extends beyond client-facing work to shape internal organizational practices. As time is decoupled from value externally, the firm does not need to tightly manage temporal parameters internally. Professionals organize work without fixed duration constraints or restrictive deadlines and evaluate performance independently of billable hours. Decoupling time and value at both the task level and organizational level creates resilience throughout the organization, enabling professionals to prioritize quality and relationship development over temporal constraints.

These findings contribute to the overarching question about the construction of temporal meanings by revealing what happens when the dominant time-based system – where time serves as the explicit measure and basis for value – is absent or minimized. By showing how professionals at Firm 1 replace temporal parameters by relationship-based assessments to determine value, the analysis reveals relationships as an alternative foundation for constructing meaning in professional work. This reveals temporal parameters as an overlay to fundamentally relational processes, suggesting temporal meanings and temporal structures as inherently relational.

Chapter 8

Discussion

This thesis explored how professionals construct temporal meanings in high-performance professional organizations. To do so, I studied the system of billable hours – where time is tracked in 6-minute increments and assigned explicit value – in three law firms representing high-performance environments, characterized by continuously demanding temporal expectations, performance pressure and intensity. Throughout this context, organizational and institutional norms create strong structural constraints, and time functioning as a primary signal of commitment (Coffey, 1994; Feldman et al., 2020) gives rise to challenges and tensions that make temporal meanings particularly consequential and visible. It is within these pervasive structures that I examined how professionals construct what time means in their daily practice.

My overarching research question was what shapes how professionals construct the meaning of time in high-performance professional organizations. I addressed this through three sub-questions examining different forms of temporal meanings. In Chapter 5, the first sub-question explored how professionals manage temporal demands given co-existing narratives about temporal commitment in these contexts. Temporal meanings here take the form of interpretations and expectations about temporal commitment, with analysis revealing two coherent images of the ideal professional that encompass how time translates into performance, how workload should be managed, what balancing of private time is legitimate, and how accountability for temporal efficiency is understood. In Chapter 6, the second sub-question investigated how these temporal ideals are constructed in hierarchical relational environments and the implications for the persistence of overwork, uncovering the relational dynamics through which interpretations and expectations about temporal commitment are formed and reinforced, systematically tilting towards intensive work patterns. In Chapter 7, the third sub-question addressed how professionals manage temporal uncertainty in their work, examining temporal meanings as understandings

about how time relates to value. By focussing analysis on one firm that does not evaluate, manage, and price work based on time as the industry standard, this chapter reveals how temporal meanings are constructed without relying on temporal parameters.

Together, I found that relationships crucially shape and account for variation in temporal meanings in professional work, challenging assumptions that measuring and controlling temporal parameters in itself shapes how professionals understand and value time. Even when organizations uniformly measure time and prescribe its value through billable hours systems, professionals construct varied interpretations through relational dynamics with senior professionals in their immediate environment. When time is removed from evaluating, organizing and valuing work, professionals construct value through relationships instead, revealing temporal parameters as an overlay on fundamentally relational processes of meaning construction. Temporal meanings are thus in part expressions of relational dynamics rather than primarily products of organizational systems or individual differences, with temporal parameters serving more as coordination mechanisms than source of meaning. This reveals that relationships mediate organizational and individual factors in shaping meaning to a degree previously unrecognized. These findings represent the overall argument of this thesis and the basis for its core contribution to research on temporality in organizations. Section 8.1 discusses this contribution in detail and outlines further implications for understanding professional socialization and organizational control.

The second core contribution of this thesis concerns research on ideal worker norms by challenging the assumption of a singular ideal worker image. Chapter 5 reveals two legitimate and co-existing temporal ideals varying across relational contexts rather than converging around one uniform organizational norm, reconceptualizing ideal worker images as both plural and fragmented. Section 8.2 discusses this in detail and outlines further implications for research on resistance and distancing in professional organizations.

The third core contribution extends explanations on overwork persistence by foregrounding the relational level as a previously under-examined analytical level beyond individual and organizational factors. Chapter 6 reveals that relational dynamics in hierarchical relationships mediate individual and organizational factors, and sustain overwork by systematically tilting perceived expectations and practices towards patterns of hyper performance. Section 8.3 discusses this contribution and outlines further implications for understanding organizational change in professional organizations.

Finally, this thesis speaks to an emerging conversation about temporal uncertainty by revealing an alternative approach to prediction and control, or acknowledgement and adaptation for managing irreducible unpredictability. Chapter 7 demonstrates how professionals reduce reliance on temporal developments altogether by substituting relationship-based assessments for temporal parameters in determining value. Section 8.4 discusses the implications of these findings for research on uncertainty management and professional work more broadly.

The chapter closes with a summary of contributions in Section 8.5, synthesis of limitations and future research directions in Section 8.6, a managerial summary and practical implications in Section 8.7, and concluding reflections in Section 8.8.

8.1 Temporality in organizations

The overarching research question of this thesis was: *What shapes how professionals construct the meaning of time in high-performance professional organizations?* Research on temporality in organizations has examined how time structures activity, how temporal orientations vary, and how professionals experience and navigate temporal demands. Practice-based approaches in particular highlight how time is experienced through the temporal structures people enact in their recurrent practices, which both shapes people's action and is shaped by it (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Previous work comparing different occupations or organizational units suggests that differences in the nature and temporal structuring of work are associated with different temporal orientations (Dougherty et al., 2013; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Oborn & Barrett, 2021). Within professional organizations specifically, studies of both junior and established professionals have highlighted increased awareness, or time consciousness, among those socialized into accounting, law, and auditing professions (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Yakura, 2001; Coffey, 1994; Lupu & Rokka, 2022). In contexts with billable hour systems or hourly payment, studies have shown how these structures shape professionals' time use and recording, continuously reproducing the link between time, value, and performance (Yakura, 2001; Evans et al., 2004; Alvehus & Spicer, 2012; Pitts, 2022; cf. also Aeon & Aguinis, 2017). Several of these studies explicitly discuss how such practices and socialization cultivate a conception of time as money in professionals (Yakura, 2001; Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Evans et al., 2004; Alvehus & Spicer, 2012). Together, this body of literature suggests that structuring, measuring and controlling temporal parameters shapes how professionals understand and value time, i.e. their temporal meanings.

My findings complicate this assumption by foregrounding the role of relationships in professionals' construction of temporal meanings. Across three high-performance professional organizations, I found that relational dynamics in the immediate environment – specifically, hierarchical working relationships – crucially shape and account for variation in temporal meanings. In Chapters 5 and 6, I examined how junior and mid-level professionals construct and enact temporal meanings across the three firms. Within each firm, professionals under the same organizational system of measuring and controlling time held markedly different interpretations of what is expected, what time means and how it should be managed. Specifically, Chapter 5 revealed two coherent temporal ideals – the Hyper-Performer ideal centred around total availability, regular priority of work over personal life, and maximum time commitment, and the Sustainable High-Performer ideal that values sustainable pacing, boundary-setting, and ownership. Based on these, I found three different ways in which professionals manage temporal demands. Selected transition accounts of professionals revealed that these interpretations and enactments were neither individually stable nor strictly linked to seniority, and patterns across the data demonstrated that both ideals co-existed in all three firms – they did not vary by firm or by formal system, but by the relational context in which professionals worked. Building on this, Chapter 6 investigated the relational dynamics through which these temporal meanings are constructed, uncovering how the interplay between partners' messaging, their practices, their interpretations of associates' behaviour, and their responses to recognized problems shapes and reinforces varied – and often misaligned – temporal meanings across hierarchical relational environments within the same organization. These findings show that the dynamics of professionals' hierarchical relationships in their immediate environment crucially mediate organizational and individual factors in the construction of temporal meanings.

Chapter 7 offers another angle on this broader argument by examining a firm that relies less on temporal parameters than the industry norm. Rather than evaluating performance based on billable hour targets and pricing based on time, Firm 1 prioritizes cultivating deep client relationships and knowledge. I found that this allows them to substitute relationship-based assessments for temporal parameters in determining value. Relationships thus serve not only as crucial mediators of meaning when temporal parameters are measured and controlled, but serve as an alternative foundation of meaning, consequentially shaping professionals' understanding of the relationship between time and value. This suggests that – within the structural constraints of high-performance environments – temporal meanings are fundamentally constructed through

and expressions of relational dynamics, with temporal parameters functioning more as a situated overlay than an inherent source of meaning.

These findings challenge the assumption that measuring and controlling time directly shapes temporal meanings by foregrounding relational dynamics as a crucial mediator. I suggest that existing research has largely overlooked the extent to which relational dynamics in the immediate environment – specifically, hierarchical working relationships – shape how professionals interpret and respond to organizational practices of measuring and controlling time, and create varied temporal meanings even within uniform systems. A key feature of my research setting may explain why relational dynamics emerged more prominently in this context than in previous studies, and thus point to an important boundary condition: the structure and stability of working relationships.

The professional organizations I studied are characterized by stable working relationships. While associates in law firms work on different projects like in other professional services contexts, they typically do so simultaneously and within stable teams, often consistently working with the same partners. This differs from contexts such as consulting (Yakura, 2001), where associates often work consecutively in project-specific temporary teams under different managers and partners (Werr & Stjernberg, 2003). Other previous studies were conducted among trainees who rotate across teams (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Coffey, 1994), where relationships may not persist long enough for meanings to settle, or within a single team (Alvehus & Spicer, 2012), where variation across relational contexts would not be observable. Stable teams and working relationships allow meanings to settle and potentially silo, as professionals remain embedded in consistent relational dynamics. In contrast, professionals who frequently work with different teams and supervisors regularly encounter varied relational dynamics. The structure and stability of working relationships in this research thus make relational variation and dynamics both more visible and more pronounced. The findings also indicate that, while stability matters, relationships need not be extensively long-term: While I did not observe consistent patterns among trainees who rotated every six months, they were evident among junior associates and new joiners who had worked in the same team for approximately one year, suggesting dynamics become consequential relatively quickly. At the organizational level, this suggests that contexts with less rotation and more stable working relationships exhibit greater fragmentation of temporal meanings across the organization, as interpretations settle within distinct relational contexts rather than converging around organizational averages. Notably, stable working relationships are arguably more

characteristic of ordinary organizational contexts than the rotating project teams where several previous studies on temporality in professional organizations have been conducted, suggesting the findings from this research may be more broadly relevant than the professional services setting might imply.

Implications for understanding temporality in organizations As detailed above, my findings reveal that the relational dynamics in professionals' immediate environment – specifically, hierarchical working relationships – crucially shape temporal meanings, and suggest that temporal meanings are fundamentally constructed through and expressions of relational dynamics. Beyond challenging assumptions about how measuring and controlling time shapes temporal meanings, this reframing carries broader implications for how we understand temporal structures themselves. Practice-based approaches emphasize that temporal structures are actively produced through their ongoing practices, rather than being objectively given, or purely subjectively experienced (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). I extend this perspective by suggesting that temporal structures are also fundamentally relational. Building on my findings, if temporal meanings are expressions of relational dynamics, and temporal parameters function as an overlay on these dynamics, then temporal structures – which essentially coordinate temporal parameters – themselves are therefore also fundamentally constructed through and expressions of relational dynamics. When professionals reproduce working rhythms, set deadlines, or establish project timelines, for instance, these practices reflect the relational dynamics of the respective hierarchical working relationship. It follows that even when formal systems of measuring and controlling time are uniform, the actual practised temporal structures also vary across relational contexts and fragment across different hierarchical working relationships within the same organization. This complicates assumptions of uniform organizational-level temporal orientations (Blount & Janicik, 2001; Slawinski & Bansal, 2012). While the idea of plural temporalities within organizations is not new (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015), my research suggests these are more localized than previously recognized, with specific relational dynamics fundamentally mediating both how temporal structures are shaped and how these shape temporal orientations in turn.

As temporal meanings constitute building blocks of temporal orientations, these findings offer a partial answer to the question of origins and antecedents of temporal orientations which has repeatedly been flagged as a priority for research by literature reviews on temporality (Tang et al., 2020; Shipp & Jansen, 2021). Relational dynamics with senior professionals emerge as a crucial shaping force, with senior professionals themselves playing a central role in the formation of

temporal orientations. In contexts characterized by long tenure and stable working relationships, this also has implications for understanding how temporal orientations develop and reproduce over time within organizations. Temporal meanings may be transmitted across successive generations of professionals – as junior professionals settle into relational dynamics shaped by their seniors, and eventually become the seniors who shape the next generation's meanings in turn. This may also have broader implications for understanding organizational change and inertia beyond temporal meanings specifically, which are developed further below.

As discussed above, the patterns and dynamics observed here appear particularly pronounced in contexts characterized by stable working relationships. Moreover, these findings emerged in high-performance environments characterized by strong hierarchical structure and significant power asymmetry between junior and senior professionals. The partnership organizational form – where senior professionals are not just practising professionals and managers, but also owners of the firm – may amplify this further as seniors embody the organization itself: partners' signals and practices may be interpreted as organizationally authoritative in ways that differ from non-partnership contexts. While this study cannot isolate these factors, I would expect the core mechanism – relational dynamics mediating how professionals construct temporal meanings within shared organizational systems – to operate wherever hierarchical working relationships are stable, and the environment is sufficiently high-performant that professionals are ambitious and pressure makes hierarchy effective – and, where transferability concerns temporal meanings specifically, wherever time functions as a signal of commitment.

Other features specific to the law firm context may shape the form and dimensions of the findings rather than constitute enabling conditions for the mechanism itself. The dominance of the billable hours system may make temporal meanings especially multi-faceted as time takes multiple forms – chargeable time, recorded time, working time – whereas in other contexts, they may more straightforwardly concern working hours alone. And while long-term tenure may amplify the stability and fragmentation of meanings across relational clusters, the findings suggest that the mechanism takes effect within a year of relationship formation, suggesting tenure deepens rather than enables the pattern. Future research could thus examine whether and how relational dynamics mediate temporal meanings in contexts with different hierarchical structures, organizational forms, and performance pressures – such as flatter hierarchies with lower power asymmetry, managed professional businesses with employed senior managers, or non-professional organizations – to further understand the boundary conditions of these findings. Another inter-

esting direction for future research is to explore how temporal structures are shaped by relational dynamics, e.g. how temporal structures vary across relational contexts and how power dynamics and hierarchy are expressed through and shape temporal structures in working relationships, such as in setting deadlines, determining pacing, or reproducing working rhythms.

Implications for understanding professional socialization The role of relationship structure and stability in understanding how meanings are constructed within organizations may have further implications for how we understand socialization and culture in organizations. Research on professional socialization has frequently focused on socialization as an organizational-level process, often concentrated in early-career induction and aimed at cultivating shared culture, values and norms (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Coffey, 1994; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The findings presented here, however, indicate that once professionals settle into stable working relationships, interpretations of norms and expectations increasingly reflect relational dynamics in their immediate hierarchical environment rather than shared organizational culture. Contextualizing this within previous research has further revealed that relationship structure and stability may be an important organizational characteristic for understanding patterns of meanings within organizations. When professionals are embedded in stable working relationships and dynamics, meanings settle within distinct clusters, producing fragmentation rather than homogeneity of organizational norms and values. While my research focused on temporal meanings, this could extend to how professionals construct norms and meanings more generally. The general structure and temporal stability of working relationships within an organization may thus represent an important, yet under-specified, factor for understanding professional socialization and culture, particularly regarding how meanings and norms converge or fragment. Examining the role of relationship structure and stability in shaping meaning construction and fragmentation more closely provides a key direction for future research. This may include exploring conditions under which relationship stability produces fragmentation or convergence of meanings across the organization, comparing contexts where professionals work in stable teams and relationships versus those with rotating project-based assignments, or examining how aspects such as relationship duration, spatial distance, and relational concentration (whether professionals work in tight dyadic relationships or larger distributed teams) shape the construction and sedimentation of meanings. Additionally, future research could examine more broadly how organizational-level socialization processes interact with relational-level meaning over the course of professionals' careers, and how professionals navigate transitions between different relational clusters and the meanings embedded within them.

Implications for understanding control in professional organizations My findings revealed that relational dynamics crucially mediate how professionals interpret and respond to organizational systems of measuring and controlling time. This relates to understanding organizational control in professional contexts. While early work primarily foregrounded the role of informal control in professional organizations (Ouchi, 1979; Mintzberg, 1980; Kunda, 1992), later work emphasizes how both forms work together (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Robertson & Swan, 2003). My findings show that even under a uniform, highly precise system of measurement and control – tracking time in six-minute increments and tying it directly to evaluation and compensation – professionals respond in highly divergent ways, mediated primarily through relational dynamics with senior professionals in their immediate environment. Given the hierarchical nature of these relationships and significant authority seniors hold over juniors' development and career progression, these relational dynamics constitute a form of informal control operating through social influence and power asymmetry. My findings thus extend understanding of how formal and informal control relate by showing how informal relational control serves as a crucial mediator of formal control systems. This foregrounds the relational level as crucial to understanding how control systems operate in practice and why responses fragment across the organization, even when formal systems are uniform. An interesting direction for future research would be to explore senior professionals' perspective more closely: whether and how they understand their practices as enacting control in relation to formal organizational systems; how they navigate tensions between formal control systems and their own goals?

Methodological implications My findings also carry methodological implications for research on temporal meanings and meanings in organization more broadly. First, they highlight the importance of attending to the relational level. Future research should examine variation across relationships and team contexts rather than focussing solely on organizational- or individual-level patterns, as meanings may fragment across relational environments even within uniform organizational systems. Second, my study demonstrates the value of relational data collection: by examining both associates' and partners' perspectives within the same teams, I revealed substantial misalignment that would have remained invisible through unpaired individual-level data. Future research examining meanings, norms, and responses to organizational systems should prioritize dyadic or multi-perspective data collection to explore different sides of hierarchical relationships.

8.2 Ideal worker image

In Chapter 5, I asked: *How do professionals manage temporal demands given co-existing narratives about temporal commitment in high-performance organizations?* (**Sub-RQ 1**) Research on ideal worker norms has generally assumed one singular image of the ideal worker – a monolithic set of expectations centered on work primacy, long hours, and total devotion (Williams, 2001; Reid, 2015; Lupu et al., 2022). Even when scholars identify an alternative schema involving sustainable work practices, this is treated as hidden and illegitimate relative to the dominant ideal worker image (Heaphy & Trefalt, 2024), despite recent organizational rhetoric increasingly emphasizing wellbeing and balance. My findings challenge this singularity.

Chapter 5 revealed two coherent temporal ideals co-existing within the same organizations, each constituted of four dimensions: The Hyper-Performer ideal is based on interpretations of (1) performance being evaluated primarily based on time, (2) busyness as a marker of recognition, (3) subordination of private time as normalized, and (4) time pressure to be absorbed. The Sustainable High-Performer ideal encompasses interpretations of (1) performance as multi-dimensional, (2) workload management as professional responsibility, (3) pacing as essential for long-term success, and (4) accountability to be bounded. Crucially, I found that both ideals are interpreted by professionals as expected and legitimate for long-term success and were openly enacted – neither was hidden or stigmatized. However, while narratives about balance and performance are co-existing throughout the organizations, professionals do not perceive both ideals simultaneously as competing demands; rather, they interpret one ideal as dominant in their immediate relational context. Relying solely on junior and mid-level professionals' perspectives, I inferred the legitimacy of both ideals based on associates' explicit interpretations and descriptions of daily practices, rather than from partner accounts. Both temporal ideals emerged across all three organizations studied with only some nuance in their specific manifestations, varying fundamentally by relational context rather than by firm. Importantly, this variation occurs within – rather than challenges – the logic of time as a signal of commitment: professionals enacting both ideals work long hours and understand substantial temporal commitment as expected; the ideals represent different approaches to managing temporal demands within that framework.

These findings challenge the assumption of a singular ideal worker image in two ways. First, they reveal an alternative ideal to the classic ideal worker image, prioritizing sustainability over maximum commitment. Second, they demonstrate that multiple legitimate ideals can co-exist within

the same organizations, fragmenting across relational contexts rather than converging around one uniform ideal worker image at the organizational level. In contrast to previous research, this reveals ideal worker images as both plural and fragmented within organizations.

Beyond revealing two co-existing legitimate ideals, Chapter 5 also uncovered three enactment patterns: professionals who enact the Hyper-Performer ideal, those who enact the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, and Time Servers – professionals who interpret the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant, and enacted it outwardly, while internally rejecting it and renouncing ambitions for a long-term career in the firm. Hyper-Performers manage temporal demands reactively. Suppressing control over temporal demands, they enact constrained forms of agency, and internalize pressure, often including intense self-monitoring of chargeable hours. Sustainable High-Performers, in contrast, sustain control over temporal demands and exhibit a strong sense of agency, actively structuring and balancing their time, and maintaining a pragmatic relationship with chargeable hours. Time Servers withdraw internally and adopt an instrumental approach to temporal demands, focussing on short-term rewards while carefully concealing their stance. Notably, no such pattern emerged among professionals interpreting the Sustainable High-Performer ideal as dominant. When these professionals viewed expected temporal commitment as incompatible with their aspirations or life situations, they negotiate feasible adjustments to their role, such as part-time arrangements, or agree alternative trajectories within their environment. In contrast, among those interpreting the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant, contestation is absent – all professionals perform the ideal outwardly regardless of their internal stance, with no option of not openly enacting the ideal. While these patterns and ideals emerged as coherent and recognizable configurations across the data, they are analytically distinct rather than clear-cut, mutually exclusive empirical categories, and professionals' enactments in practice often drew on elements of more than one type.

The Time Server pattern, in particular, resonates with research on distancing and resistance in professional organizations. Studies have documented how professionals psychologically distance themselves from demanding organizational expectations while continuing to perform them outwardly – for instance, through cynical distancing (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006), role distancing (Lupu et al., 2022), or imagining alternative futures as a form of resistance (Costas & Grey, 2014). This literature demonstrates that, rather than affecting change, such distancing often reinforces dominant meanings through continued performance, or as professionals resist their own resistance by framing demanding work as temporary (Kärreman & Alvesson,

2009). Drawing on this research from comparable high-performance environments, I interpret Time Servers' renouncement of long-term career ambitions not as concrete intentions of exit but as a psychological buffer – a way of distancing themselves from demands they perceive as incompatible with their values while maintaining outward performance. This pattern emerges specifically among those interpreting the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant. This ideal's focus on chargeable time, long working hours as normalized and a marker of recognition, and partnership as the only available long-term trajectory leaves little room for negotiating temporal demands or pursuing alternative paths. The perceived up-or-out logic, in particular, means professionals see only two options: full performance towards partnership or exit. Anticipated exit thus functions as a psychological buffer even as plans may be "repeatedly postponed" (Hochschild, 1997, p. 249) rather than actualized. In contrast, when professionals interpret the Sustainable High-Performer ideal – which fosters agentic approaches to temporal demands – they perceive space to negotiate adjustments or non-partnership alternatives. This extends understanding of when and why professionals resort to these forms of internal distancing, as further elaborated below.

This study identified two legitimate temporal ideals that co-exist and fragment within the same organizations. Several contextual factors may help explain why this plurality emerged in this particular setting. First, the broader professional context may indeed be shifting, with changing discourse around work and wellbeing. Organizations increasingly recognize the costs of overwork for retention and performance (Kelly & Moen, 2020), and generational and demographic changes are perceived to reshape workforce expectations. While this shift does not necessarily entail that long working hours are no longer expected or normalized – particularly in high-performance, high-salary contexts – it rather concerns the legitimacy of acknowledging overwork as problematic and pursuing balance. Official recognition of burnout and long working hours as occupational risks by international bodies such as the WHO and ILO further support such shift in legitimacy (World Health Organization, 2019; Pega et al., 2021). Several interviewees in this study also noted this as a change in their environment and perceived generational differences between junior and senior professionals.

The implications of such a shift may indeed be particularly visible in law firm contexts, given their long-term career model. Professionals often remain with the same firm for decades, evidenced also by the average tenure in my sample of 14 years across partners and associates, and 20 of the partners having been with their firm for over 20 years. This model depends on professionals remaining with the firm through different life stages and career phases, making retention an

important organizational concern. In fact, this long-term retention was identified by several senior interviewees as amongst their firms' biggest challenges. This long-term orientation and emphasis on retention makes sustainable orientations plausible in these organizations, and may stand in contrast to contexts more commonly treated as short-term stepping stones by junior professionals, such as strategy consulting or investment banking.

However, the specific historical moment of data collection may have also amplified the emergence of a legitimate alternative ideal. Drawing on Barley and Kunda's (1992) analysis of how managerial ideologies shift over time in conjunction with broader economic and social changes, the legitimacy of the Sustainable High-Performer ideal may reflect a particular temporal context. Data collection occurred in 2023-2024, potentially still shaped by the post-pandemic environment. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened awareness of wellbeing and work-related mental health challenges, bringing concerns about sustainable work practices more to the forefront. Whether this made the Sustainable High-Performer ideal more salient at this specific point in time, or this attention to sustainable work practices more accurately reflects contemporary norms remains unknown, suggesting an important direction for future research.

Implications for understanding the ideal worker image My findings reveal multiple images of the ideal professional that co-exist as legitimate within the same organizations, with different ideals being perceived as dominant in different relational contexts. Alongside a temporal ideal that resonates with the classic ideal worker image centred on total availability and maximum commitment (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2001), I found an alternative ideal that values sustainable pacing, boundary-setting, and ownership, even within traditional high-performance settings. By revealing ideal worker images as both plural – encompassing multiple legitimate forms – and fragmented, this challenges the prevailing assumption of a singular, monolithic ideal worker norm dominating within and across organizations (Williams, 2001; Reid, 2015; Lupu et al., 2022). While I find similar majorities of professionals aiming for sustainable approaches as Reid (2015), Lupu et al. (2022) and Heaphy and Trefalt (2024), the main difference in findings lies in the legitimacy of the alternative sustainable schema. Comparing my findings to Heaphy and Trefalt (2024) and Reid (2015), in particular, provides additional insights into how alternative images emerge as legitimate ideals. In the context of consulting firms, the earlier studies find that professionals enacted working practices that deviate from the classic ideal worker image in hidden networks, with professionals actively forming relationships and shaping project assignments to create protective spaces for sustainable work practices (Heaphy & Trefalt, 2024), or altered how

openly they deviated ('revealing' or 'passing') depending on the specific audience or colleague relationships (Reid, 2015). As discussed earlier, my finding that professionals interpret and enact the alternative sustainable ideal as openly legitimate emerged in settings with stable working relationships. This stands in contrast to rotating project teams in these previous studies' settings, which may explain the difference in findings, and further suggest that relationship structure and stability may play a key role in understanding how meanings and ideals settle and fragment as legitimate within organizations. It appears that when both ideals co-exist, the classic ideal worker image exerts interfering forces from which sustainable approaches require protection: In rotating teams, professionals construct this protection through hidden networks or selective enactment, whereas stable teams provide consistent relational contexts that allow protection to become embedded and sustainable approaches to establish local legitimacy. I therefore also extend scholarship on ideal worker images by suggesting that relationship structure and stability may play a crucial role in understanding why and how alternative ideals remain hidden or gain legitimacy.

Beyond the structure and stability of internal working relationships, other contextual factors may contribute to understanding the emergence of plurality in this study. The patterns may reflect broader shifts in discourse around work-life balance, or organizational responses to generational changes and retention concerns. The post-pandemic temporal context of the study may have additionally played a role, raising the question whether the particular moment simply made sustainable approaches more salient, or whether the pandemic has actually amplified a broader and more enduring shift. However, the difference in relationship structure and stability between this context and the contexts of earlier studies also provides a theoretical explanation that could account for divergent findings, independent of historical contingency. While further research is needed to explore the interplay of these factors, my findings suggest to reconceptualize ideal worker images as locally constituted through relational context rather than as uniformly dominant organizational norm. Based on this, future research could further explore what shapes plurality and fragmentation of ideals, e.g. employees' tenure and turnover, or structure and stability of internal working relationships. Longitudinal research especially could help understand how plurality and fragmentation of ideals evolve differently across organizations, and what shapes such differences, or how cohorts of professionals who have entered the workforce during the post-pandemic period experience and shape subsequent shifts.

Implications for understanding distancing and resistance My findings also have implications for work on psychological distancing and resistance in professional organizations (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006; Costas & Grey, 2014; Lupu et al., 2022). The Time Server pattern I found resonates with this research in that professionals maintain outward performance while internally rejecting demanding expectations, but thereby reinforce rather than challenge organizational meanings. This pattern only emerged among professionals interpreting an ideal that offers limited agency over temporal demands and embeds the perception of an up-or-out logic, while no such pattern appeared among those interpreting an ideal that supports an agentic approach to temporal demands such that professionals perceive space to negotiate alternative trajectories. My findings thereby qualify existing research by specifying that these forms of psychological distancing are not a general feature of high-performance professional organizations but linked to factors related to agency over temporal demands and perceived available trajectories that can vary even within the same organization. Directions for future research could include how senior professionals recognize and respond to these patterns, and how those responses relate to firms' long-term strategic orientation or concerns about talent retention. Additionally, longitudinal research could examine career trajectories and outcomes for both Time Servers and those who negotiate alternative arrangements, examining how internal withdrawal or negotiated adjustments shape career trajectories and retention over time.

8.3 Persistence of overwork

In Chapter 6, I addressed the question: *How do professionals construct temporal ideals in their immediate relational environment, and what are the implications for the persistence of overwork?* (**Sub-RQ 2**) Existing research explains the persistence of overwork through individual-level phenomena such as the autonomy paradox and professionals' internalization of demands (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Michel, 2011; Lupu & Empson, 2015), organizational-level phenomena including flexibility stigma (Williams et al., 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Leslie et al., 2012) and temporal lock-in and synchronization (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019; Lupu & Liu, 2025), as well as institutional factors (cf. Gascoigne et al., 2015). More recently, research on boundary and identity work has increasingly highlighted the importance of working relationships for understanding how professionals navigate expectations (Kelly et al., 2014; Trefalt, 2013; Reid, 2015; Lupu et al., 2022; Conzon & Huising, 2024). However, relational dynamics themselves – involving both junior and senior professionals' perspectives – as well as intra-firm differences

have remained largely unexamined. This study extends this literature by revealing how meanings about temporal commitment are constructed and reinforced at the relational level.

Chapter 6 builds on the two temporal ideals revealed in Chapter 5 – the Hyper-Performer ideal as producing overwork patterns, and the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. Examining accounts from both partners and associates, I analyzed cases of aligned and misaligned interpretations between junior/mid-level and senior professionals, such as associates focussing on chargeable hours more than partners expected, partners' support efforts remaining invisible to associates, partners misinterpreting associates' strain as enthusiasm, or partners de-legitimizing associate protection by circumventing formal systems. This analysis revealed four forms of relational dynamics that shape which ideal junior and mid-level professionals perceive as dominant in their relational environment: (1) associates interpreting partner messaging, (2) associates interpreting partner practices, (3) partners interpreting associate enactment, and (4) partners responding to acknowledged problems. Notably, I also found a systematic tilt towards the Hyper-Performer ideal when interpretations misaligned, and an asymmetric enactment whereby the Hyper-Performer ideal is enacted even when some dimensions are interpreted in line with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal. Thereby, my findings demonstrate how patterns of overwork are asymmetrically reinforced through relational dynamics.

These findings extend existing explanations for understanding the persistence of overwork by foregrounding professionals' immediate relational environment as a crucial yet previously underexamined analytical level. I demonstrate that relational dynamics between junior and senior professionals fundamentally and variably shape how professionals interpret expectations about temporal commitment alongside individual, organizational, and institutional factors. Crucially, by showing how systematic patterns of interpretive misalignment and asymmetric enactment consistently tilt interpretations towards intensive work patterns, I also reveal that patterns of overwork among junior and mid-level professionals are systematically reinforced and sustained at the relational level even when senior professionals may intend otherwise.

Several factors may help explain why relational dynamics so often produce misalignment and why this systematically tilts towards reinforcing overwork patterns in these professional contexts. First, the asymmetry between the two temporal ideals may represent a general tilt towards interpretations that are more clear and easier to measure. The interpretations constituting Hyper-Performer dimensions are mainly one-directional as opposed to the ones constituting Sustainable High-Performer dimensions. Aiming for one end of a spectrum – maximizing chargeable

hours or maintaining total availability – is often more straightforward than gauging the 'right' point along a continuum, such as determining what constitutes an appropriate number of hours or at what capacity level it becomes responsible to decline work. This difficulty is amplified because the appropriate point or level typically varies across individual perspectives, making it safer to aim towards the end of a spectrum for fulfilling others' expectations. Additionally, Hyper-Performer and Sustainable High-Performer interpretations are often orthogonal rather than opposing. Valuing multi-dimensional performance does not exclude evaluating performance based on hours but extends it; protecting recovery time does not contradict prioritizing work over private time when necessary but adds a dimension of sustainable pacing. These characteristics of Hyper-Performer interpretations – one-directionality and one-dimensionality – may thus make the Hyper-Performer ideal both easier and safer to enact. The orthogonal relationship between dimensions of the ideals may explain why professionals still gravitate towards interpreting the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant even when interpreting some dimensions aligned with the Sustainable High-Performer ideal, as sustainable interpretations extend rather than invalidate intensive work expectations. This also suggests that fostering the Sustainable High-Performer ideal requires more explicit communication, guidance, and reinforcement from senior professionals to help juniors gauge appropriate levels of chargeable hours, availability, or boundary-setting, and to understand how different dimensions relate to each other. This would help explain why even when partners support sustainable approaches in principle, this often fails to translate into associates' interpretations, and nevertheless results in misalignment that reinforces overwork patterns.

Second, the organizational form and hierarchical structure of partnership settings may contribute to relational dynamics being more consequential than professionals realize, and therefore reinforce certain patterns inadvertently. Since the owner-managers of professional partnerships are also practising professionals (Greenwood & Empson, 2003), seniors holding significant organizational authority remain highly visible in day-to-day work. Several of the interviewees in this study, for instance, were currently or had previously been acting as managing partners or members of global management committees, yet they were still working directly with junior associates and even trainees on client projects. The partnership structure thereby creates close working relationships between professionals at vastly different hierarchy levels. This combination of visibility, authority and partners' substantial power over associates' careers may prompt junior and mid-level professionals to attend particularly closely to partners' everyday signals. Chapter 6 revealed that associates attribute more interpretive weight to partners' practices than to their verbal mes-

saging, and that subtle aspects of partners' behaviour like their responses to formal systems – respecting or circumventing them – are interpreted as particularly powerful signals. Meanwhile, partners may not recognize the extent to which their actions shape associates' interpretations, and inadvertently send signals that reinforce intensive work patterns through behaviours they consider routine or unremarkable. The close working proximity of professionals with substantial hierarchical distance may thus contribute to implicit signals, practices, and modelling being disproportionately powerful in shaping juniors' interpretations in these settings. When seniors remain unaware or do not consider this dynamic, patterns of overwork may be reinforced even when this may not necessarily correspond to seniors' expectations or commitment, i.e. interpretations are misaligned.

This may differ from larger managed professional organizations where senior executives' role is often primarily managerial, and more removed from junior staff. Nevertheless, this dynamic is not unique to professional partnerships. In startup environments, for instance, founders often work directly alongside junior employees; in academic settings, senior faculty share offices, labs, and fieldwork with doctoral students and early-career researchers; in hospital settings, senior physicians and clinicians work in close proximity with junior doctors and residents, whose interpretations of expected behaviour carry significant consequences for both practice and career progression. In all these contexts, the combination of hierarchical authority and day-to-day visibility may similarly amplify the interpretive weight junior staff place on seniors' everyday behaviour – and seniors' potential unawareness of it.

Third, the structure and stability of working relationships and the long-term career tenure characteristic of the professional organizations studied here – both aspects already discussed above – may contribute to the persistence of misalignment and overwork patterns, once emerged. Working relationships in law firms are often stable and may span extended time periods, as professionals remain with the same firm, and often within the same team, for many years. Meanwhile, the power asymmetry means that junior professionals cannot simply exit a problematic working relationship without taking substantial action such as changing teams or leaving the firm. As the dynamics of these enduring relationships shape which meanings become settled and stabilized over time, misalignment is also reproduced and persists through the same relational dynamics. The stability and longevity of working relationships in these contexts may thus magnify the tendency for existing patterns to reproduce themselves more than in contexts with more frequent turnover or rotating team structures, where professionals may be more continually exposed to

different signals and stimulated to reinterpret meanings. This particular inertia may additionally contribute to reinforcing existing patterns of overwork in these professional contexts.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, interviews are themselves sites of meaning-making and social performance, and shaped by participants' efforts at self-presentation and identity work (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). Partners may have performed more supportive stances towards associates and balance, or performed commitment more explicitly in interviews than they project in their everyday practice, seeking to present themselves or their firms positively. However, several factors suggest this plays a limited role for and within my findings.

Most importantly, if partners overstated their commitment to balance and supportive approaches in interviews, this would not undermine the core findings based on my analytical approach. Partners naturally described their practices without having the conceptual framework that my analysis revealed in mind. They would frame their practices as well-intended (e.g. *"I have a mantra that if my associates are working, I should be working. Which I think helps"*, 1-OP/P), without perceiving this as reinforcing associates' interpretations of a Hyper-Performer ideal (normalization of subordinating private time). Often only the analysis of both associates' and partners' accounts side-by-side revealed the contradictions, ambiguities, and consequences of partners' described practices and messages, irrespective of whether they were framed as supportive or not. For example, partners would frame giving associates responsibility for project economics as developing their business skills, while associates often responded to this by over-assuming accountability for containing time within budgets, or absorbing budget overruns by under-recording time. Thus, whether partners performed more supportive or sustainable approaches in interviews than in practice, or not, did not affect which ideal I found to be reinforced.

Moreover, several factors suggest that many of the partners support sustainable approaches beyond the interview setting. Associates' accounts revealed that the Sustainable High-Performer ideal was widely interpreted as legitimate, with a majority to two-thirds of associates per firm perceiving it as such. This supports that many partners project sustainable approaches in their actual daily practices and interactions. Many partners also substantiated their commitment to sustainable approaches through business or self-serving interests rather than appealing to social desirability. Partners mentioned retention and team stability as a salient challenge, provided financial rationales for investing in associates' development, or preferred that associates provide reliable delivery rather than *"sit there all night and get themselves into a mess"* (2-IA/P).

While I cannot fully rule out that some partners performed more supportive or sustainable approaches in interviews than in their daily interactions, this would not impact the core findings about how relational dynamics shape temporal meanings and reinforce overwork patterns. Instead, this potential limitation would primarily affect the degree of misalignment between partners' and associates' accounts. However, misalignment here served primarily as an analytical tool to foreground relational dynamics, treating tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies as productive for theoretical insight (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). The findings about how relational dynamics shape interpretations, and how these reinforce temporal ideals that produce certain enactment patterns are independent of the degree of misalignment. The latter only indicates the extent to which this may occur *inadvertently*, which is not central to the contribution – whether partners inadvertently reinforce intensive work through genuine unawareness or through wilful ignorance (Alvesson, Einola, & Schaefer, 2022), the relational construction of meaning and systematic reproduction of overwork remain.

Implications for understanding overwork and work-life balance While existing research has identified individual-level and organizational-level explanations for the persistence of overwork, the relational dynamics between junior and senior professionals themselves have received less attention for understanding how interpretations and expectations about temporal commitment are reinforced. By examining hierarchical working relationships through two-sided perspectives, this research demonstrates that, within the broader organizational and institutional structures, these ongoing interactions crucially shape which interpretations and expectations professionals perceive as dominant in their immediate environment – and thereby how they interpret and respond to the individual and organizational factors they face. Importantly, in doing so, this perspective offers an explanation for intra-firm differences in overwork patterns that previous individual- and organizational-level approaches could not account for. Prior research has identified supervisor support and the relational environment as facilitating factors for professionals to redefine their roles (Lupu et al., 2022) or reveal their deviations from the classic ideal worker image (Reid, 2015). My findings align with and extend this work highlighting the importance of working relationships by specifying their role as mediating, and unpacking the specific relational dynamics through which this mediation occurs. This mediating function means that the relational level shapes how professionals interpret and respond to the interplay of individual-level mechanisms and organizational-level structures that professionals face. Exemplifying how this plays out in relation to previous work illustrates this: For instance, Mazmanian et al. (2013) demonstrate how the autonomy paradox creates pressure for constant availability – my findings suggest that

relational context shapes whether autonomy translates into expectations of total responsiveness or enables legitimate flexibility in pacing work. Similarly, concerning Williams's (2001) flexibility stigma, my findings suggest that in addition to social class and gender, relational dynamics shape whether flexibility is stigmatized or legitimate. Critically, as relational dynamics serve as an interpretive mediator, they systematically tilt towards reinforcing overwork, adding to explanations for how and why overwork becomes reproduced. This systematic tilt may reflect inherent characteristics of intensive work patterns: as discussed earlier, their one-directionality and one-dimensionality make maximum commitment easier and safer to enact than gauging appropriate levels of sustainable pacing. Moreover, the mediation of organizational and individual factors by relational dynamics means that changes at these other levels – such as shifts in organizational rhetoric or individual attempts of recalibration – may not translate into corresponding changes in actual interpretations and enactment. This helps explain why overwork patterns tend to persist.

These findings also speak to a broader literature on challenges around work-life balance, work-life integration, and navigating work-life boundaries. Research on this interface has documented how, in demanding professional contexts, organizational conditions and cultural logics determine when and how work encroaches on personal time – often in ways that resist individuals' efforts to maintain control (Hochschild, 1997; Perlow, 1998). My findings resonate with this literature in that the Sustainable High-Performer ideal and its enactment pattern foreground professionals' experience of control over their time as a critical marker of overwork rather than long working hours alone. Scholars have attended to this more agency-centred dimension, conceptualizing the experience of temporal overload and work-family strain not in terms of volume of hours but as a subjective sense of scarcity and loss of control (Perlow, 1999; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006), and examining the individual tactics through which professionals seek their preferred configuration of work-nonwork boundaries (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). Trefalt (2013) further demonstrates that this boundary work is not purely an individual or organizational matter but that boundaries are negotiated within and adjusted to specific interpersonal relationships that enable or constrain boundary setting.

My findings extend and specify these insights in two respects. First, they specify Perlow's (1998) observation that boundary control operates at the level of organizational conditions by identifying the local hierarchical relationship between senior and junior professionals as the more immediate site at which the perceived availability of temporal control is constructed. Second, they extend the framework of Trefalt (2013) by operating at the level of precondition rather than

strategy: what is relationally shaped is not only how boundaries are negotiated within relationships, but whether a space for boundary work is perceived as available at all. While this literature broadly assumes professionals' agency to engage in some form of boundary work, my findings show the perceived availability of this itself to be variably constituted through hierarchical working relationships: where professionals perceive the Hyper-Performer ideal as dominant, they either comply and suppress temporal control (Hyper-Performer enactment), or respond through internal withdrawal and deferral of exercising agency over their time (Time Server enactment) – in neither case do they attempt to negotiate their boundaries as the relational context does not support the perception of space for it. This has implications for understanding why work-life balance initiatives tend to fall short in high-performance professional settings. Prior research documents how – despite widespread availability (Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2014) – formal initiatives designed to improve work-life balance are undermined or not taken up when senior partner support is absent (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010; Noury, Gand, & Sardas, 2017). My findings illuminate this mechanism further by suggesting that support for specific initiatives or policies is insufficient without a more fundamental precondition: whether the hierarchical working relationship affords professionals a sense of agency over their temporal demands, constituting or foreclosing the perceived space for boundary work independent of formal provision and policy endorsement.

Several factors discussed above suggest conditions under which this relational mediation and relational constitution of agency as precondition may be particularly pronounced. In settings characterized by high visibility of hierarchically distant seniors, such as professional partnerships, relational dynamics may play an especially consequential role in reinforcing overwork. This asymmetry may contribute to unrecognized misalignment sustaining overwork patterns, when seniors remain unaware of the interpretive weight of their practices and intensive work interpretations persist unchallenged. Low turnover and stable working relationships may additionally heighten inertia of existing patterns in these contexts and thereby reinforce overwork. At the same time, while these characteristics of the context may amplify the dynamics documented here, the underlying mechanisms – relational construction of temporal meanings, systematic tilt towards intensive work patterns, and fragmentation within organizations – are likely to operate wherever hierarchical working relationships are stable and careers are shaped through sustained proximity to senior professionals.

These findings open several directions for future research both within and beyond the professional context. First, examining how relational dynamics operate across different organizational contexts would help clarify the boundary conditions and variation in the systematic tilt. This includes comparing settings where senior leaders operate primarily as managers rather than frontline workers alongside juniors, exploring how physical and social distance from leadership affects relational construction of meanings, and examining whether flat versus steep hierarchies produce different patterns of mediation and tilt. Second, research could investigate conditions under which sustainable approaches become dominant or 'sticky' enough to override overwork patterns, including whether contexts exist where the asymmetric enactment reverses. Longitudinal research could shed more light on how relational dynamics evolve over time, including how misalignment becomes sustained or corrected as working relationships develop. Finally, research could investigate organizational interventions that might interrupt the systematic tilt, exploring whether and how organizations can shape relational dynamics to support sustainable approaches more effectively.

Implications for understanding change in professional organizations Change in professional organizations has long been documented as slow, complex, and political, with law firms often being portrayed as particularly resistant to change and innovation (Cooper et al., 1996; Kronblad, 2020; Susskind, 2017). Scholars have attributed this inertia to high levels of institutionalization, internal governance dynamics, and the role of professional associations (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Greenwood, Hinings, & Suddaby, 2002; Anand, Gardner, & Morris, 2007; Lawrence, Malhotra, & Morris, 2011). Prior research has also highlighted that senior professionals' buy-in is critical for effective leadership, decision-making, and compliance with agreed decisions given their contingency upon consensus in partnership structures (Empson & Langley, 2015; Angel, 2007; Hinings, Brown, & Greenwood, 1991). My research demonstrates that senior buy-in matters not only for these governance functions but also for translating change throughout the organization. As relational dynamics shape how associates interpret and enact organizational-level signals, any organizational-level changes are mediated through the relational level. This means that changing practices and structures requires senior professionals not just to agree and comply with changes themselves, but how they project and reinforce new expectations also shapes how changes are taken up by associates throughout the organization. Seniors' role in enabling or constraining organizational change is thus amplified in contexts where relational dynamics are particularly powerful, such as partnerships with stable, long-term working relationships. Moreover, as discussed above, factors such as relationship stability and long tenure may themselves

contribute to strengthening the inertia of existing patterns in these organizations. Together, my findings thus suggest that attending to the mediating role of relational dynamics, the structure and stability of working relationships, and career tenure may enrich broader understandings of change in professional organizations. Interesting future research could include exploring how relational mediation operates across different change initiatives – such as technological adoption, diversity efforts, or work-life balance policies. Comparative research could also examine whether relational mediation of change operates differently in contexts with varying relationship structures and career tenure patterns, such as organizations with higher turnover, rotating team assignments, or flatter hierarchies.

8.4 Uncertainty and relationship management

In Chapter 7, I set out to answer the question: *How do professionals manage temporal uncertainty in their work?* (**Sub-RQ 3**) Professional work is widely recognized as inherently uncertain and ambiguous, characterized by the application of expert judgment to non-routine problems where both outcomes and the adequacy of solutions are difficult to measure and evaluate (Abbott, 1988; Alvesson, 2001; Alvehus, 2022). Because professional problems are ill-defined and evolving, and open to interpretation at every stage – from diagnosis to outcome – indeterminacy is constitutive of professional work rather than an exception to it. It follows that the temporal development of professional work is inherently difficult to predict: as both process and outcome depend on emerging information, and the shifting contexts of multiple parties, what happens when and how long it takes cannot be fully specified in advance. This is understood here as temporal uncertainty, the irreducible uncertainty about the temporal development of events, which cannot be eliminated by any amount of prior information but only through the unfolding of time itself.

In response to this indeterminacy, professionals and professional organizations in several sectors – such as legal services (Lupu & Rokka, 2022), consulting (Yakura, 2001; Evans et al., 2004), accounting (Alvehus & Spicer, 2012), and even creative work (Pitts, 2022) – have historically turned to time as a practical, commensurable proxy to account for effort and value. Crucially, this system was designed to work retrospectively: recording time as it unfolds to document, rationalize, and justify work already performed, rather than to predict and determine what work would entail in advance. This would suggest that when organizations attempt to manage temporal uncertainty through prediction, the system reaches its limits – translating past effort into time units cannot

resolve uncertainty about how future work will unfold. Addressing this challenge of 'predicting the unpredictable', research on innovation and creative work has recently foregrounded a different perspective on temporal uncertainty, showing how actors and organizations manage temporal uncertainty not through prediction and control but by acknowledging and adapting to it (Austin et al., 2012; Lifshitz-Assaf et al., 2021; Fayard, 2024; Otto et al., 2024). Given increasing pressures on professional organizations to provide ex-ante estimates and budget certainty (Bloomberg Law, 2021; BigHand, 2021), whether and how such an approach might transfer to professional settings, where work is typically organized around time-based systems, remained an open question.

Chapter 7 examined this question through Firm 1, a revelatory case that handles the most novel, complex, and bespoke work among the three firms studied, yet does not rely on time to organize and value work internally. My analysis revealed that professionals at Firm 1 manage temporal uncertainty through a distinct mechanism: decoupling time and value. Rather than attempting to predict temporal parameters, professionals replace temporal parameters with relationship-based assessments in determining value – pricing work based on relationship knowledge of client priorities rather than predicted duration, evaluating returns at the relationship level across extended timeframes rather than per transaction, and investing in relationships through underpriced and uncompensated work to create lock-in effects that stabilize future workflow. Across these strategies, relationship focus substitutes for temporal prediction as an approach to managing temporal uncertainty, as they reduce reliance on predicting how long work takes, when it occurs, and whether it recurs. This decoupling extends internally, shaping how the firm organizes associates' work without duration constraints and evaluates performance independently of chargeable hours. I found that this mechanism is enabled and sustained by organizational practices that cultivate relationship knowledge, relationship-centric orientations, and relationship expertise through broad relational rather than technical specialization, intensive socialization that shields professionals from competing commercial orientations, and a partner selection process that prioritizes proficiency in building and managing relationships. Notably, Firm 1 was distinctive across the three firms in explicitly acknowledging temporal uncertainty as an inherent feature of their work. Professionals at Firms 2 and 3 predominantly expressed confidence in their ability to predict time and effort, rarely foregrounding temporal uncertainty as a salient challenge.

These findings speak to both uncertainty management and our understanding of professional work and organizations more broadly, opening a conversation about an alternative approach

to managing temporal uncertainty. They extend understanding about uncertainty management by identifying decoupling time and value as a novel mechanism for managing irreducible unpredictability. This goes beyond both prediction and control, and adapting temporal structures to temporal uncertainty – rather than improving prediction or embracing uncertainty as generative, it reduces reliance on temporal parameters themselves, making work and its value fundamentally less dependent on temporal developments. This decoupling thus fosters resilience to temporal uncertainty, with relationships serving as the enabler of this approach.

This points to a related but distinct insight about the role of relationships in managing temporal uncertainty. The findings show how relationship focus generates an alternative form of certainty. Deep, long-standing relationships provide stability through reciprocity and lock-in effects grounded in accumulated knowledge and mutual investment. This creates a stable foundation for value creation that does not depend on temporal developments and that temporal prediction cannot provide. By relying on relationships as a way of managing temporal uncertainty, professionals thereby substitute relationship-based certainty for the illusory certainty of temporal prediction, fostering resilience on a more robust basis.

The findings revealed several organizational practices as enabling conditions for this approach. Firm 1's broad specialization approach organizes professionals around client relationships rather than technical domains, allowing professionals to sustain engagement and accumulate relationship knowledge across legal domains; its socialization practices cultivate a relationship-centric orientation from the outset of professionals' careers while shielding them from competing commercial pressures; and its partner selection process prioritizes proficiency in building and cultivating relationships over technical or managerial skills, securing relationship expertise across successive generations of firm leadership. Together, these practices build and sustain the relationship focus which makes decoupling time and value possible.

Beyond these enabling practices, several broader features of the context may constitute important boundary conditions. Firm 1's position in the top market segment – both in terms of status and price point – means that engagements are typically high stakes and high value. Based on this, clients may be more accepting when it 'takes as long as it takes', and, as the work is often novel and complex, they may also be more receptive to acknowledging work as inherently unpredictable, understanding the limits of upfront pricing estimates or fee caps, or accommodating overruns. In contrast, where work is more commoditized and standardized, clients may

have clearer pricing expectations based on the market, leaving less space for this approach to operate.

Firm 1's high status in the market constitutes a further enabling condition, particularly for their approach to socialization. It allows the firm to recruit strong candidates directly from university and also to retain high performers who, in some cases, could earn more at firms that pay bonus based on billable hours. High status may also play a role in the conception of temporal uncertainty at Firm 1. Emphasizing the irreducible unpredictability of their work could be interpreted as a status performance – celebrating uncertainty – that reinforces their jurisdictional claim to the most complex and novel problems (Abbott, 1988), marking their work as categorically different from more standardized professional work. Such celebration of uncertainty and high status may thus be mutually reinforcing, with status enabling the acknowledgment of unpredictability, while that acknowledgment reproduces and defends status. How status and the acknowledgment of temporal uncertainty relate – and whether that plays a role for this approach – remains an open and interesting question.

While the contextual features and findings of this single case study might make Firm 1 appear as particularly distinctive or even unique, I suggest that it merely makes dynamics more visible that could be found, to varying degrees, across professional organizations. Relationship-centric orientations emerged across many interviewees at all three firms; at Firm 1, however, it was particularly pronounced and salient as the underlying logic connecting organizational practices and priorities. This suggests that Firm 1 represents one end of a spectrum rather than being categorically different. As Starbuck (1993) notes, studying contexts that operate at the top of the market is precisely where successful dynamics reveal themselves most clearly. Consistent with this approach, the case here serves primarily to illuminate and exemplify a mechanism – how decoupling time and value, enabled by relationship focus, fosters resilience to temporal uncertainty. As Siggelkow (2007) suggests, a case can provide a concrete example that brings an argument to life and demonstrates that something can work, with the coherence of the underlying logic standing on its own.

Implications for understanding management of temporal uncertainty My findings extend research on managing temporal uncertainty – the irreducible uncertainty about future developments – by identifying an approach beyond both reducing and adapting to it: fostering resilience by reducing dependence on temporal developments. Research on innovation and creative work has emphasized the importance of acknowledging unpredictability rather than attempting to

predict or control it (Austin et al., 2012; Lifshitz-Assaf et al., 2021; Fayard, 2024; Otto et al., 2024). The findings here resonate with this in foregrounding acknowledgment of temporal uncertainty and limits of prediction as a starting point. These parallels could indicate that, at the most novel and bespoke end, traditional professions share more with creative and innovation contexts than commonly recognized – both involving unpredictable, judgment-dependent work where temporal uncertainty is irreducible. Yet where innovation research goes further in embracing uncertainty as generative and harnessing unpredictability as a source of novelty and creativity, my findings take a different direction. By decoupling time and value, professionals and organizations can make value determination and generation less dependent on temporal parameters, effectively reducing their vulnerability to temporal developments themselves. In replacing temporal parameters with relationship-based assessments, the basis of evaluation is thereby shifted away from temporal parameters, such as duration or timing, and decoupled from temporal developments. This adds a novel mechanism for understanding how professionals and organizations manage irreducible unpredictability.

My findings also demonstrate that relationships enable this decoupling to manage temporal uncertainty. While linking relationships and uncertainty management itself is not new, this specific connection – leveraging organizational-level relationship management to manage irreducible unpredictability about how the future unfolds – has been under-explored. Prior research has shown that relationships shape how actors experience and cope with uncertainty in psychological or interpersonal terms, often conceptualized through mechanisms such as trust or uncertainty reduction. For example, relationships reduce perceived vulnerability or informational ambiguity in dyadic and group interactions, including leader–follower contexts in organizations (C. R. Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), provide attachment-based security in contexts of personal anxiety (Bowlby, 1969), and enable psychological safety within teams facing ambiguity about outcomes (Edmondson, 1999). Sociological accounts similarly highlight trust as a mechanism for reducing complexity in social systems (Luhmann, 1979), while economic sociology emphasizes how social embeddedness mitigates transactional risk and informational opacity within market exchanges (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997). However, these literatures largely concern affective, epistemic, or interactional uncertainty – something that can be alleviated through additional information, communication, or relational familiarity. Less attention has been paid to the intersection of organizational approaches to relationship management and temporal uncertainty – a type of uncertainty that cannot be resolved ex ante but only through the unfolding of time.

My findings show how relationship-centric practices and strategies can foster resilience against temporal uncertainty at the organizational level. In this organization, professionals cultivate relationship-based certainty as a substitute for temporal prediction in managing temporal uncertainty. This mechanism resembles the logic of relational contract theory, where enduring ties substitute for formal safeguards under exchange uncertainty (Macneil, 1980), yet my findings show how this substitution reduces reliance on temporal developments rather than guarding against contractual incompleteness. These findings also mirror Uzzi and Lancaster's (2004) observations that embedded relationships allow professionals to refine the financial valuation of complex tasks through the use of private relationship information. My findings add to this logic by showing how decoupling value from time reduces the need for temporal prediction rather than just helping value complex tasks more accurately, and how this can extend as an organizing principle beyond external pricing. By demonstrating how professionals effectively replace temporal parameters with relationship-based assessments, these findings thus illuminate a concrete way in which organizations manage unpredictability, highlighting a link between relational approach and temporal uncertainty that has been under-explored in prior research.

These findings are subject to several boundary conditions discussed above. The approach emerged in a context of particularly novel and complex work, sophisticated clients without standardized pricing expectations, and a market status that enables the sustained relationship investment on which it depends. An important distinction for understanding the scope of these findings is between the mechanism and the strategies that Firm 1 deploys. I suggest that the mechanism itself – decoupling time and value through relationship focus – may travel to wherever work is highly unpredictable, deep client relationships are central, and organizations develop practices that enable an organization-wide prioritization of building and cultivating those relationships. Meanwhile, the specific strategies through which Firm 1 substitutes relationship-based assessments for temporal parameters in determining value – relationship-based pricing, evaluating returns across extended timeframes, investing in uncompensated work to cultivate lock-in – may be more contingent on market position, work complexity, and client sophistication, and harder to replicate where margins are tighter and work is more commoditized. Within this, however, the findings may well be relevant to contexts beyond legal services, such as complex consulting, bespoke software development, architecture or even construction.

Several directions for future research follow. Future research could examine whether and how this mechanism operates across other professional contexts and market segments, and whether

the enabling organizational practices can be developed outside the specific conditions studied here. The potential limits of relationship-based approaches also warrant attention – as Uzzi (1997) notes, deep relational embeddedness can produce insularity and reduce responsiveness to external shifts, and future research could explore how organizations navigate these tensions. The substitution of relationship-based certainty for temporal prediction also raises questions about exposure to relational uncertainty. Professionals at Firm 1 consistently identified the rise of procurement functions that mediate and formalize client relationships as a challenge. Future research could examine how organizations navigate this tension, and whether and how relationship-based approaches to managing uncertainty remain viable as business relationships become increasingly professionalized, commoditized, and depersonalized, including through technological intensification. Related to that, as predictive analytics and AI-driven tools become increasingly sophisticated, an important question is whether technological advances make temporal prediction more viable even for bespoke work – and what this means for the relative value of human-centred, relationship-based approaches to managing uncertainty.

Implications for understanding relationship management and professional work My findings also extend understanding of relationship management in professional work by revealing it not merely as a basis for leveraging client relationships as assets, or as part of professional expertise, but as an enabler for a fundamentally different approach to organizing and valuing work under uncertainty. While relationships are widely recognized as central to professional work – as relational capital, strategic assets, and drivers of firm performance (Maister, 1993; Lowendahl, 2005; Broschak, 2015) – the client side of professional work has received relatively little attention in organizational research (cf. Alvesson, Kärreman, Sturdy, & Handley, 2009). Some work has focused on how professional expertise and knowledge are relationally co-produced and constructed through ongoing client interactions (Fosstenløkken, Løwendahl, & Revang, 2003; Sturdy, Clark, Fincham, & Handley, 2009; Anand et al., 2007; Pakarinen & Huising, 2023). Yet this work focuses primarily on how client relationships shape the development and construction of technical expertise, rather than on how the expertise of managing relationships itself is embedded in and shapes the internal organization and practices of professional organizations. My findings extend this perspective by demonstrating how an organization's relational approach – specifically, embedding an organization-wide prioritization of building and cultivating deep client relationships – can manifest as an organizing principle shaping organizational structure, socialization practices, and promotion processes, and providing an alternative foundation for determining value and managing uncertainty that reduces reliance on time-based systems alto-

gether. They further reveal the specific organizational practices and strategies through which this focus is enabled and cultivated, offering a concrete account of how professionals develop, enact, and sustain this relationship focus throughout the organization. This highlights an under-explored connection between how professional organizations manage client relationships externally and how this shapes their internal organization.

Certain differences between Firm 1 and Firms 2 and 3 also raise some interesting questions about the nature of professional work itself. Professional work is widely characterized as inherently uncertain and ambiguous (Abbott, 1988; Alvesson, 2001; Alvehus, 2022), and as developed earlier in this thesis, such indeterminacy would suggest that its temporal development is similarly difficult to predict. Yet while professionals at Firm 1 explicitly acknowledged temporal uncertainty as inherent to their work, professionals at Firms 2 and 3 predominantly expressed confidence in their ability to predict time and effort, even in contentious work commonly assumed to be highly unpredictable. This suggests two directions that warrant further analysis. First, as discussed above, the explicit acknowledgment of uncertainty at Firm 1 could itself reflect a status performance – celebrating unpredictability as a marker of jurisdictional claim to the most complex and novel work, with status and the acknowledgment of uncertainty mutually reinforcing each other. Yet given that Firms 2 and 3 are also high-status, high-profile contexts, what does their expressed confidence in prediction mean? And how do they establish and construct their status? Investigating this could provide insight into how status is defended differently across market positions – from claiming jurisdiction over uniquely unpredictable problems to demonstrating mastery and predictability. This would raise the question of whether the relationship between status and uncertainty acknowledgment is more varied and strategic than a simple mutual reinforcement, and whether different status performances are available to firms at different market positions, with the choice itself being a form of strategic positioning.

Alternatively, the contrast between the firms may reflect genuine differences in the nature of work across market segments. However, if this was the case – and work even at tier 2 was already highly predictable – then this would suggest that large parts of professional work are more standardized and routine than commonly conceptualized by the literature. The parallels between the most novel and bespoke professional work and creative and innovation contexts indicated above may also support this possibility. This would qualify foundational characterizations of professional work as inherently ambiguous and unpredictable, suggesting such indeterminacy as characteristic of only the most bespoke and novel segment of the profession, and varying

meaningfully across professional work rather than defining it. This could mean that the most bespoke end of professional work may indeed share more with creative and innovation contexts than with counterparts in more standardized segments of the profession in terms of temporal uncertainty. This would also help understand the function and limits of time-based systems – well-suited to more standardized segments, but reaching their limits precisely where work is most bespoke and novel. Both these directions – status performances or temporal uncertainty across market segments – could be pursued through further analysis of the data collected here. More broadly, bringing the literatures on professional work and creative and innovation work into closer dialogue may prove a promising direction for future research, given the potential overlap in how temporal uncertainty is experienced and managed at the more novel and bespoke ends of both domains.

Several directions for future research follow from these findings. First, questions remain about the transferability of the approach documented here. Does decoupling time and value as a mechanism for managing uncertainty only work at the highly bespoke, high-status end of the market? Could other firms develop similar approaches if they cultivated the enabling organizational practices – or are those practices themselves enabled by the boundary conditions that distinguish this market segment? Second, if professional work becomes increasingly standardized and scalable (e.g. through technology), and as client relationships become more rationalized through professionalized procurement processes, the conditions that enable relationship-based approaches may shift across the profession. At the same time, as demands for prediction and budget certainty intensify, organizations across market segments may increasingly encounter the limits of a system designed to account for work retrospectively rather than predict it. How organizations navigate these developments – and whether relationship focus remains a viable organizing principle as the client landscape of professional work changes – provides an important direction for future research. Finally, the connection between how professional organizations manage client relationships externally and how this shapes their internal organization and practices remains under-explored. Future research could examine how different approaches to relationship management translate into distinct internal organizational logics, and what this means for how professional organizations are structured, governed, and evaluated.

8.5 Summary of contributions

This thesis set out to explore how professionals construct temporal meanings in high-performance professional organizations. The overarching finding is that relationships fundamentally shape and account for variation in temporal meanings: across three professional organizations, relational dynamics in professionals' immediate environment – specifically hierarchical working relationships – crucially mediate how professionals interpret and respond to organizational systems of measuring and controlling time. When time is removed from organizing and valuing work, professionals construct value through relationships instead, revealing meanings as fundamentally constructed through and expressions of relational dynamics. This overarching argument is built across three empirical chapters, each of which additionally makes a distinct contribution to specific literatures, and provides the basis for the theoretical contribution of this thesis to literature on temporality.

Temporality in organizations Research on temporality in professional organizations has largely assumed that measuring and controlling time shapes how professionals understand and value it – cultivating particular temporal meanings through temporal structures (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Coffey, 1994; Yakura, 2001; Alvehus & Spicer, 2012). I complicate this assumption by foregrounding relational dynamics between junior and senior professionals as a key determinant and mediator in the construction of temporal meanings. Chapter 5 demonstrated that professionals under the same organizational systems construct markedly varied meanings about temporal commitment and showed that these were neither firm-specific nor individually stable over time, indicating instead that these meanings are crucially shaped in professionals' immediate relational environment. Chapter 6 built on this and revealed how temporal meanings are shaped and reinforced through relational dynamics between junior and senior professionals across different forms of interactions. Chapter 7 provided another perspective on this argument by showing that when organizations reduce their reliance on temporal parameters to evaluate, organize and value work, professionals construct value through relationships instead, revealing temporal parameters as an overlay on fundamentally relational processes rather than an inherent source of meaning. The theoretical discussions of these findings within literature on the ideal worker image and overwork persistence further elaborated this argument: the discussion of Chapter 5 revealed that the stability of working relationships plays a critical role in how temporal meanings fragment and settle within organizations, while the discussion of Chapter 6 specified the relational level as mediating between individual and organizational factors in shaping temporal meanings. Together,

these findings suggest that within the structural constraints of high-performance environments, temporal meanings are fundamentally constructed through and expressions of relational dynamics. This challenges assumptions that measuring and controlling time directly shapes temporal meanings, and suggests reframing temporal orientations and temporal structures themselves as inherently relational. These findings have additional implications for research on professional socialization in foregrounding the role of relationship structure and stability for understanding the fragmentation or convergence of meanings within organizations, and for research on organizational control in suggesting relational dynamics as a crucial mediator of formal control systems.

Ideal worker image Research on ideal worker images has generally assumed a singular, monolithic norm dominating within and across organizations (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2001; Lupu et al., 2022) – a coherent set of expectations centred on work primacy, long hours, and total devotion, relative to which alternative approaches remain hidden or illegitimate (Reid, 2015; Heaphy & Trefalt, 2024). I challenge this assumption by revealing ideal worker images as both plural and fragmented within organizations. Chapter 5 demonstrated that two temporal ideals can co-exist as legitimate within the same organizations, fragmenting across relational contexts rather than converging around one uniform norm. The theoretical discussion of these findings provided further insights to boundary conditions: Contrasting with earlier studies conducted in rotating project team contexts suggests that relationship structure and stability may play a critical role in whether alternative ideals gain local legitimacy or remain hidden, extending understanding of how and why plural ideals emerge. The findings have additional implications for literature on distancing and resistance, by specifying features of the dominant ideal that may prompt forms of psychological distancing characterized by continued performance despite internal withdrawal.

Persistence of overwork Research on the persistence of overwork has primarily focused on individual and organizational-level explanations (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Lupu & Empson, 2015; Williams et al., 2013). I extend this research by foregrounding the immediate relational environment as a crucial yet previously under-examined analytical level that mediates these existing explanations. Chapter 6 revealed that relational dynamics between junior and senior professionals systematically tilt perceived expectations and work patterns towards overwork, even when senior professionals may intend otherwise. The theoretical discussion specifies how the relational level mediates between individual and organizational factors, as it shapes how professionals interpret and respond to these in practice. It thereby connects existing explanations by

adding an explanation for intra-firm differences in overwork patterns that previous individual- and organizational-level approaches could not account for. These findings additionally speak to research on organizational change, suggesting that change initiatives are mediated through the relational level before reaching junior professionals, and that attending to this along with the structure and stability of working relationships may enrich understanding of why change initiatives fail to translate throughout the organization.

Uncertainty and relationship management Research on uncertainty management has largely focused on prediction and control, or more recently on acknowledging and adapting to uncertainty as generative. This thesis contributes to this research by opening a conversation about an alternative approach to managing temporal uncertainty by identifying a novel mechanism and its enabler. First, Chapter 7 revealed decoupling time and value as a mechanism for managing temporal uncertainty that goes beyond both prediction and adaptation, as it fosters resilience by reducing reliance on temporal developments altogether. Second, the findings demonstrated how relationship focus serves as the enabler of this decoupling, generating an alternative form of certainty grounded in reciprocity, lock-in effects, and accumulated relationship knowledge that temporal prediction cannot provide. The findings additionally open a conversation about relationship focus as an alternative organizing principle to time-based systems, and raise questions about assumptions of uncertainty as a defining feature of professional work.

8.6 Synthesis of contextual conditions and future research

The findings of this thesis emerged under specific contextual conditions. The study was conducted in a single professional context – law firms – within one national market. Law firms represent a particular configuration of professional work, characterized by stable working relationships, long-term career tenure, partnership structure, and a dominant billable hours system that makes temporal meanings particularly visible and consequential. Yet I would expect that the core dynamics found here – the relational construction of temporal meanings – could be observed wherever hierarchical working relationships are stable and high-performance pressures and ambitions make the power asymmetry between seniors and juniors consequential. Partnership structure, billable hours, and long career tenure may amplify and make these dynamics more visible – adding analytical clarity to hierarchical relationships, making temporal meanings more multi-faceted, and deepening the fragmentation of meanings over time – but neither constitutes an enabling condition for the mechanism itself. The findings are thus relevant to organizational

contexts more broadly, and may well be more independent of the professional services context than initially apparent. Indeed, stable working relationships are arguably more characteristic of ordinary organizational contexts than the rotating project teams where several previous studies have been conducted, suggesting law firms and consulting contexts may be more different from each other than often assumed.

The study relies on interview data collected at a single point in time, which shapes the findings in two respects. As with all interview-based research, accounts reflect interviewees' constructions and self-presentations rather than direct observations of practice, as discussed in more detail in Section 8.3 above. Additionally, the cross-sectional design means that how temporal meanings and relational dynamics evolve over time remains beyond the scope of this thesis. However, as the discussion above also showed, this particular point in time – data collection in 2023-2024 – may itself be revealing: this thesis provides an early in-depth account of work practices in the post-pandemic environment that may indeed be documenting a moment of shift in how sustainable work practices are understood and legitimized. Whether this represents a momentary salience or a more enduring change remains an open and important question for future research. Importantly, this historical contingency only concerns the specific salience of the Sustainable High-Performer ideal at this particular moment, but not the core argument about relational dynamics mediating temporal meanings. Meanwhile, differences in relationship structure and stability may equally account for the divergence in findings with earlier studies.

The findings open several directions for future research. The first involves exploring how the relational construction of meanings – and this need not be limited to temporal meanings – operates across different contextual conditions, in particular with regard to the features of working relationships. As mentioned above, the difference between stable vs. rotating relational environments emerged as a potentially crucial factor in explaining plurality and fragmentation of temporal meanings. This raises questions around whether fragmentation versus convergence of meanings within organizations more broadly are related to relationship stability – in other words, do organizations with rotating project teams have a more homogeneous culture, and vice versa? Or how do organizational-level socialization processes interact differently with relational dynamics depending on relationship stability? Further contextual features of working relationships also warrant further examination: How do relationship duration, spatial and social distance from leadership, relational concentration (working in tight dyadic relationships or larger distributed teams) and the degree of power asymmetry (flat vs. steep hierarchies, including whether supervisors

are employed managers or owner-managers as in partnership structures) shape the relational construction of meanings and their fragmentation? Longitudinal research could additionally examine how these features of relationships may help us understand how relational dynamics shape organizational change, for instance how change efforts are mediated by relationship structure, stability, career tenure and turnover patterns, or flat vs. steep hierarchies.

A second direction concerns the legitimacy of sustainable approaches and the plurality and fragmentation of how the ideal worker manages demands within organizations. At the organizational level, research could further explore what shapes whether alternative approaches gain legitimacy, for example through comparative approaches. Longitudinal designs could illuminate how the legitimacy of sustainable approaches evolves over time. How the plurality and fragmentation of ideals evolve within organizations would also be interesting, and how this is shaped by factors such as career tenure and turnover patterns, or how post-pandemic cohorts of professionals experience and shape subsequent shifts. Another open question is whether there are contexts where sustainable approaches become sufficiently embedded to override intensive work patterns, and how these operate. At the individual level, longitudinal research could examine career trajectories and outcomes across different patterns of enacting ideals – how do sustainable vs. intensive vs. instrumental approaches shape careers over time? How does flexibility stigma play out when sustainable approaches are interpreted and enacted as legitimate? At the relational level, it would also be important to understand how relational dynamics reinforcing these approaches evolve over time – how does misalignment become sustained or corrected as working relationships develop? Finally, the senior professionals' perspective warrants closer attention – how do seniors recognize their own influence, and respond to the dynamics this thesis has documented? How do they construct temporal ideals themselves?

A third direction emerges around temporal uncertainty and relationship management. The mechanism of decoupling time and value documented here points towards a broader conversation about managing unpredictability through relationships – exploring related forms, such as agile project management in software development, for instance, through interpretive qualitative research could shed light on whether and how similar mechanisms operate across different contexts and whether relationship focus recurs and functions similarly as a response to temporal uncertainty. The contextual conditions raise further questions about transferability: Does this approach only operate at the high-status, bespoke end of the market? And how is temporal uncertainty experienced and managed across different segments? Addressing this could both

clarify the boundary conditions of the findings and shed light on broader assumptions about uncertainty as a defining feature of professional work. How relationship-oriented organizations navigate increasing commodification, professionalization of client procurement, and technological intensification also warrants attention, as these developments may reshape the conditions under which relationship-based approaches remain viable.

Finally, this thesis demonstrated the value of dyadic and relational data collection for understanding how meanings are constructed through hierarchical relationships. By examining both associates' and partners' perspectives within the same teams, substantial misalignment became visible that would have remained hidden through individual-level data alone. This methodological approach holds promise for organizational research more broadly – wherever meanings, norms, and responses to organizational systems are shaped through working relationships, multi-perspective relational data collection may reveal dynamics that conventional approaches overlook.

8.7 Managerial summary and practical implications

This thesis examined how professionals experience and navigate temporal demands in high-performance professional organizations. To do so, I interviewed and analyzed 80 professionals across three City law firms (40 partners, 32 associates and trainees, 8 others including management professionals and counsels). The findings carry practical implications for those responsible for managing people and teams within professional organizations, as well as those responsible for managing client relationships and organizing work. The following section provides managerial summaries of all three chapters and derives their practical implications.

Managing temporal demands and overwork

One of the clearest findings of this thesis is that junior and mid-level professionals in the same firm, under the same formal systems, can respond to these and manage their temporal demands very differently – and that these differences are not primarily a matter of individual personality or commitment, but of their immediate team and supervisor environment. Senior professionals are a crucial determinant of how junior and mid-level colleagues interpret what the organization expects of them, what a successful career looks like, and, accordingly, how they manage their time and working hours – with significant implications for their long-term commitment and out-

look on retention. While this research was conducted in City law firms, these insights are not limited to professional services: wherever professionals work in stable hierarchical relationships, performance pressures are high, and seniors carry authority over juniors' careers and trajectories, relational dynamics are likely to matter more than the formal systems in place.

Managing temporal demands: 3 patterns of enactment Specifically, Chapter 5 found three archetypes of how junior and mid-level professionals manage temporal demands: Hyper-Performers, Sustainable High-Performers, and Time Servers. Trainees, before settling into stable team contexts, do not yet fall into any of these – drawing primarily on organizational messaging, formal training, and peer observation, they do not yet form a coherent image of what is expected.

Hyper-Performers manage temporal demands reactively. Suppressing control over temporal demands, they enact constrained forms of agency, and internalize pressure, often including intense self-monitoring of chargeable hours, absorbing overruns, and under-recording time. This enactment is based on their perception of the dominant image of what is expected of the 'ideal professional' – a coherent set of underlying interpretations and perceived expectations about how time is valued and managed in their environment. In the case of Hyper-Performers, their dominant ideal encompasses that: chargeable hours is the primary measure of performance, busyness signals recognition and value, subordination of personal time to work demands should be unquestioned, and time and fee pressures should be absorbed individually.

Sustainable High-Performers, in contrast, sustain control over temporal demands and exhibit a strong sense of agency, actively shaping and structuring their time to balance high performance with personal needs sustainably, and maintaining a pragmatic relationship with chargeable hours. Sustainable High-Performers perceive an ideal that assumes that: performance encompasses dimensions beyond billable hours, workload should be managed realistically and reliably, sustainable pacing is essential for long-term success, and accountability for efficiency should be bounded appropriate to the respective level and role.

The third archetype, Time Servers, adopt an instrumental approach to temporal demands – performing outwardly, but focussing on short-term rewards and ceasing to attempt shaping their role or career trajectory, they go into a 'time server mode'. Time Servers' enactment is based on the same perception of the underlying ideal as Hyper-Performers – centred around maximizing chargeable hours, total availability, and long working hours – but instead of being committed to it, Time Servers internally reject this model, and privately withdraw their long-term commitment

to the firm while carefully concealing this stance – suspending control over their time in the anticipation to re-claim it through exit in the future.

Importantly, these archetypes demonstrate that professionals perceive only one or the other ideal as dominant in their environment, and that this shapes not only how they enact expectations in specific domains of their daily practice – performance evaluation, workload management, balancing private time, and accountability for client time – but their broader relationship with time itself – how they experience pressure around temporal demands and metrics, how they manage these in enacting agency over their time, and how they envision their future trajectory within the firm. And this represents the crucial difference between these patterns: they do not differ simply by number of hours worked – all three types work long hours. The critical differentiator is the sense of agency over their time: Professionals who feel in control of their time, who actively shape and structure their demands rather than absorbing them reactively, can sustain high performance over the long term. It is the absence of that agency – when professionals perceive that expectations leave them with no control over their time – that represents the more concerning pattern, with significant implications for wellbeing, long-term commitment, and retention.

Shaping expectations: 4 forms of relational dynamics Chapter 6 revealed how the three enactment patterns are shaped and reinforced in working relationships between junior and senior professionals – and how this is often based on misaligned interpretations of the dominant ideal. The analysis shows how these dynamics operate across four types of interactions.

First, associates interpret partners' explicit messaging and communication. When partners convey complex or ambiguous expectations – emphasizing both performance and sustainability, for instance, or billable time as one of many criteria but neither sufficient nor outright necessary for advancement – associates tend to prioritize what is clearest and most measurable, which typically means metrics like chargeable hours. Without explicit clarification of how different criteria relate to each other, such simplification reinforces Hyper-Performer expectations by default.

Second, associates rely far more heavily on what seniors actually do than on what they say: when partners' visible practices undermine their verbal commitments – practising total availability themselves, for instance – associates read these behaviours as the real signal of what is expected, overriding any supportive messaging. In contrast, sustainable expectations only gain credibility when partners actively and visibly model them.

Third, partners also interpret associates' behaviours and signals, and the findings showed that associates' long working hours and extension are often read by partners as enthusiasm, commitment or outstanding attitude – yet these same associates often experience significant pressure and strain, and may over time come to reject this model and withdraw their long-term commitment. Any rewarding of such behaviours without proactive clarifications of expectations or interventions implicitly reinforces and thus sustains these patterns, with severe consequences when remaining unaddressed. The findings suggest that an effective way to mitigate such misinterpretations is not only for managers to 'check-in' regularly ('How are you?') but to proactively and explicitly acknowledge the possibility of strain ('Are you okay?') and clarify expectations ('You don't need to do this' / 'It has to be sustainable for you').

Fourth, partners send particularly powerful signals in how they respond to acknowledged problems: when partners circumvent formal protection mechanisms – work allocation systems, time recording policies – associates interpret this as reflecting that the underlying problem is not that important – and thereby not only reinforcing the status quo but actively de-legitimizing alternatives. Across all four dynamics, the consistent pattern is that when interpretations diverge, they reinforce expectations of intensive work patterns even when senior professionals may genuinely intend otherwise. Crucially, the chapter also shows that in cases when associates' ideal is not entirely coherent across all dimensions, Sustainable High-Performer expectations get overridden, and associates enact the Hyper-Performer pattern overall, meaning that even partial progress in reinforcing sustainable expectations rarely translates into genuinely different work patterns.

These findings have several practical implications. They suggest that firms should not assume that organizational values around sustainable work or formal systems of measuring and controlling time translate uniformly into how professionals actually behave – professionals interpret expectations very differently depending on their relational context, and what is legitimate in one team can be entirely different from what is legitimate in another. More importantly, senior professionals may be inadvertently reinforcing intensive work patterns and sustaining overwork even when they genuinely intend otherwise. Developing awareness of this is essential: seniors should recognize that associates attend far more closely to what they do than to what they say, that what looks like enthusiasm may be underlaid by more pressure and strain than it appears – with check-ins potentially being more effective than praise to sustain long-term commitment – and that circumventing formal protection mechanisms, even when this feels routine or necessary, sends powerful signals that undermine stated commitments to sustainable working. The Time Server

pattern reveals particular implications for retention: when professionals perceive intensive commitment as the only legitimate approach and partnership as the only viable long-term trajectory, some will conceal internal withdrawal while maintaining outward performance. For long-term retention, firms should therefore make alternative career paths not just formally available but actively visible and legitimate, and actively support professionals' agency over their own working patterns. As noted above, what determines sustainability is not the number of working hours *per se*, but the degree of agency professionals feel over their temporal demands. Professionals who feel in control of their time are more likely to sustain high performance over the long term, while those who do not are at greater risk of burning out or quietly withdrawing.

Managing unpredictability through client relationships

Professional work is inherently unpredictable – how long tasks and projects take, when they arise, and how they unfold cannot be fully specified in advance. This thesis examined a firm that responds to this challenge not by trying to predict time more accurately, but by organizing work around deep client relationships instead. The findings reveal three practically relevant strands for firms considering this direction.

The first strand concerns how relationship focus can be cultivated as an organizational capability. The case study revealed how organizing teams and professionals internally around broad rather than narrow technical specializations allows professionals to build deeper client relationships and knowledge by enabling them to follow clients across different matters and legal domains. Further, the firm cultivates relationship-centric orientations among its professionals not only through strong socialization, but also through shielding junior professionals from commercial aspects of work – by not involving professionals in pricing, billing, and cost management, they prevent business logics that may prioritize efficiency and short-term gains from competing with and crowding out long-term relationship considerations. Finally, the partner promotion process prioritizes proficiency in building and managing client relationships over both technical and managerial skills, ensuring that relationship expertise is secured and reproduced across successive generations of firm leadership. Together, these practices embed an organization-wide prioritization of building and cultivating deep client relationships as a structural feature of how the firm operates.

The second strand concerns how relationship focus enables professionals to manage unpredictability through relationships. Defying to predict how long work will take or when it will arise – predictions that are inherently unreliable for novel and complex work – professionals decouple

value from time by relying on relationship-based assessments instead. Rather than pricing based on predicted duration, professionals draw on relationship knowledge to assess what outcomes are worth to clients – pricing based on value. Rather than evaluating returns per transaction, they take a long-term relationship-level perspective that reduces dependence on the timing of individual matters. And rather than forecasting future workflow, they invest in relationships through underpriced work that builds reciprocity and client lock-in, generating a more robust form of certainty than prediction can provide.

The third strand concerns how this approach allows for decoupling from time internally. When time is no longer the basis for valuing work externally, the firm does not need to tightly manage time internally either. Professionals organize their work without fixed duration constraints or restrictive deadlines, and performance is evaluated independently of chargeable hours. Rather than preoccupying themselves with time metrics, professionals can thereby focus on producing high quality work and cultivating the client relationships that generate long-term value.

For firms seeking to strengthen their relationship focus, the findings suggest several structural features to consider – how professionals are organized internally, what aspects of work they are involved in, and who gets promoted all shape whether relationship expertise can develop and be sustained as an organizational capability. Firms should consider whether their internal structures support professionals in sustaining engagement with clients and building relationship knowledge, whether commercial pressures crowd out relationship investment, and whether their promotion criteria reward relationship expertise. For firms grappling with the inherent unpredictability of complex work, the case study reveals an alternative approach: reducing reliance on temporal developments by decoupling value from time. Finally, the findings demonstrate that operating without billable hours internally is not only possible but can free professionals to focus on quality and relationship development rather than time metrics – yet this requires a deeply ingrained and carefully cultivated approach that pervades practices across the organization, not simply the removal of the system.

Rethinking change of the system of billable hours

The billable hour system has long attracted criticism – whether for driving overwork, incentivizing inefficiency, or producing misaligned interests between professionals and clients. Both externally – as a way of pricing work – and internally – to evaluate performance and as a basis of compensation – calls for change are prevalent from across clients, wellbeing advocates, junior

professionals, firm leadership, and industry commentators alike. In recent years, some firms have begun to experiment with reforms to reduce reliance on billable hours in their internal evaluation and performance management (Jackson Lewis, 2014; Clifford Chance, 2019; Hill, 2025). This thesis speaks directly to these developments.

The findings suggest that the behavioural consequences of billable hour systems are more complex than the debate often assumes. What drives how professionals work is not the system itself but the relational context in which it operates – the signals senior professionals send, the expectations they model, and the space they create or foreclose for alternative approaches. This means that reforming or removing the system alone will not change how professionals behave if the relational dynamics that shape behaviour remain unchanged. Equally, this means that alleged consequences of the billable hour system with regard to unsustainable work patterns, mental health and overwork can be addressed by attending to the relational level, independent of whether the system itself is reformed. Additionally, the case study demonstrated that organizing and evaluating professional work without relying on billable hours is not only possible but that relationships can provide an alternative organizing principle for managing professional work. Together, the main conclusion from these findings is that relationships represent the crucial lever: they determine how expectations are interpreted and enacted, and – if relationship focus is deeply embedded and cultivated as an organizational logic – can provide an alternative foundation for assessing value in organizations. Further reflections on the billable hour system as a basis for pricing work, which emerged from observations across this study but are not presented in the thesis, are discussed in the concluding remarks.

8.8 Concluding reflections

I set out to study billable hours – a practice that establishes a direct link between time and a certain value. I was driven by the question: What does this practice do? To organizations, people, and their relationship with time? The answer is: surprisingly little. Instead, what is valued and meaningful consistently emerged to be determined by relationships.

When I first engaged with the literature on temporality, I became aware of my own relationship with time in a way I hadn't been before. It opened up perspectives that were new to me – recognizing that I had implicitly assumed only one conception of time – objective, homogeneous, measured by the clock – but that time could be perceived as more fluid, and more

context-dependent – heterogenous in value depending on the situation. This shift helped me both understand and even shape my own relationship with time, and, importantly, how I understood others. It also invoked a question: Had working under a billable hours system from the outset of my career shaped this orientation I was now noticing – my intensive awareness of time, the high value I attributed to it, conceiving of it as such an important resource? The literature was hinting at this, suggesting that professionals in these contexts held particular temporal orientations, or were socialized into particular time consciousness. But it was not conclusive, and left open the question of how and why. How measuring and controlling time shapes temporal orientations thus became an early question guiding my research – yet this shifted as the research developed.

I never expected relationships to emerge as the dominant theme of my thesis. I had chosen a relational data design because my growing awareness that people can experience and perceive the same situation in fundamentally different ways had given me the sense that capturing multiple perspectives was essential. I noticed the wide variation in how professionals approached and managed temporal demands throughout data collection, and had already shifted the focus of my research away from trying to understand this, putting it down to just individual differences. It was only when I began looking at the senior data side-by-side that the systematic patterns struck me. I was surprised by the extent to which seniors' accounts explained juniors' experiences – how much of what juniors felt, interpreted, and enacted could be traced back to the dynamics of those hierarchical relationships. I had always assumed that supervisors and senior colleagues play an important role in professionals' experiences of daily working life, but I had not anticipated that these relational dynamics could shape people's responses to formal systems so fundamentally, that it produced such vastly different experiences even within the same organizational culture. That, more than anything, surprised me. Finally, the mechanism at the heart of Chapter 7 – finding resilience in the face of unpredictability not through prediction or control, but through certainty grounded in relationships – is one I have since had the privilege of experiencing on a personal level. It has been genuinely fascinating to explore this mechanism within an organization, and I think it warrants more attention in future research.

Finally, this research also changed how I think about the system of billable hours itself. Having immersed myself in how it operates across three firms, I find myself with some observations that go beyond what I have theorized in this thesis, and speaking less to the academic literature and more to practitioners and the ongoing debate about the system. At the risk of being provocative,

I would like to address two 'myths' of the billable hour. The first concerns the 'death' of the billable hour. The system's demise has been proclaimed for decades. Yet the system has proved so resilient that the debate has almost inverted – with commentators now more likely to declare that it will never die than to predict its 'death'. Based on my observations, however, I would argue that the billable hour is, in many respects, already dead. The original system – and what the assumptions of commentators often still rely on – presupposes an 'open tab' hourly rate pricing arrangement, where clients are billed for time as it accrues *without* any prior estimate. Across interviews, I observed that only a very small fraction of work still priced on this basis. The overwhelming norm – and I suspect many practitioners will recognise this – involves some form of estimate – even in contentious matters where billing on an hourly rate is arguably still the most prevalent, estimates are often demanded for distinct phases of work. Formally, an estimate may carry no binding force. Yet, according to my observations, it shapes behaviour and case management in much the same way as a fixed, capped, or other close-ended fee. Across interviews, the differences between these arrangements were consistently described as far less pronounced than commentators tend to assume. In any case, professionals feel pressure to stay within the quoted figure, write off time that exceeds it, and do not manage resources any differently. Instead, a recurrent insight was simply that work takes as long as it takes, and that the scope for actively shaping how long tasks and projects require is actually quite limited. What this suggests, at the very least, is that any debate about the billable hours and its future needs to be clearer about what it means by the system, as the 'open tab' hourly rate mechanism that anchors most of these discussions is already the exception rather than the norm.

This connects to the second myth: that billable hours encourage inefficiency. Across my interviews, I found little evidence and space for this. To the contrary, professionals at every level were primarily concerned with being as efficient as possible, for three reasons. First, they simply do not have the time to be inefficient: the volume of work already exceeds what fits comfortably into a normal working week, and professionals consistently expressed having no interest in extending it further. Second, as described above, pressure to stay within fee estimates was near-universal and consistently described as very real, given competitive pricing and a recurrent pattern of tasks exceeding their budgets. Across firms, I observed that substantial overruns and write-offs were the norm, leaving no room for deliberate inefficiency. Third, this pressure is often transmitted to junior professionals. From trainee to partner, being efficient was one of the most consistently named qualities of a good associate across my interviews. It thus appears the 'new billable hour' – as it operates today in conjunction with estimates, caps, and fixed fees – rather

than incentivizing inefficiency already generates considerable pressure in the opposite direction. At least in the short term and at the level of individual case management – whether, when and how these pressures translate to firm level and industry-wide change remains to be seen.

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