**Gender Management and Gendered Career Politics in a**

**Masculine Professional Culture**

**A Case Study in a Swiss Railway Company**Peter Kels & Isabelle Clerc

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**Abstract**

The feminization of occupations that have long been considered exclusively male domains represents a typically complex endeavour that is subject to a multitude of preconditions. To date, the success of attempts to stimulate more interest for technical careers among women and to offer female professionals adequate career opportunities has to be considered modest at best. At the same time, highly male-dominated professions such as engineering reveal a particular tendency towards marginalizing part-time professionals in terms of their acceptance and career prospects. This paper contributes to a more differentiated notion of process of marginalization of part-time professionals in engineering professions. Using an explorative case study at a Swiss public transport and logistics business, the authors investigate the extent to which gender policies, local managerial and professional cultures, and individual career strategies are interrelated in the case of male and female engineers with family responsibilities. The findings indicate that the named marginalization processes are not only the product of convictions or justificatory concepts concerning performance capacities or aspects of visibility that exist in management or occupational cultures, but that the gender career policies of employees themselves contribute to reproducing this marginalization.

**Keywords:** *Gender Management, Engineering, Part-Time Professionals, Career Politics*

**1 The engineering profession and the margins in Switzerland**

It is a matter of historical record that the roots of the engineering profession are tied closely to the military world (König 2011). In this world, female engineers or professionals working in part-time arrangements had little presence, nor were they expected to. The decision to pursue a career in engineering was considered a typical male careerist option, allowing men (willing to work long hours) to progress e.g. from machinist to mechanical engineer positions. Working as an engineer offered the promise of a steep career for many ‘first-generation academics’ (Fuchs-Heinritz and Hoerning, 1995: 87). Current discourses in society and political associations and the attempts to increase the share of female engineering students, employers’ programmes for family-friendly workplaces, and the general changes in the engineer’s role itself (in particular in terms of the increasing relevance of social-communicative, commercial, and coordinating-organizational skills brought about by the increasing prevalence of project organizations in engineering work (Kurz, 2000a, 2000b; Bolte, 2000; VDI, 2002) can be read (albeit driven by economic interests) as a feminization project in the profession (drawing on Bolton and Muzio, 2008). The implied ambition of this historic project is to offer working fathers and mothers an opportunity to pursue a demanding and in-demand, well-salaried career while maintaining a subjectively satisfactory balance between work and private life. In this context, part-time professionals in Engineering are a promising research subject, since the ambiguities and paradoxes of modern employment and career prospects are uniquely focused in the professional and occupational world of this group: they represent a category of employees who are typically working in permanent employment, who pursue technically and educationally highly demanding tasks, often in project-type organizations, who are comparatively well-paid, and whose store of know-how and experience makes them prime objects for the retention efforts of their employers in the form of attractive working conditions and career perspectives (cf. MacDermid et al., 2001; Lawrence and Corwin, 2003):

‘In contrast to secondary jobs, part-time professional positions tend to be created by the organization as a response to a valued employee’s needs, or to attract and retain qualified professionals. Moreover the idiosyncratic nature of many of these new part-time positions is exacerbated by their locations in professions such as law and engineering which have no institutionalized history of part-time work’ (Lawrence and Corwin, 2003: 926)

At the same time, research suggests that part-time professionals are implicitly or explicitly assumed to have lower performance motivation and/or to identify less with the organization than their full-time peers, since professional commitment is typically equated with physical presence on site and/or over time (Hakim, 1997; Lewis and Lewis, 1996; Jacobsen, 2000; Lawrence and Corwin, 2003; Lawrence, 2004). The allocation and take-up of part-time positions generally reveals a strong gendered segregation, driven to a unique extreme in the case of highly qualified work. Societal constructs of normality and stereotypes about the distribution of roles and responsibilities between genders (household, childcare, salaried employment, careers) and gendered competence attributions makes it a natural assumption that women should work part-time, whereas highly qualified men in part-time positions are perceived as somehow unnatural (Lewis, 1992; Baumgartner, 2006; Ruiz Ben, 2007). From a gender and a labour market perspective, the exclusive masculinity of the Engineering profession has created massive constraints for the process of professionalization.

Looking at the case of Switzerland, the process of feminization in the engineering profession and other MINT-occupations (mathematics, information science, natural sciences, and technology) is confronted with intersected boundaries for part-time professionals on the societal, occupational and firm-level. As a result of stereotyped career choices of men and women, women continue to be underrepresented in MINT professions: in Switzerland, women account for only 6% of the people taking up technical education (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2010: 21). Despite the pressing need for more engineering specialists in Switzerland (resulting e.g. in 10% of MINT positions in the construction industry remaining vacant in 2009; Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2009: 24), the virtually negligible presence of women in MINT careers was still considered as unproblematic in Swiss government circles in 2004. The problem of the stereotyped career choices of men and women was only returned to the governmental spotlight after the UN’s criticism in a 2009 report on professional segregation in Switzerland (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2010: 4). Female part-time work in Switzerland does not, however, automatically mean less qualified work, but it does seem to be an inhibiting factor on the path to leadership positions – which is certainly due to a considerable extent to the lasting belief of employers and male workers in an idealized vision of a linear salaried career promising reliable continuity. At the same time, part-time work frequently means lower social security protection (e.g. in terms of pension accounts) and fewer opportunities for professional development and career advancement. Part-time professionals are also typically allocated tasks and responsibilities that are easily reconciled with their reduced presence, but are oftentimes not particularly beneficial for their careers (cf. Dick and Hyde, 2006: 547; Russo and Hassink, 2008).

**2 Research Questions and Theoretical Framework**

The ambition of this paper is to contribute to a more differentiated notion of the processes and barriers that stand in the way of gender management and family-friendly policies anchored in corporate strategies and aimed at full institutionalization (also cf. Callan, 2007; Powell, 2009). Drawing on an explorative business case study conducted by us, we aim to uncover the interdependencies that exist between gender policies, local managerial and professional cultures, and the individual career and working time strategies employed by male and female engineers with family responsibilities. This case study is based at a Swiss public sector, for-profit organization in the public transport and logistics industry. It was conducted in the course of the on-going MAPCA (**Ma**naging **P**rofessionals´ **Ca**reers in knowledge-based firms[[1]](#footnote-1)) research project, which is aimed at the occupational, company-specific opportunities for career advancement and professional development as well as the professional biographies of specialists in knowledge and technology-intensive companies in Switzerland.[[2]](#footnote-2) Our discussion and analysis of the case study distinguishes between three complementary levels of inquiry:

The first step was interested in *company-specific policies and programmes with gender or family-friendly motifs* aimed at creating more appealing employment conditions for highly sought-after specialist or executive talent and experienced professionals in the job markets (in particular for engineers, project managers etc.) to make better use of the company’s recruitment and staff retention potential. Such programmes and concepts are frequently implicitly or explicitly built around the paradigm of a “feminization” of the engineering profession (cf. Callan, 2007, Bolton and Muzio, 2008). The inquiry used a total of six expert interviews with corporate representatives from Human Resources and Gender Management as well as a survey of the considerable body of documents on the company’s gender management strategy, leadership and promotion principles, processes, and instruments, and the established management development programmes. This allowed us to outline the goals and line of advance of the current corporate gender management strategy and the extent to which it is being taken up in the corporate management culture.

In a second step, the mentioned six expert interviews with HR managers were continued in the form of a further six interviews with line managers, predominantly construction engineers, at an organizational unit specialized in the management of rail infrastructure projects. These interviews investigated the extent to which *the local work context shaped by the given professional and managerial culture* (Lawrence and Corwin, 2003) *is receptive to the stated gender mainstreaming and family-friendliness ambitions*. Moving away from the intriguing approach pursued by Lawrence and Corwin (2003), we concentrated less on rituals of interaction (such as management meetings), and more on the typical lines of argumentation and patterns of justification about the (limited) feasibility of a “reduced-load work” (Lee et al., 2000) and gender equality that were expressed in the interviews. The working assumption was that convictions ingrained in professional and managerial culture about the organization and distribution of labour, individual performance motivation, or visibility function as “career boundaries” that reduce the opportunities for male and female engineers in part-time or other alternative forms of employment when it comes to reconciling their career prospects with an active role in the education or upbringing of their children. We also assumed that the strongly masculine nature of the engineering profession and the “gendered substructure of organization” (Acker 1998)[[3]](#footnote-3) amount to a persistent, systematic discrimination of people with family responsibilities and highly qualified women in particular (also cf. Cotter et al. 2001; Mayrhofer et al., 2008).

As a third step, we conducted a series of 16 problem-centric interviews built around a catalogue of questions about the interviewees’ work environment and career (Witzel, 2000). The purpose of these interviews was to uncover the barriers perceived by the participating male and female engineers in their organizational and professional environment, and the *strategies, tactics, and coping techniques developed by them to counter the perceived barriers and experience of marginalization*[[4]](#footnote-4). The theoretical underpinnings of this approach were established by the concept of career politics developed in our line of research (Kels, 2008; Vormbusch and Kels, 2008). This concept assumes that men and women with family responsibilities and a preference for part-time work or alternative career models are forced to confront themselves with their experiences or perceptions of discrimination and marginalization in terms of working conditions and career prospects, depending on the specific occupational or organizational culture they find themselves in. To respond to this challenge, they develop distinctive, active (and potentially gendered) coping strategies and career tactics (cf. esp. Dick and Hyde, 2006; Benschop, 2009; Powell et al., 2009). Taking this into account, the *concept of* *career politics* refers to the entire ensemble of individual interpretations, orientations, tactics, and strategies for influencing one’s professional career in the interplay with company-specific opportunities and boundaries for career advancement, recognition, or development as well as the perceived opportunities and boundaries in the external labour markets or social relations (see Evetts, 2000: 63; Hitzler and Pfadenhauer, 2003; Moen and Sweet, 2004; Kels, 2008: 226-231). Careers politics can be understood as (more or less) *reflexive modes of coping with and mediating the constraints and boundaries* individuals are faced with in their career field and life situation following their personal definition of career success.

**3 Case Study: Gender management, boundaries and career politics in the context of engineering and project management**

In the following, we will look at our case study at a semi-privatized Swiss rail company operating in the field of public transport and logistics. The investigation aims to identify the extent to which the corporate gender mainstreaming and anti-discrimination ambitions and their practical application in gender management programmes or the promotion of part-time employment actually reach the “local work context” (Lawrence and Corwin, 2003).

*3.1 Transforming the corporate culture via gender management?*

In a war for talents among employers searching to recruit an ever smaller supply of specialists, the company had introduced a gender management strategy approx. three years ago. The purpose of this strategy is to become a family friendly employer with a commitment to equal opportunities and, by extension, to recruit and retain highly qualified graduates and specialists. The company proclaims its commitment to social responsibility in the form of a balanced workforce and the availability of family-friendly working models, taking precedence over commercial considerations such as the savings promised by lower staff turnover, the maintenance of high-quality services, or the safeguarding of a sufficient supply of qualified labour. However, as the company states openly and self-critically, it is beginning its efforts from a rather low starting point: the total employment ratio of women lies at 14%, with only 8% of management positions being held by women. Women are fully excluded from many key decision-making bodies. With this in mind, the company has set itself the ambitious corporate targets to increase the representation of women in its workforce from 14% to 18%, to improve the number of women among its top managers from 8% to 15%, to provide an environment that aids the reconciliation of work and family life, and to introduce a non-discriminatory professional and leadership culture. The measures pursues in this ambitious change campaign include the expansion of part-time work in specialist and executive functions, the introduction of childcare services, the development of HR advisory expertise in the area, and the redesign of all HR processes to account for gender neutrality and thorough gender management on the corporate and divisional level.

A key element in the practical implementation of the strategy for a family-friendly and non-discriminatory company is the corporate “Competence Centre for Gender Management”, with a gender management delegate present in each business unit. These delegates act as a lynchpin in the system, advising operational HR officers and managers, spreading awareness for the issue, and introducing divisional activities. The Competence Centre for Gender Management also offers career counselling and mentoring programmes to help people understand their current place and position as well as hosting three to four corporate networking events for female executives and junior managers / specialists. The purpose of these events is to bring together women across the company and discuss not only traditional concerns of leadership, but also “women’s topics”, such as balancing job and families.

There can be no doubt about how invested the company is in this topic, to create an awareness among male executives about the culturally ingrained disadvantages for women or part-time employees and about the need to promote the career growth of highly qualified women. At the same time, a certain reservation persists about how the culture of masculinity can be opened up and how equal opportunities can be ensured. How challenging the achievement of gender equality is not least at the top management level can be seen in the experiences of the company’s leading HR executives when attempting to promote awareness for the issue in the company’s boardrooms:

“You know, we for example told people that gender management needs to be set up structurally, that is, in the board. [---]. That was a story, initially. A big fuss, nobody understood it, what is its purpose, isn’t it a matter for some specialist representative… It all takes its time.”

“I have to say, it is a tough nut, a tough nut. You need patience, now we have her, Miss (...) She is a pro, she knows what to do, she has been doing it for years, and she isn’t getting anywhere. That is tough.”

The deep roots of the theme of masculinity in the corporate culture can be illustrated with the experience of one of the HR managers we interviewed. She reported of a constantly repeating experience from management meetings and workshops at the company, in which the few women who are present are usually not addressed directly. She is personally convinced that any open criticism of this discriminatory cultural habit would be ineffective, and believes that female managers should use humour to remind their male colleagues that there are women present. Women should develop a social instinct for managing a male-dominated culture by showing patience, consideration, and a sense of humour.

“Then it gets through. You mustn’t feel put open, but get your message across with some humour, else people will see you as a combative feminist, and they will not like that. That is how I see it.”

Another HR manager observed that the male-dominated leadership culture was still struggling with the recognition that “the others” are now to be actively integrated in the decisions of management meetings and committees as recognized productivity factors. His rather optimistic belief, however, was that the culture of these debates would change with the pure presence of female executives alone:

“Well, the whole discussion, that culture of confrontation, it is like that. But there are other facets, a different culture of debating, not less tough, I am not saying that, but different all the same. I think, certain issues, the female question, immediately get a different taste to them. No more male-only discussions. That is simply natural, even if women don’t get involved in any really different way. The fact is, there is somebody else there. But it needs determination.“

*3.2 Career boundaries and the marginalization of part-time professionals in the field of project management*

The significance of career boundaries and processes of marginalization affecting part-time professionals will now be revisited on the level of the local working, professional, and managerial culture that exists in one specific organizational unit of the case study organization. In this unit, a total of approx. 600 project managers (the majority coming from an engineering background) are engaged in planning and executing rail infrastructure maintenance and renovation projects. The greater part of the professional employees possess a degree in a technical subject (typically construction or electrical engineering), have gained 4 to 5 years of professional experience outside of their current organization (usually in construction engineering practices), and are leading large-scale, frequently highly complex and multidisciplinary rail infrastructure projects.[[5]](#footnote-5) These project managers are in charge of the interdisciplinary cooperation of project and functional specialists in one of the named areas of expertise (mostly allocated to a specific region within Switzerland) or are responsible for large-scale, cross-regional, and multidisciplinary rail infrastructure projects. In both cases, their work covers the entire project lifecycle, from pre-project work and the approval process to the eventual execution of the project. Typically, project leaders are entrusted with multiple infrastructure projects at the same time, depending on their specific complexity and scope, often extending over a number of years. Seen individually, each project in turn covers a versatile range of duties and the required know-how, ranging from construction technology, legal considerations (for both domestic and international regulations), commercial awareness (e.g. project financing and budgeting), project management practices, to the handling and coordination of the work of internal and external employee groups (specialists from construction engineering services, cantonal or communal planners).

No data is available about the representation of part-time professionals in the specific research area of rail infrastructure professions. However, the assumption is that such professionals remain a rare occurrence, as a mere 9% of the infrastructure workforce are women, compared to 14% at the company as a whole, and female managers account for only 4% of managerial positions, compared to a total of 6% on the corporate level. Although this situation is hardly surprising in the very “construction-intensive” and “male-dominated” lines of work, such as track-laying, maintenance, or road construction, the overall underrepresentation of women and male and female part-timers is still surprising, since project management as a whole is increasingly relying on competences and flexible working models that HR management theory would consider to be stereotypically “female” qualities. The local line managers and HR executives interviewed by us consequently see the gender management and family-friendly policies espoused by corporate management as substantial HR political and professional-cultural challenges. This is especially due to the fact that the current scarcity of specialists in the labour markets and the generally falling numbers of graduates (e.g. Umbrach-Daniel and Baumbergern, 2010) make it a considerable challenge for them to recruit sufficient numbers of engineers with the required profile and range of experience to meet even current demand. The trends towards higher demand for public transport, showing no signs of abating, is leading to a massive upsurge in workload, reflected in the strong increase in the number of infrastructure projects aimed at expanding the reach and capacity of the Swiss rail network. This double hit of a recruitment bottleneck and simultaneous boost in demand made the increasing burden in terms of tasks and working hours for the employed project managers a constant topic in the interviews. These boundaries created by the labour market and HR policy constraints form an unholy alliance with the strongly gendered and physical presence-focused, outmoded notion of performance that now stands in the way of the official introduction and acceptance of family-friendly flexible working hours for professionals. All three female HR managers and executives we interviewed in the infrastructure unit were thoroughly sceptical about the dominant masculine culture’s willingness to open up to new gender roles and part-time arrangements. One interviewee did voice her conviction that she would not be discriminated against, but rather accepted as a woman as long as she “puts the work in” (which practically means a minimum of 90% workplace presence) and integrated even as a woman into the existing, ingrained gender pattern:

“There are male domains in almost all business and there is a certain culture. So you want to take part and women don’t always have to be woman-like. As a woman, in my experience, that does not stand in your way, you are accepted. You only need to learn to roll with the punches and handle the way we do things. You cannot think that men, that a 12 or 13-people management team (…) that they would change in any big way. Right now, the issue is that almost 99% of men in there believe that women work for one day or do the household. So it is just stuck in that traditional role-model. I am not judging that. It is just a fact.”

In the context of this strongly masculinized, visibility and presence-focused leadership culture, it becomes clear that flexible arrangements, such as job-sharing, part-time work, or home office concepts do not receive much systematic support or actual take-up in the project management or middle management areas. Even though targets in these areas are built into the gender strategy and despite the interviewed executives’ general belief in the ability to split up and share project leadership duties,[[6]](#footnote-6) virtually all interviewees (with a single exception, irrespective of the gender of the interviewee) could not image rethinking or reshaping the existing ways of allocating jobs. A comparison of the expert interviews revealed the following patterns of justification for continuing to maintain the ideal of the full-time professional:

* “If people work with a sense of responsibility, they simply work more.”
* Part-time work is seen primarily as a matter of “will” and “individual time management” and less a matter of institutional arrangements.
* “Presence on site in the sense of customer focus” is simply highly important.
* Experience shows that home office arrangements are not as effective because of a lack of discipline, which has led to a move away from such opportunities.
* From the point of view of the community, there need to be enough people “who are ready to get their hands dirty” and “take charge”.

The experience of one high-ranking manager working in a part-time arrangement does, however, cast considerable doubt on the inability to overcome these constraints and patterns of justification. In the interview, he stated that he advertised all new vacancies as 80% to 100% positions as a matter of principle and that he has been able to recruit applicants in particular who applied explicitly with a view to the part-time opportunities.

*3.3 Career politics and the identity work of technical specialists and project managers working part-time*

In view of the great scope of the project management engineers’ work and their unique, not easily replaceable competence and experience profiles, the engineers interviewed by us were fully aware of how well-placed they are in the labour markets. The effective balancing of professional and private roles and requirements was therefore not only generally important for most of the interviewees: they also perceived the working time arrangements already in place at the organization and their general autonomy as project leaders as a good starting point for shaping their work arrangements flexibly to suit their family responsibilities.

“We use an annual working time account, not weekly or monthly, but pure annual hours. Works very well. If I think I need a break, I need some air, and if I have the hours, I can just stay at home, spontaneously. (…) I say, that or that day I won’t be here, are there meetings, there are no meetings. So I am simply not there. I can be reached, by mail, by phone, but the day is mine. And since I am the head of the project, I can organize that myself” (Overall Project Leader, 38 years of age)

Despite this assessment by one project leader, the existing work arrangements of the interviewed male professional employees appear to the outside observer as quite traditional and gender-specific in revolving around a “work-centric model” of living one’s life. 13 of the 14 male interviewees had children, but none worked in an official part-time system. Nonetheless, we encountered (as will be discussed) informal arrangements in individual cases which actually represent a reduction of the workload or effective part-time job, albeit at high levels (approx. 90%). These were designed to allow the interviewees to fulfil their roles in terms of an active involvement in the bringing-up and looking-after of their children. In line with our assumptions, both interviewed female project managers were working in official part-time positions with much lower working hours (between 50% and 70%) to account for their private commitments (primary responsibility for education and childcare).

Ms A.W., a graduate construction engineer and overall project leader in her late 30s, is mother to two children, aged 3 and 5. Ms A.W. works in a 50% position (spread over 3 days / week) and has the primary responsibility for childcare and education at home, while her husband is working in a 100% position. In her line of work, overall project management, Ms A.W. is the only person working less than 80%. Negotiating this arrangement was difficult despite the support of her immediate superior.

It was like that, when the first child was on its way, I wanted to speak to my boss, my supervisor, and the story was: 60% minimum, so that I will be there for a real three days a week. And that meant discussions and debates, and it is really hard to assert yourself at work, especially in projects, because it is never finished at the end of the day, and when I am home, the project is not sleeping, it just goes on. (…) But here, I am in charge, and if something is working, it will still happen on the days when I am not there. I have to admit, it is working really well. People have grown accustomed to it and I am not getting that many phone calls at home anymore. (A.W.)

Ms A.W. put a particular emphasis on maintaining a clear dividing line between her job and her family. Home office or other mixed forms were no suitable options for reconciling her work and her private life:

See, I am usually working whole days, because that means more peace and quiet for the other days. For me, that means: in the mornings, I say, I am going to work, so I am really there 100%. But when I am back home, I am really back home. (A.W.)

Ms A.W. had to realize that she has only been entrusted with smaller-scale projects as a result of her part-time position. She is not pursuing any career advancement for her professional future, but she wishes to secure her position, and is committed to the challenge of continuing in her career despite her two children. As a result of her family responsibilities, her priorities have, nonetheless, shifted and moved away from any longer-term career plans.

Yes, well, I admit that a family changes the way you see things. [Her career]: That is not the first thing for me anymore, like it used to before my children.[…] And even more, I now need to plan from one year to the next. (A.W.)

In her line of work, A.W. could observe the parallel persistence of the traditional career notion (that is, upward progression and increasing leadership responsibilities, in particular for men) and the rise of more subjective notions of careers, in which the term “career” received a subjective and individual meaning.

By contrast to Ms A.W., our second female interview, Ms S.L., is not working in overall project management, but acts as the leader of sub-projects. The intricate interdependences between the various subjects pose a considerable constraint on her autonomy in terms of her working hours. Ms S.L. is in her early 30s, with two degrees in technical subjects, has two young children, and is currently working in a 70% position. Her husband is employed in a 100% executive position. Ms S.L. is similarly committed to maintaining the distinction between job and family life:

Well, I am well-organized, because my husband works 100%, maybe more even. But I am organized, and it went well with one child. I had very strict, I mean, I never did overtime. And that was OK, with my supervisor. I said, I will now work 80%, not 100% on four days. I will come in at 8 and I will leave at 5 and so on. (S.L.)

Ms S.L. took part in a corporate mentoring programme for women, which gave her a forum for confronting herself with her career ambitions. At the same time, it showed her that she could not pursue a traditional leadership career as a part-timer:

Instead of doing the junior executive programme 2, I said, OK, I will do the mentoring programme for women. And that is a programme that was designed especially for women, where you get a mentor for a year. […] At the end, we had a, like a day, a workshop, and there were people there to speak about their jobs. There were two women, one high up at SBB, and a man. And then, the issue, well, mothers as executives, and part-time of course. […] And so, I really enjoyed that, one of the two women really talked a lot, yes, women today simply do not have the courage etc. etc. And especially, one of them said, almost, girls, you need more power, you do not have the courage etc. That there are so few women in management, she saw that as a question of cowardice. […] So we asked: do you have any children? No. And the other one: do you? No, none. Neither of them had any children. So they can’t experience that, I man how we, women with children, sometimes, you know, make our voice heard. They don’t know what it’s like, because back then, I also though, pah, children, I still work 100%, no problem. (S.L.)

Ms S.L. deemed a leadership career, which remains the only really prestigious, institutionalized, and recognized career track at the company, to be irreconcilable with her situation as a mother in part-time work. The price she would have to pay for a career was clearly too high for her.

Our male interviewees also represent highly qualified professionals who are in great demand in the Swiss labour market. Before joining the company, most of the interviews had been employed in private sector businesses and saw their switch to the company, a state-owned, albeit dynamic enterprise, as a step back into more stable working conditions. Mr N.O., manager of construction projects, discussed how he consciously decided in favour of a post in the public sector after many years in private industry for the good of his work-life balance. His family had born the brunt of his prior work:

[The family experienced] not much really positive, simply a constantly tired father, I guess. […] Of course, it is like that, you build a house, then you work a lot, the pressure increases, simply because it all gets so personal, you cannot switch the projects off […] And that naturally affects everything, when you have all these absent periods, at home, and no more time for yourself. (N.O.)

Very few of the interviewees are pursuing a traditional career progression. Instead, most emphasized that they are faced with a point in their career in which they appreciate the security and regular work at a public sector organization. This notion of security revolves primarily around generating a regular and high income for the family and looking after the family in this manner. Even though such claims underline the importance of family and children, none of the interviewees revealed any substantial reductions in their working hours in favour of childcare or family pursuits. At the same time, a number of the interviewees practice what could be called ‘concealed arrangements’. While they are officially employed in 100% positions or have reduced their hours at most to 90% – which is still considered to be full-time work – opportunities for flexibility are identified at work to spend more regular time with their children during the week. These informal periods are not recorded in any employment contracts, nor are they made public on higher levels of the hierarchy. At best, the immediate supervisor is involved and his approval is gained on an unofficial level. In a form of confidential agreement between the supervisor and the employee, these arrangements allow them to reconcile their stated ambition of being involved in the development of their children with the needs of their full-time work. In view of the lack of official support, these arrangements do, however, remain precarious. A new superior or a change in the team’s make-up can quickly call these arrangements into doubt or make them altogether impossible. Lacking official recognition, neither the company nor the superior can be held to account when these arrangements are concerned. Their purpose is therefore not to ensure the equal distribution of family responsibilities or to aid the employability of the mother by sharing the load. Mr A.B, overall project leader and father to one child, explained:

Yes. I am trying to keep Thursday afternoons free, but it is, you know, it is like this, well, she [his wife] cannot say that she only wants to work on Thursday afternoons, that doesn’t work. (A.B.)

Mr A.B. pursued a traditional career strategy, defined by a clear purpose in terms of the progression into a leading position, meaning a step up over two salary bands.

Another overall project leader, Mr F.P., father to three children, stated that he ‘actually’ works 100%, but that an internal arrangement allows him to keep one day free for childcare duties.

Actually [I am working] 100 %. I have this arrangement in place, we can take 60 days unpaid parental leave at the company in the first six years after birth. I am taking it in the sense of reducing my weekly hours to 90% until I have used up these 60 days, that means, per week, statistically speaking, I have half a day off. I work from home for another half day and have the afternoon off, then I can look after my children and my wife can go to work. (F.P.)

With the aid of these arrangements, the fathers are trying to resolve an obvious dilemma: living up to the ideal of the permanently available professional, being the male breadwinner of the family, and still contributing to raising their children. At the heart of their self-presentation as professionals, they focus on maintaining the impression of presence, visibility, and commitment, even if they forego any active career development at the same time. Mr F.P. again:

I always wanted a family and children. Having children so soon was perfect for us, but it came as a surprise. It does not always work well. So the priorities shifted somewhere in those, well, four years, between our first and our third child. Right now, family with children, family with small children is extremely important for me. (F.P.)

These unofficial arrangements are not made official in the form of binding part-time contracts for a variety of reasons: official part-time work would mean a loss of available income, and the fathers are afraid of gaining a negative image at the company for reducing their workload. There are rumours and stories about men who tried – often in vain – to get an official reduction of their working hours:

Someone tried it [reducing his workload], but they made him see that it would not be a good idea. […] I don’t know the details. But he was speaking to the boss of my boss. At least that is what I’ve heard. […] Because we have so much work to do. (M.N)

This restrictive attitude concerning part-time arrangements has developed in the recent past. In earlier times, reducing one’s hours was not considered problematic: in 1999, M.N. worked in an 80% contract to spend more time with his wife. In that period, the company seems to have been committed to promoting part-time work.

The absence of an officially endorsed policy for highly qualified part-time work – especially for male employees – means that the acceptance of part-time arrangements often stands or falls with the person of the part-timer’s immediate supervisor. Surprisingly, our expert interviews encountered one high-ranking manager working in an official 80% part-time position. Mr O.P., father to two young children, stated that he could see no problems with an even broader distribution of part-time arrangements at the organization. In his eyes, working part-time does not have to stand in the way of one’s individual career prospects. Rather, the crux is that men were not clear about what they actually wanted and that part-time was still perceived as an unmanly system:

I would say that I was kicking at an open door when I said that I wanted to do this [the 80% reduction]. […] Most people think that it wouldn’t work, it is, I believe, people are just holding themselves back. If you really want it and think it through properly and seriously and find ways, then you will find a solution and you will get it through with your supervisor. I think the biggest problem is the people themselves […] not the environment. So that’s that. I might be saying the exact opposite to what people are telling you. And I am only speaking from my own experience, because I also needed two years until the thing was through, until I said that is what I want and this is how I will do it. And I noticed, I am my own worst enemy, I always find reasons why, I am not looking for reasons why it will work, but always reasons for why it wouldn’t work. So people say, you don’t actually want this, you are not a full man, or well, are there any problems with your career etc. All of these superficial things that people come up with. (O.P.)

The strategy espoused by male employees to avoid official part-time work with “concealed” arrangements acts as an unintentional barrier to the conscious opening-up of the management culture to other men working in part-time and reproduces the continued perception of part-time as unmanly and career-inhibiting.

**4 Conclusion and discussion**

The first and foremost question in this paper concerned the implications and interdependencies between gender management programmes and individual career policies and the occupational culture and career prospects of male and female engineers in part-time employment. The few currently available studies on the marginalization of female and/or part-time professionals in male-dominated professions offer an important starting point from a conceptual and methodological standpoint: they produce invaluable insights into how the gender stereotypes identified by gender research and gendered segregation processes (as seen in career choices and the labour markets) are reproduced on the level of organizations and individual jobs (Callan, 2007; Powell, 2009). One important ambition of this paper was to learn more about the mechanisms of marginalization of part-time professionals that are at work in organizations and jobs in male-dominated professions, not least with a view to career prospects. For this purpose, we pursued three complementary lines of enquiry: 1) investigating the reception of “reduced-load work” in management culture (Lee et al 2000), 2) exploring the local occupational and professional culture of engineers, and 3) reconstructing the career and coping strategies of part-time professionals in the context of commercial organizations.

Our case study revealed that even gender management programmes that are sustainably embedded in the corporate strategic framework always operate under the most difficult circumstances imaginable, a situation that can be expected to persist for the foreseeable future. The still rather meagre track record of industry associations and political groups when it comes to channelling more women into technical careers and the resilience of traditional gender roles and stereotypes reinforces the finding that gender relations are anything but trivial also on the level of corporate or HR management (cf. Davies and Thomas, 2000). Our research took place in a comparatively early phase of the strategy’s introduction, and our findings should therefore be considered provisional to some extent. However, they reaffirm that obstacles and barriers on the level of corporate cultures play a crucial role in hobbling the progress of feminization and the spread of family-friendly jobs. The still male-dominated cultures of visibility and the masculine connotation of the ideal of a linear, full-time, salaried and upwardly mobile career (not restricted to engineering professions) mean that both individual capabilities and career strategies are strongly subject to gendered constraints. These cultural motifs are particularly visible and portentous when it comes to the marginalization of part-time professionals, femininity, or the general growth of alternative career concepts. The result is strongly gendered career policies that only contribute to reinforcing the ingrained role allocation between genders in terms of family / childcare duties and thus sustain the structural disenfranchisement of female professionals. Our male interviewees with children generally continue to pursue traditional career models and seize opportunities of greater flexibility work to pursue “clandestine” part-time work, without infringing on the social ideal of the male breadwinner and constantly available employee. In the main, the career prospects of men remain intact, whereas our female interviewees with children relinquished their career ambitions in favour of reconciling the opportunity for challenging, albeit part-time work with their main concentration on raising and looking after their children. We see the reason for the ambiguous and, to some extent, marginalized place of part-time professionals in the fact that “reduced-load work” is still considered a deviation from an implicitly unchallenged work ethos of professionals that is reinforced by the given work setting: a deliberately not unrestrained, but actually time-restricted availability and visibility of professionals employees still carries the taint of the unprofessional despite the many studies that have revealed the increased motivation and efficiency of part-timers. Today’s ideal professional is expected to be available anywhere and anytime to serve the needs of his organization or the wishes of his clients.

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1. The participants in the research project of the Commission for Technology and Innovation of the Swiss Federation based at the Berne University of Applied Sciences are Peter Kels (project leader), Isabelle Clerc, and Simone Artho. Further information is available at /www.reflexive-careers.ch [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Three in-depth case studies (at a medium-sized IT service provider, a large-scale energy supplier, and a public transport and logistics company) are conducted to investigate the relevant company-specific circumstances and concepts concerning HR and career development in IT specialist, project management, internal consulting and sales, engineering, and energy trade analyst careers. For each case study, approx. 10 expert interviews are conducted with HR managers and executives in addition to a documentary analysis to reconstruct the theory and practice for developing and supporting holders of specific know-how. In parallel to this analysis of the organizational and managerial perspective, each case study includes 16 problem-centric occupational biography interviews (Witzel, 1982; 2000) with male and female specialist employees. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “I suggested that there is a gender substructure of organization that operates to help reproduce gender divisions and inequalities, even against the best intentions of some women and men working in organizations. […] The substructure is not just ideological, but is manifested and reproduced trough the ostensibly gender-neutral practices and activities of doing the work of organizing, including the textual tools of management used to specify work tasks, responsibilities, coordination of activities, wage setting procedures, promotion processes, performance assessments etc.” (Acker, 1998: 197) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the course of our intensive case study, we conducted 16 problem-centric interviews (Witzel, 2000; 2011) with project managers and specialists in project management for rail infrastructure projects. The interviewees were aged between 30 and 50 years of age; 10 interviewees had university degrees (typically in engineering subjects), 6 a higher vocational qualification; two interviewees were female (both with young children at pre-school or primary school age); 13 of the 14 male interviewees have children at pre-school or primary school age. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Depending on their exact objectives, the management of rail infrastructure projects covered either the construction or re-design of real estate (stations, lines, tunnels, bridges, other structural constructions), the maintenance or replacement of electricity or other communication lines, construction of signal boxes, or track measurement. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “A project leader (...) can work more easily in part-time than I in a management position. I am far too much under outside control, while project leaders control themselves.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)