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**Normalization of Degraded Expert Work in Globalized Finance:  
The experiences and consequences of organizational control over outsourced expert workers**

Journal:	<i>Organization</i>
Manuscript ID	ORG-24-0071.R2
Manuscript Type:	Special Issue: Expert Futures
Keywords:	degraded expert work, decomposition, organizational control, normalisation, international outsourcing
Abstract:	<p>An important element of the crisis in expertise is the growing insecurity and degradation of the working conditions of many expert occupations. Building on theoretical work on the crisis of expertise, this paper examines the status and conditions of expert financial workers who find themselves in challenging and unwelcome working conditions. Using in-depth interviews with financial assistants employed in the outsourced fringes of the global banking industry, we portray how management in the outsourcing firm extracts, standardizes and exploits the expertise of its workers while using sophisticated cultural and normative techniques to normalize work degradation. Specifically, we show how workers' aspirations, willingness and responsibilities are mobilized to cultivate elements of expertise deemed valuable to management. A paradoxical situation arises whereby management values the expert work conducted within the financial system, while simultaneously degrading the conditions of those executing the work. The notion of expertise emerges as a hidden yet powerful mechanism of organizational control, raising questions of the socially constructed, precarious, fluid and incomplete nature of expertise.</p>

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4 **Normalization of Degraded Expert Work in Globalized Finance:**  
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6 **The experiences of organizational control over outsourced**  
7 **expert workers**  
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13 **Abstract**  
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15 An important element of the crisis in expertise is the growing insecurity and  
16 degradation of the working conditions of many expert occupations. Building on  
17 theoretical work on the crisis of expertise, this paper examines the status and conditions  
18 of expert financial workers who find themselves in challenging and unwelcome  
19 working conditions. Using in-depth interviews with financial assistants employed in the  
20 outsourced fringes of the global banking industry, we portray how management in the  
21 outsourcing firm extracts, standardizes and exploits the expertise of its workers while  
22 using sophisticated cultural and normative techniques to normalize work degradation.  
23 Specifically, we show how workers' aspirations, willingness and responsibilities are  
24 mobilized to cultivate elements of expertise deemed valuable to management. A  
25 paradoxical situation arises whereby management values the expert work conducted  
26 within the financial system, while simultaneously degrading the conditions of those  
27 executing the work. The notion of expertise emerges as a hidden yet powerful  
28 mechanism of organizational control, raising questions of the socially constructed,  
29 precarious, fluid and incomplete nature of expertise.  
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46 **Keywords:** Degraded expert work, decomposition, organizational control,  
47 normalization, international outsourcing  
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## Introduction

The crisis of expert work and expertise has become increasingly acute in recent decades (Eyal, 2019; Leicht and Fennell, 2023; Nichols, 2017; Reed and Reed, 2022, 2024). Expert work is usually associated with ‘good jobs’ (Kalleberg, 2013) that provide relatively high rewards in labor markets (e.g. high levels of pay, status, and autonomy, and good working conditions). But many organizations that employ experts are becoming increasingly less generous with these entitlements. The terms and conditions of expert work, like those of many other forms of employment, face steady erosion. Many types of expert work are increasingly insecure and subject to a degradation of conditions.

This situation represents a partial reversal of the optimistic appraisals of work and expertise often found in the latter part of the twentieth century. Expertise is usually thought to be of indispensable value to modern societies, as described in literature as diverse as the sociology of professions (Brint, 1994; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011), economic theories about human capital formation (Brown, et al, 2020; Fleming, 2017), discussions on the shift to a post-industrial knowledge economy (Castells, 2000), or the output of businesses and consulting companies such as McKinsey’s ‘War for Talent’ (Michaels et al, 2001). Today, however, experts and expertise are widely said to be in crisis (Nichols, 2017; Reed and Reed, 2024). This crisis takes many forms. A major recent theoretical exploration by Reed and Reed (2022; 2024) identifies three possible scenarios about the current and future directions of expert professions, suggesting that expert work is widely viewed as either ‘de-legitimised’, ‘demystified’ or ‘decomposed’. Drawing on Reed and Reed’s discussion of the ‘decomposition’ narrative, we demonstrate how and why expert work has been ‘decomposed’ in one specific setting. Our study explores the degradation of expert work in the financial analysis industry under complex international outsourcing arrangements, where highly competent expert workers are hired on insecure terms while simultaneously being expected to conform to the highest standards of professional conduct and behaviour.

We refer to the degradation of expert work as being subjected to the combined effects of major and long-running changes in the structure and conduct of post-

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4 industrial knowledge economies. The development of high-value knowledge work  
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6 coexists with other major socio-economic trends such as financialization and the  
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8 international division of labour (Leitch & Fennell, 2023). Knowledge and expertise are  
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10 not exclusively owned and controlled by experts. High-value features can be readily  
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12 extracted, codified, standardized and exploited by employers in a globalized knowledge  
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14 economy (Cohen & El-Sawad, 2007; Styhre, 2017). There is no simple relationship  
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16 between expertise and the ‘talent’ of individuals including experts’ personal attributes  
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18 of cognition, intuition and capital (Bigley & Wiersema, 2002; Cummings & Knott,  
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20 2018; Dane & Pratt, 2007). The global universality and codifiability of certain forms of  
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22 expert work means that the knowledge economy is quite capable of generating bad jobs  
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24 among the good (Kalleberg, 2013). There is no guarantee that educational investment  
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26 will supply the good jobs and rewarding careers that graduates hope to secure (Fleming,  
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28 2017).

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30 As Brown et al (2012) argue, graduates are increasingly locked into a ‘global  
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32 auction’ administered by transnational companies including international outsourcing  
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34 companies in which graduates are motivated to continuously expand and advance their  
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36 ‘talent’ in order to engage in a greater range of high-value activities in global value  
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38 chains. This auction is ferociously competitive, and it favours the interests of the strong;  
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40 in this case the employers. Financial knowledge is institutionalized, codified and  
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42 divided into modular components with a hierarchical structure and a ‘specialized  
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44 dictionary’ or codebook is developed and used by international outsourcing firms which  
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46 assign particular models and vocabularies in terms of know-how to workers who then  
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48 work to this codebook (McCabe et al., 1998). Consequently, a new division of expertise  
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50 is generated where international outsourcing companies enjoy wide leeway to exploit  
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52 and capitalize upon the education, talent and abilities of ‘para-experts’ who desire to  
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54 become ‘true’ experts through career developments (Brown et al., 2014; Leitch &  
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56 Fennell, 2023; Piketty, 2014).

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58 Using in-depth interviews with financial analysts employed in the outsourced  
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60 fringes of the global banking industry, we construct a picture of the complexities,  
opportunities and challenges of degraded expert work. Our study adds to the body of

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4 critical literature on the decline of expert status by exploring the work and careers of  
5 workers in the financial analysis sector in China. Based on qualitative interviews with  
6 financial analysts employed by an outsourced provider of financial information to major  
7 investment banks, we show how these expert workers possess many of the skills,  
8 attitudes and features of expert workers, but face a continued struggle for autonomy,  
9 recognition, job security and career development. They possess masters-level degrees  
10 (but, critically, not from the top-ranked universities), and work in what is clearly a  
11 white-collar, knowledge work, or professional setting. Managers would normalize the  
12 degraded work conditions so that expert workers come to view it as less degraded. This  
13 normalization entails two stages: first, recasting the context by introducing a clear frame  
14 that ‘yes, there is a precarious work environment, but it is not really what it appears to  
15 be’; second, emphasizing and encouraging the development of traditional frameworks  
16 associated with expertise by highlighting the similarities in personal traits, skills and  
17 potential of conducting expert work with in-house employees, in order to encourage  
18 outsourced workers to exert continuous effort to develop their expertise and  
19 professional comportment as a route to moving to higher-status positions at the top  
20 investment banks in near future.

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37 Our key contribution is to demonstrate that the ‘decomposition’ of expertise  
38 involves not simply the total managerial control over expertise that degrades and  
39 destroys expertise. Rather, decomposition in this particular setting involves the  
40 simultaneous disassembly of, and increased control over, expert work, while also  
41 rhetorically inflating the notion of expertise in a more general ideological sense as part  
42 of a broader programme of organizational culture management. This rhetorical boosting  
43 of expertise is used to motivate and compel workers and is enthusiastically embraced  
44 by expert workers. We show that managers proactively attempt to normalize conditions  
45 of degraded expert work, while simultaneously inflating and reification the notion of  
46 expertise. In this sense, ‘the crisis of expertise’ is not about explicitly delegitimizing  
47 expertise, skills or professionalism; in fact, rhetorically what we find is the opposite.  
48 Our research identifies the contradictory nature of Reed & Reed’s decomposition  
49 narrative (2024: 76-105). It compels expert workers to generate constant willingness,  
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4 aspirations and responsibilities to accumulate elements of ‘expertise’ during work and  
5 simultaneously fixes and degrades them as a very specific kind of lower-level expert  
6 which no longer relies on cognitive abilities and heuristic skills of decoding tacit  
7 knowledge. Such an understanding of expertise as a hidden yet powerful mechanism of  
8 organizational control raises questions of the socially constructed, precarious, fluid and  
9 incomplete quality of expertise.  
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### 15 **Experts in Crisis: Understanding Expert Decomposition in the Workplace**

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17 A large multidisciplinary literature has emerged over the last decade which argues in  
18 various ways that experts and expertise are in crisis. Elements of this crisis include the  
19 questioning and delegitimizing of expert knowledge claims by, for example, populist  
20 political figures and their followers (Nichols, 2017; Reed and Reed, 2024), the intrusion  
21 of pervasive forms of managerialism that have asserted New Public Management style  
22 control over professionals in a low-trust environment of performance management, cost  
23 control and accountability (Power, 1999; Shore, 2008); technological change such as  
24 the development and application of AI into knowledge domains that were until recently  
25 the sole preserve of certified, university-accredited professionals (Suskind and Suskind,  
26 2015), and new workplace practices that question the continued employment of  
27 qualified professionals in favor of replacing them with lesser-trained and uncertified  
28 staff employed to handle more basic, unbundled and discrete tasks (Noordegraaf, 2015).  
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40 One of the most insightful explanations of the expert work crisis is the recent work  
41 of Reed and Reed (2022, 2024) where three specific positions of expert crisis are  
42 narrated: ‘de-legitimization’, ‘de-mystification’ and ‘decomposition’. The first ‘De-  
43 legitimation’ narrative questions the survivability of the very notion of expertise. It  
44 ‘signals a fundamental breakdown in the institutionalized ‘trust relationship’ between  
45 experts and those whom they try to serve’ (Reed and Reed, 2024: 21). Second, the  
46 ‘Demystification’ narrative provides a more complex and less epochal perspective in  
47 which (predominantly Foucauldian) theorists of expert work argue that experts and  
48 expertise have not been delegitimized and are not at critical risk of extinction. Rather,  
49 their position is that expertise is a complex assemblage of forms of ‘governmentality’  
50 that remains highly influential in the ways in which societies are structured and run.  
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4 Compared with the first two positions, the decomposition narrative suggests that  
5 de-legitimation and demystification positions are both exaggerated, and that expertise  
6 and expert work have adapted to changing conditions. Indeed, new forms of expert  
7 work such as corporate professionals (Hodgson, Paton & Muzio, 2015; Kipping &  
8 Kirkpatrick, 2013) have emerged to bring new rules, conventions and norms into  
9 existing expert work systems, which might challenge traditional status of expert work.  
10 As seen, advocates of decomposition take a relatively optimistic attitude that expert  
11 workers undertake pragmatic, tactical responses to organizational and regulatory  
12 change in attempts to secure their survival. From their perspectives, inherently  
13 adaptable and resilient organizational and regulatory structures can absorb threats and  
14 sustain the long-term survival of expert work (Reed and Reed, 2024). In sum,  
15 decomposition might mean the established system of professions is becoming  
16 dismantled, but this does not lead to the destruction of expertise or the demise of expert  
17 work.  
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31 We argue in this article that the decomposition perspective offers a useful way to  
32 understand expert work as a complex and adaptive system of reorganizing and  
33 reproducing organizational and social relations. Once experts accept their tenuous  
34 status as part of the existence of a complex division of expert work, they are assumed  
35 to effectively manage the contradictions, tensions and paradoxes inherent in the  
36 reorganizing processes. We argue that these conflicts and paradoxical tensions cannot  
37 be subsumed under experts' control, because experts are increasingly exposed to  
38 organizational control which fragments and fractures expert labor, leading to degraded  
39 expert work conditions. In their recent book, Leicht and Fennell (2023) argue that  
40 within the globalized knowledge economy, the rapid expansion of management and  
41 high-value knowledge work has called corporations to extract, codify, standardize and  
42 exploit high-value features of expert labor (see also Styhre, 2017). Expert work has  
43 been subjected to marketization and financialization that reshapes and constrains the  
44 ways expert work is valued, specialized and distributed. Brown et al (2012) consider  
45 that graduates or new expert labor are increasingly locked into a 'global auction'  
46 administered by transnational companies in which graduates are motivated to  
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4 continuously expand and advance their ‘talent’ in order to engage in a greater range of  
5 high-value activities in global value chains. Consequently, a new division of expertise  
6 is generated where multinational corporations enjoy wide leeway to exploit and  
7 capitalize upon the education, talent and abilities of ‘para-experts’ who desire to  
8 become ‘true’ experts through career developments (Brown et al., 2014; Leicht and  
9 Fennell, 2023; Piketty, 2014).  
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15 In this article, we illuminate how organizational controls over the decomposition  
16 of expert work invoke a paradoxical situation which is often overlooked in the existing  
17 research on the crisis of expertise. Decomposition raises the possibilities of the  
18 simultaneous disassembly of, and increase control over expert work, while also  
19 rhetorically constructing a quasi-expert environment or new regulated zones of  
20 autonomy where experts are encouraged to enhance their capabilities and talents. In the  
21 following section, we outline our contribution to this debate through our discussion of  
22 the ‘normalization of degraded expert work’.  
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### 30 **Normalization of degraded expert work: International outsourcing**

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32 As suggested by the above discussion of degraded expert work globally, we see it as  
33 extremely challenging for a large number of knowledge experts who are increasingly  
34 placed in precarious employment relationships: they have limited access to skill  
35 developments, voices in workplaces and experience unequal opportunities to conduct  
36 truly autonomous professional work with high-value clients, and to gain promotion into  
37 higher positions (Standing, 2011). We recognize that what is perceived to precarious  
38 and degraded is inherently paradoxical and how the degradation is accomplished is  
39 often socially acceptable and less undesirable. It signifies that there is a process of  
40 normalization of degraded expert work that has been widely conducted in various  
41 organizational, institutional and societal situations (McCann et al., 2008; Mousa et al.,  
42 2023; Turnbull & Wass, 2015). The notion of normalization refers to organizational  
43 and individual processes in which extraordinary challenges in organizations are  
44 rendered less salient and disrupting, and more acceptable and ‘ordinary’ (Ashforth.,  
45 2025). In our article, normalization of degraded expert work becomes an important and  
46 even necessary means to frame rules, regulations and norms (; Ashforth & Kreiner,  
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4 2002), which come to be regarded as acceptable and tolerable to experts. By acting as  
5 if organizations embody high-valued attributes of expert work, the degraded work  
6 environments are transformed into workplaces of high value where workers are  
7 expected to exert the highest possible efforts (see Ekman, 2015).  
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11 The fantastical or ‘as-if’ quality of expert work is particularly apparent in the  
12 international outsourcing context where lower-grade outsourced workers are employed  
13 to adapt to insecure, temporary and exchangeable relationships with multinational  
14 corporations. As a new structural development in global political economy in terms of  
15 falling costs and the rapid development of telecommunication technologies, continual  
16 waves of outsourcing and offshoring shifts power and controls to multinational firms  
17 including international outsourcing firms, which establish explicit or implicit cues  
18 regarding how to construe an outsourcing activity and what behaviors of expert workers  
19 are expected (Levy, 2005).  
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29 This is exemplified in the financial service outsourcing industry, which generates  
30 a new division of expertise within a hierarchical structure: financial analysts in  
31 investment banks are framed as ‘true’ experts who outsource work to employees in  
32 outsourcing firms who are often treated as ‘para-experts’ or ‘para-professionals’ (Leicht  
33 and Fennell, 2023). With this division of expert labour into high and low status being  
34 quite clearly visible, managers employing the outsourced, lower-grade advisory  
35 workers engage in sophisticated rhetorical processes designed to normalize the  
36 conditions of degraded expert work (Ekman, 2015). Somewhat paradoxically, the  
37 processes of normalization in this setting involve both managers and expert workers  
38 engaging in and reproducing narratives of expertise, talent, and career development  
39 through professionalism, even when the actual prospects for career advancement and  
40 the enhancement of status are very limited.  
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52 Specifically, establishing an as-if quality involves imitating the practices of  
53 multinational companies. A large pool of graduates is increasingly attracted with  
54 ‘acceptable or better quality’ (Cohen & El-Sawad, 2007; p. 1237) in countries that  
55 afford few employment alternatives, little regulatory protection and weak social safety  
56 nets (Levy, 2005). The as-if quality of the graduates is characterized by not just similar  
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4 levels of English language competence, experiences of study abroad and expertise in  
5 finance and business (Gaston, 2005), but also a similar, strong willingness to learn,  
6 develop and to embrace risk (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Rivera, 2012). By selecting  
7 similar young and ambitious individuals, the management of outsourcing firms acts as  
8 if the degraded work conditions are entirely normal for the industry, , conveying the  
9 message to workers that everything is as expected and correct.  
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15 As a result, the ‘situational strength’ of outsourcing is therefore created and  
16 sustained (Ashforth, 2025, p. 4), involving managing the inner hopes, aspirations and  
17 even fears of workers rather than controlling their behaviors directly. Organizational  
18 control over constructing an as-if quality of expert work becomes more invasive than  
19 traditional controls. The seeming autonomy of a continuous pursuit of expertise *from*  
20 control is precisely willingness *around* control in that outsourced workers are  
21 constrained to enact meanings, values and quality of expert work within implicit or  
22 explicit constraints allowed by the corporate controls. They are motivated to see  
23 opportunities to upgrade their capability to ‘full package production’ in the near future  
24 (Bair and Gereffi, 2003), whereby they become the first-tier suppliers of knowledge  
25 which are tightly integrated with leading world-class investment banks. In this way,  
26 non-traditional or lateral career pathways that allow movement between subordinate  
27 and elite firms are implicitly created for these workers (Pech, 2017).  
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41 Through normalization of degraded expert work, outsourced workers are placed  
42 into an awkward space between the ‘true’ experts they desire to be, and the lower status,  
43 degraded expert work stratum with lower levels of skills and with which they do not  
44 wish to be identified. This awkward space is reinforced and normalized by these  
45 outsourcing firms as an opportunity for the experts to understand themselves as  
46 ‘professional non-standard’ rather than ‘nonprofessional non-standard’ (Klaniot-Hess,  
47 2020, p.61). Whereas the existing models of normalization often focus on group- and  
48 occupation-level processes, this study focuses on how individuals – specifically,  
49 managers and outsourced workers – describe their efforts to normalize the precarious  
50 work environments.  
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### **Research site and methods**

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4 This paper emerged out of a broader qualitative case study conducted in a financial  
5 service outsourcing company located in China. The initial research question sought to  
6 examine the ways in which financial assistants working in the company interacted with  
7 managers and remote financial analysts. In viewing expertise and expert work as an  
8 inherent feature of the research context, we drew closer attention to relational and  
9 contested aspects of expert work.  
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15 As we mentioned above, the financial services industry that involves relationships  
16 between investment banks and international outsourcing firms is an intriguing case for  
17 understanding degraded expert work. Facing increased global competition and  
18 regulatory pressures, investment banks are driven to seek possible organizational  
19 changes in order to save on operating costs (Grote & Taube, 2007; McCabe et al., 1998).  
20 The banks often outsource or offshore low- and medium-level research activities (e.g.  
21 institutional and industrial analysts and country research) to outsourcing firms in non-  
22 western countries, while retaining the complex and core tasks of providing investment  
23 recommendations and writing up research reports to investors in their domestic settings.  
24 The outsourcing company in our case is a leading player in the global financial services  
25 supply chain, offering basic data collection and analysis service to those world-leading  
26 commercial and investment banks.  
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39 A large number of Chinese financial assistants is recruited to offer data support to  
40 financial analysts. They hold postgraduate degrees in finance, accounting and  
41 management from universities in Europe and America, although from lower ranked  
42 institutions compared to the top-rated universities that the in-house analysts graduated  
43 from (Grote and Taube, 2007). They were commonly below the age of thirty. Operating  
44 in an environment where the purchasers of business services (investment banks) were  
45 sensitive to price competition, management was always concerned to control wages and  
46 reduce costs whilst simultaneously maintaining a high-quality 'professional' service.  
47 The internationalized and outsourced nature of the financial industry has led managers  
48 to repeatedly suggest to the assistants that the potential existed for individual career  
49 development, including moving to top financial institutions in the near future. This  
50 study's primary research aim was to explore the specific ways in which managers in  
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4 the outsourcing firm establish and sustain the assistants' aspirations, constant  
5 willingness and responsibilities of cultivating elements of 'expertise' in terms of  
6 becoming a financial analyst. Our method for exploring this question was that of in-  
7 depth interviews with managers and analysts in this setting.  
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### 11 12 13 ***Data collection*** 14

15 This study conducted 37 semi-structured interviews (8 male; 29 female) with the  
16 financial assistants, and 3 managers in the outsourcing firm. Sampling was purposive  
17 to include as much as possible assistants with a variety of ages, gender and educational  
18 backgrounds. Table 1 provides brief anonymized information about the participants.  
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23 We used open-ended and follow-up questions to facilitate collaborative dialogue  
24 with the participants. The first author asked assistants to describe their working  
25 conditions in the outsourcing company, their relationships with managers and remote  
26 in-house financial analysts and their career plans. The interviewer used follow-up  
27 questions to further ask about preparations or strategies for career development.  
28 Additionally, the interview dataset is strengthened by the inclusion of managers from  
29 the same firm, who answered questions relating to staff development and career  
30 mobility. In 2023, the researchers conducted a second round of in-depth interviews with  
31 five assistants who successfully moved from the outsourced company to an investment  
32 bank in order to explore the extent to which their aspirations to find 'true' professional  
33 employment were realized. Overall, every interview lasted 60 to 95 minutes. All  
34 interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Pseudonyms are used for all  
35 interview excerpts in this article.  
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### 50 51 ***Data analysis*** 52

53 Analysis of the interview texts involved non-linear thematic analysis (Braun &  
54 Clarke, 2006). We conducted line-by-line open coding of the first-round interview data  
55 and generated a list of initial codes of the nature of the outsourced work, including  
56 '*collecting data in the financial markets*', '*data for client requests*' and '*providing*  
57 '*initial analysis for the data*'. These codes are in contrast to those that described core  
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4 elements of the financial analysis work conducted in the investment banks such as  
5 *'making judgements and assessment for the collected data'* and *'building up strong*  
6 *relations with clients'*. It was at this stage that we realized that the assistants' work was  
7 associated with the idea of expertise but of a limited and restricted kind. This led us to  
8 focus on degraded expert work.  
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13 We then further extracted more examples and coded the specific ways in which  
14 expert work was degraded in the outsourced setting. During the process, we identified  
15 paradoxical ways in which managers engaged in the process of degrading expert work  
16 conditions. In many examples, including *'explaining this firm as not a formal financial*  
17 *institution'*, *'emphasizing the cost model'*, *'treating the firm as a springboard'* and  
18 *'highlighting the similarities with analysts'*, we recognized that the degraded expert  
19 work assistants experienced was not just constituted and reinforced by management,  
20 but also normalized through specific practices. We therefore developed a more nuanced  
21 understanding of the nature and processes of normalization of degraded expert work.  
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### 33 Findings

34 The findings present two stages of normalization of the degraded expert work in  
35 this outsourcing context. The first stage is reframing, recalibrating and refocusing,  
36 involving an introduction of perspectives and convergence of perceptions of financial  
37 assistants. Managers made attempts to recast undesirable and insecure work conditions  
38 for its occurrence and legitimate the negative emotions and perspectives for managerial  
39 purposes. We see that this recasting of meanings of this setting involves the precise  
40 construction of the context, that is: *'yes, there is a precarious work environment, but it*  
41 *is not really what it appears to be'*. The second stage of normalization is social  
42 weighting and contract, where managers emphasized similarities and differences  
43 between outsourced workers and financial analysts in investment banks. This helped  
44 organize workers in a way that significantly increased productivity and commitment  
45 towards the firm while simultaneously controlling costs and degrading the terms and  
46 conditions of expert work.  
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***‘This is a precarious environment you need to move out!’***

Managers working in this outsourcing firm faced the challenges typically associated with the precarious and insecure work environment that constrains the accumulation of expertise in financial analysis. Becoming very aware of the socially undesirable work conditions for expert work, they proactively introduced a perspective of understanding the nature of the outsourcing firm, which made the degraded work environments seem more acceptable and legitimate by assistants. The viewpoint that ‘working in this outsourcing firm is precarious and insecure’ was often justified through the managers’ promotion of possibilities or pathways of moving out and into a more ‘professional’ and secure setting, making assistants feel the current working environments as tolerate and even promising:

*“You are not working at a formal financial institution. We are at the periphery of the finance sector. Very peripheral. The investment banks are at the centre. So, you can’t have a lot of opportunities of performing important tasks like those financial analysts due to this situation. I often told them that it doesn’t matter. You can regard this company as a springboard and jump to those at a higher level when you accumulate enough experience and knowledge. We have good relationships with those top banks, right?” (M3)*

The description of the outsourcing firm as both the periphery of the financial sector and a ‘springboard’ to investment banks added a layer of normalization to this work environment. Managers explicitly pointed out that a key challenge of this outsourced job was dealing with limited opportunities of performing central tasks such as financial analysis. At the same time, they neutralize the negative aspects of the job by emphasizing the possibility of an alternative career pathway of moving into the investment banks, constituting the flexibility of career movement. By transforming the challenge of handling the degraded aspects of expert work conditions into an opportunity of moving out, the primary beneficiary of this dynamic, however, was the outsourced firm, not its workers.

Through this reframing strategy, assistants were very receptive to the perspective of the outsourcing firm as a springboard to investment banks. This also became the very

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4 reason that assistants were attracted to work in this outsourcing firm. Assistants seemed  
5 to converge with the perspectives and judgments of managers while simultaneously  
6 expressed some strong emotions towards the insecure expert work environments:  
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9 *“We all agree that the company is very strange. It is a third-party company, and*  
10 *it offers service to those top investment banks who want to save costs and outsource*  
11 *part of their jobs to this company. Given the price those banks offered, this company*  
12 *has to control its own costs so that our wages cannot go up infinitely. In the first few*  
13 *years, our salaries increase but then do not change, because the company doesn’t have*  
14 *enough margin. Finally, the salary reaches the bottleneck, and I have to leave.” (A6)*  
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21 An intriguing finding emerged regarding those assistants who were very aware of  
22 their precarious environment, allowed to raise their disturbing emotions in workplaces  
23 and even shared their fears and worries associated with the salary limits to colleagues.  
24 Very few managers discouraged this, because these emotions and concerns in turn  
25 provided clues for managers about how to foster cohesion among assistants. For  
26 example, the cost control model the assistant mentioned was widely recognized by  
27 assistants as an important management strategy of the outsourcing firm: from their  
28 perspectives, the organisation always prioritized minimizing the costs of human capital;  
29 it did not care when staff quit and no participant mentioned management making any  
30 effort to keep an employee who had handed in their resignation. By building up this  
31 shared recognition, assistants were implicitly encouraged to seek for and recalibrate  
32 possible values they can gain from this outsourcing firm. Although they realized that  
33 everyone employed here is an expendable unit of capital, they became explicitly aware  
34 of the significance and necessary of developing full responsibility for their hoped-for  
35 careers. At the same time, this perception was further reinforced by the collective  
36 practices where they regularly heard stories of colleagues who had successfully moved  
37 into investment banks. As a result, this further instilled their belief that being fully  
38 responsible for their own careers had been a group endeavor, that is, ‘I’m not the only  
39 one who desires for moving out this firm and moving into investment banks’:  
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58 *“We think they (investment banks) also wanted to reduce expenses at that time, so*  
59 *they flew over to find you and put a bunch of them offshore first, so that we can get in*  
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4 *touch with these banks indirectly from offshore. Then when we become familiar with*  
5 *the tasks, they will recruit us from offshore finally. They put you offshore first, use some*  
6 *criteria to block you at offshore, offer low salary and do dirty work. However, we*  
7 *believe we will move into the banks one day". (A16)*  
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11 The first account above reveals that the assistant identified and legitimized the  
12 invisible transitional pathway towards working in investment banks, by re-imagining  
13 themselves as parts of the analysts' teams rather than outsourced workers in different  
14 firms. This re-imagination and normalization of their degraded expert status in turn  
15 constituted some emergent norms of how they work as a financial assistant:  
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21 *"We agreed with managers who thought it was impossible to make great progress*  
22 *in this company. At least within the company, there is no prospect for our future.*  
23 *However, I find that there is a systematic routine for analysing financial markets, but*  
24 *currently I can't master it. Theoretically, the ways in which reports are presented are*  
25 *quite similar I guess it may take a year and a half to two years to master the frameworks"*  
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31 (A17)  
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33 Whether through formal or 'informal' recruitment, assistants were induced to  
34 consider how to slowly build their knowledge, skills and abilities similar to their  
35 analysts. Developing 'a systematic routine for analysing financial markets' was  
36 considered as a way of overcoming their questionable expertise. This opens a door for  
37 social weighting and contrast, whereby such a precarious work environment was  
38 rendered comparatively better (i.e. less different from investment banks), which will be  
39 discussed in the next part of findings.  
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48 ***'You are similar to them!'***  
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50 Managers would mention that they often targeted graduates who were predisposed to  
51 working in such a precarious environment. This predisposition is associated with their  
52 knowledge, skills and educational backgrounds, which are good but insufficient for  
53 doing financial analysis tasks. The scare of expert knowledge or quasi-expert  
54 knowledge, from managers' perspectives, fostered a strong desire and willingness to  
55 embrace the outsourcing work environment as highly acceptable:  
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4       *“I’m very proud that our company includes many young people and is energetic.*  
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6       *They have professional abilities and skills which are similar to those financial analysts.*  
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8       *To be honest, we don’t recruit those who graduate from Chinese Universities, because*  
9       *we need those with studying abroad backgrounds. We also don’t consider those from*  
10       *top universities in US, UK and other countries. They are over-qualified. We don’t need*  
11       *them and it’s impossible for them to come here” (A21).*  
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15       This recruitment strategy clearly distinguished the ‘new’ experts working in this  
16       outsourcing firm from the established experts working in the investment banks. It  
17       filtered a group of ‘well-qualified’ candidates who were similar to the in-house  
18       financial analysts while having entered the industry from less prestigious routes. This  
19       made the assistants feel that temporarily working at this less ‘professional’ setting was  
20       a good idea because, lacking the required educational credentials from a top university,  
21       employment in the outsourced company granted certain opportunities to become  
22       accessible to people from stronger educational backgrounds and working in more  
23       clearly ‘professional’ settings. Yet, the challenge here for managers is to further identify  
24       *acceptable* individual differences between these outsourced workers and financial  
25       analysts, and created an expected benchmark or stimulus that shaped acceptance of the  
26       precarious expert work. Despite the recruitment of well-qualified candidates, individual  
27       qualities of assistants still vary widely. It is seen from an account below that assistants  
28       were constantly informed that they were similar to the in-house financial analysts in  
29       terms of some specific characteristics:  
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33       *“We are not quite different from our analysts. Our educational backgrounds were*  
34       *very similar, as we graduated from universities in the US, UK and other countries, and*  
35       *our major was finance and accounting. We have a similar knowledge basis from the*  
36       *beginning, although we are offshore and give data support to them. I also find that we*  
37       *are following a systematic way of analysing data and writing up analysis reports” (A9)*  
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41       *“We are still young and energetic, which is our capital and strength. The analysts*  
42       *we worked with were of similar age, and they were not much older than us. Even our*  
43       *families are quite similar because they (families) have enough money to support us to*  
44       *study abroad. Based on these aspects, I believe that I can become more experienced*  
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4 *and professional only if I learn from my analyst and cultivate my understandings of the*  
5 *markets in these years” (A11)*  
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8 The two accounts highlight that social weighting and comparison occurred in a  
9 collective situation, providing a social resource of relatively like-minded assistants for  
10 sensemaking and legitimacy of their circumstances. The term ‘we’ versus ‘they’  
11 fostered an awareness that we are ‘in the same boat’. Such in-group similarity might  
12 sustain their biased perceptions of ‘we are similar to them’ and ‘if they can do it, we  
13 can do as well’. Specifically, the first account shows that while there are certain  
14 differences in the two groups (i.e. outsourced workers graduated from medium-ranked  
15 universities while in-house employees graduated from ‘older’ universities), this  
16 difference was largely downplayed, and similarities in the educational background were  
17 emphasized. From assistants’ perspective, having a similar educational background was  
18 perceived as an important condition for shaping expertise. The similarities were further  
19 shared by highlighting similar ages, family backgrounds (middle-class families) and  
20 aspirations. Fixing on these ‘similar’ characteristics lessens the perceived precarities of  
21 their own circumstances. In this way, more than targeting graduates who are  
22 predisposed to doing the normalization, managers also target those who can be  
23 persuaded to accept the degraded work conditions, despite their doubts about the  
24 settings.  
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40 Moreover, by making light of the similarities, managers also motivated assistants  
41 to be aware of *enough* differences and distinctions to separate the outsourced assistants  
42 from the in-house analysts. It is exemplified that managers regularly reminded  
43 assistants of paying closer attention to interests and concerns from invisible clients their  
44 analysts work with. Although clear perceptions of the inaccessibility and distance from  
45 those clients are likely to be shaped by the assistants, repeated exposure to those client  
46 requests made them feel they were not far from those client relationships:  
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54 *“When writing analysis reports, we tell them to pay attention to the audience who*  
55 *reads them. Unfortunately, our assistants can’t ask any questions about who the clients*  
56 *were from their analysts and their analysts can’t reveal any details about the clients.*  
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4 *That's the fact, but I don't think they struggled at this point. What they should do is to*  
5 *pay attention to each task their analysts gave” (A14)*  
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8 *“After reading our reports, clients may show an interest in a specific idea or data,*  
9 *and they expect us to give more information or explanations. If he or she is a big*  
10 *customer, we need to complete the tasks and cope with this request first. So, while we*  
11 *can't directly communicate with the clients, the analysts will deliver the request to us,*  
12 *and we may cope with the request in many rounds” (A19)*  
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17 The accounts clearly indicate the assistants' acceptance of the inaccessibility of  
18 clients, sharing and reproducing the *differences* from financial analysts (who have  
19 social networks with clients) created by the managers. The perceived differences helped  
20 reduce their emotional frustrations arising from the inaccessibility to the clients and  
21 other disruptive circumstances in this outsourcing context. More importantly, they  
22 gradually increased an acceptance of the 'reality' of the situation and were prepared for  
23 a full exposure to these 'real' things through incrementally closer approximations. An  
24 example of improving their proximity with financial analysts is shown below:  
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33 *“I think the most crucial quality of being a professional analyst is to listen to*  
34 *interests and concerns from clients, through which to develop our own perspectives.*  
35 *Although it's difficult for us to achieve this goal, we can start from now to make my*  
36 *analysis as reliable as possible. I mean, if clients can see our data, they will convey*  
37 *their suggestions and ideas to our analysts. I then have a chance to pick up the clients'*  
38 *ideas from the analysts. I need to be always waiting from their side, digest their*  
39 *perspectives, and incorporate these into my tasks. (A2).*  
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47 They admitted that the core element of their jobs was to reduce the artificial  
48 differences and distinctions from their analysts. This prepared assistants for making  
49 continuous efforts to improve their knowledge, skills and understandings through the  
50 daily interactions with their analysts. This perceived and constituted differentiation and  
51 similarities, therefore, constituted a self-growth process, that is, they perceive it, they  
52 understand it, so they grow up in it.  
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## **Discussion and conclusion**

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4 Our paper understands the crisis of expert work through the prism of the  
5 ‘decomposition’ narrative. Based on a study of an outsourcing financial analysis firm  
6 in China, we explore the complexities surrounding a new division of expert labour  
7 arising from the changing organizational structures in the global financial industry.  
8 Expert workers were employed in financial advisory roles; positions connected to, but  
9 very much secondary in status to, the core investment bankers. Managers of the  
10 outsourced company employed these analysts using sophisticated tactics to control  
11 work and limit costs while also attempting to encourage and motivate staff by  
12 rhetorically invoking discourses of global marketplaces for talent and expertise. We  
13 argue that this is accomplished through the normalization of degraded expert work, a  
14 process where precarious and insecure work conditions are rendered seemingly  
15 legitimate, justified and acceptable. This process includes two stages of reframing (i.e.  
16 recasting the setting as precarious but with the possibility of being able to move out of  
17 it) and social weighting (i.e. outsourced workers are differentiated and proximate from  
18 in-house analysts). Putting the two stages in play, the reality of degraded expert work  
19 is normalized and workers’ effort and commitment towards expertise and  
20 professionalism are secured.  
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36 The study extends previous research on the crisis of expert work in two ways.  
37 First, we show the contradictory nature of Reed and Reed’s decomposition narrative  
38 (2024, 76-105), which is empirically and theoretically under-explored in the literature.  
39 Through our discussion of the normalization of degraded expert work, we highlight that  
40 decomposition compels expert workers to generate constant willingness, aspirations  
41 and responsibilities to accumulate elements of ‘expertise’ during work, and yet  
42 simultaneously fixes and degrades them as a very specific kind of lower-level expert  
43 which no longer relies on cognitive abilities and heuristic skills of decoding tacit  
44 knowledge. Revealing such a complex picture of the fragmenting and fracturing  
45 dynamics, we suggest taking a less optimistic attitude towards the status and authority  
46 of experts, which become intensively precarious and degraded. Normalization practices  
47 have highlighted various ways in which alternative organizational forms and controls  
48 (e.g. the global outsourcing of financial services knowledge work) make expert work  
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4 vulnerable to restructuring and degradation, although the nature and promise of  
5 expertise and expert work remains rhetorically and practically valuable to managers  
6 and to workers. This is especially evident when expert workers are explicitly and  
7 implicitly *induced* to adapt to the escalating pressures and to deploy adaptive strategies.  
8 Inner hopes, aspirations and fears of expert workers are managed by organizational  
9 normalization to a significant extent.  
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15 Second, speaking against this background of normalization of degraded expert  
16 work, we argue that ‘the crisis of expert work’ is rooted in an awkward space between  
17 increasingly invasive organizational and managerial control practices and the decaying  
18 discourses around expert work. Expert work has become a problematic concept and  
19 issue, which is constituted by the complex interplay of degradation and restructuring.  
20 Seen in this way, the crisis of expert work is not about explicitly delegitimizing,  
21 demystifying and decomposing expertise, skills or professionalism; in fact, rhetorically  
22 the is the opposite. Expert work can never achieve full occupational closure; rather, it  
23 is continuously negotiated and shaped, whereby expert workers might find themselves  
24 being exposed to a continuous pursuit of self-correction and self-growth of their  
25 expertise. Seen in this way, an overly optimistic or pessimistic view of the crisis of  
26 expert work can both overlook the ambiguous, ambivalent and tensional aspects  
27 regarding the meanings of ‘crisis’.  
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41 Certain limitations of the study should be kept in mind for further work on the  
42 crisis of expert work. The first is the limited attention to diverse groups of experts  
43 whose degraded work conditions are being normalized. We need to pay more attention  
44 to emerging bodies of ‘new experts’ across occupations and industries whose power,  
45 authority and status experience are being contested in multiple ways. Looking beyond  
46 outsourced workers from the financial analysis industry, it seems likely that significant  
47 populations of well-qualified and educated white-collar expert workers, especially in  
48 nonstandard and temporary employment relations, are similarly subject to powerful  
49 forms of organizational control over their work and careers. The precarious status of  
50 these new experts has generally received limited attention in the sociology of expertise  
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4 and professions due to negative social meanings attached to them such as technical,  
5 semi-professional or dirty work.  
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8 Yet, our study finds that new divisions of labor that emerge through the  
9 development and establishment of global value chains do not directly remove these  
10 workers from the system of experts but instead places them in more peripheral zones.  
11 As shifts toward platform capitalism and artificial intelligence play increasingly  
12 important roles in generating the complex division of expertise, there are opportunities  
13 for expert workers to reconfigure their values and identities in relation to technological,  
14 economic and social change. We are interested in exploring the extent to which they  
15 are encouraged and induced to develop skills, abilities and talent that redefine their  
16 expert authority, autonomy and security. Therefore, a major task of future research is  
17 to explore these different conditions and processes of normalization of ‘degraded expert  
18 work’ and their consequences, particularly specific forms of corporate controls are  
19 involved in managing the conditions and inducing those expert workers to both ‘own’  
20 and ‘lose’ expert authority at the same time.  
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33 The second concern is a limited discussion of the ethicality and social  
34 responsibility around normalization of degraded expert work itself. When many like-  
35 situated workers are targeted and recruited as outsourced workers, to a significant extent  
36 these outsourcing firms cut off their social relations from the wider society and place  
37 them in an enclosed work environment. This raises important questions around how  
38 outsourcing firms claim their responsibility for societies. Is it ethical to subject expert  
39 workers to the intense social pressures of normalization? Is it permissible to strip away  
40 their interests and identity and infuse *expected* hopes, fears and aspirations into their  
41 minds? While outsourcing work is often seen as a logical, cost-effective and necessary  
42 part of global value chains, more work is needed to further explore the unintended  
43 consequences of normalizing degraded expert work in outsourcing contexts and other  
44 quasi-expert settings.  
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**Table 1: Participant Information**

Participant name	Title	Gender
A1	Junior Assistant	M
A2	Junior Assistant	M
A3	Junior Assistant	M
A4	Junior Assistant	F
A5	Junior Assistant	F
A6	Senior Assistant	F
A7	Junior Assistant	M
A8	Junior Assistant	M
A9	Junior Assistant	F
A10	Senior Assistant	F
A11	Junior Assistant	F
A12	Junior Assistant	F
A13	Junior Assistant	F
A14	Senior Assistant	F
A15	Junior Assistant	F
A16	Junior Assistant	F
A17	Junior Assistant	F
A18	Senior Assistant	F
A19	Junior Assistant	F
A20	Senior Assistant	M
A21	Junior Assistant	M
A22	Senior Assistant	F
A23	Junior Assistant	F
A24	Junior Assistant	F
A25	Junior Assistant	F
A26	Junior Assistant	F
A27	Junior Assistant	F

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A28	Junior Assistant	F
A29	Junior Assistant	F
A30	Junior Assistant	F
A31	Senior Assistant	F
A32	Junior Assistant	F
A33	Junior Assistant	F
A34	Junior Assistant	F
A35	Junior Assistant	F
A36	Junior Assistant	F
A37	Senior Assistant	M
M1	Manager	M
M2	Manager	M
M3	Manager	M

For Peer Review