



**New views on autonomy:
relationships between independent worker and clients**

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Introduction

In Canada and in other industrialised countries, non typical employment forms are multiplying (Tremblay and Dagenais, 2002) and self-employment or independent work is a case in point. Indeed, non-farm independent work is now the first source of new “jobs” in Canada. According to surveys of the working population, the number of self-employed workers in Canada has increased by 3,6% between 2004 and 2005). This was the strongest employment growth among all categories of workers. In percentage of employed persons, independent workers represent almost 16% in Canada and 13% in Québec). The national average is similar to that of industrialised countries overall. In addition, it seems that non farm independent work will continue to develop in Canada and elsewhere.

In the present economic context, new and more flexible employment relationships are generated whereby workers are made more accountable. Independent workers for example, sidestep the obligations inherent to a work contract; instead of obeying a boss, they deal with a client. Yet the freedom associated with this status requires qualification (Everaere, 2001). For a number of authors among which Hyytinen and Ruuskanen (2007), Smeaton (2003), Stanworth and Stanworth (1997), this is an indication of increasing job insecurity, while others read the issue in terms of increased worker autonomy (Lepak and Snell, 1999; Inkson and Arthur, 2001; Cappelli, 2001; Kunda, Barley and Evans, 2002). In the context where forms of organisation, work and employment are transformed and reconstructed, it is important to assess how such classic management notions like control and autonomy have evolved. Through analysis, this article questions the notion of work autonomy as it applies to a non typical form of employment, i.e., self-employment.

First, we explore the notion of independence as defined in management literature. The notion was initially developed for wage earners, but is also applied to self-employed workers. Second, we examine the theoretical and practical redefinition of autonomy as it applies to independent workers. Finally, with reference to independent IT workers, we provide an illustration of how the notion of work autonomy is redefined in this form of non typical employment. Developments in self-employed work lead us to focus on the underpinnings of autonomy in work as a determinant concept of human resources management.

Conceptual framework

Over the years, the discourses of management have evolved in many different directions. Research seems to confirm that wage earners enjoy enhanced freedom and that they are increasingly responsabilised (Everaere, 2001). Concurrent to this movement toward autonomy, controls seem to have been reinforced (Lallé, 1999) to oversee more closely this delegated autonomy. For some authors (Lepak and Snell, 1999; Inkson and Arthur, 2001) the autonomous wage earning approach, applied to responsabilised employees who are also seen as “entrepreneurs of themselves” is a win-win solution for both the workers and the employer. This model has been widely commented and praised in the management literature whereby “the rank and file relationship appears to be a kind of client-vendor relationship, established through identical practices and requiring substantially identical skills to manage the terms of the reciprocal trade: which objectives, functions and responsibilities must be established in exchange of which material and qualitative consideration, including wages.” (Lallé, 1999; p. 105, our translation) Indeed the ideal model of the responsabilised worker, the self-entrepreneur evolving toward a client-vendor relationship with his/her employer is a definite, actual trend: it is called independent work.

It is therefore important to investigate the features of independent worker’s autonomy since the client-supplier relationship governing the process is often deemed to be the 'exemplar model', applicable as well to rank and file wage earning relationships.



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Van Gelderen and Jansen (2006) note that a consensus of sorts has emerged around the notion of autonomy as the capacity of individuals to make choices independently. But the notion of work autonomy is so diverse in management studies that it has become polysemic (Cisneros, 2005; Lallé, 1999). Some argue that the notion of discretion should be preferred (De Terssac, 1992) and contend that there are limits to autonomy. De Terssac and Maggi (1996) note that the discretionary character of autonomy is such that the worker may choose among different options in surroundings fraught with dependencies, although self-reliance means the ability to set one's own actions. No process may therefore turn out to be completely autonomous or self-contained. The empirical study by Janz, Colquitt and Noe (1997) points out that interdependence among team members is the number one limiting factor of autonomy.

Alverson and Willmott (2002) use the expression "micro emancipation" to evaluate situations whereby workers gain marginal autonomy. In such situations, organisational constraints are eased but stress and job insecurity crop up. For example, workers may well enjoy more flexibility in defining their work methods and schedules, but they must comply with quality and quantity criteria or parameters established by others.

According to Alexandre-Bailly (2001, p.37, our translation), "it is obvious that autonomy within the enterprise cannot be absolute except in specific situations such as in a cooperative environment or where self-management in the workplace is practised." We therefore refer to the definition of freedom of action proposed by Alexandre-Bailly et al. (2003, p. 232, our translation) whereby autonomy "supposes leeway for choosing between a number of alternatives without invading the freedom of others and without breaking shared rules". Further, there are two types of autonomy:

- Valued and often compulsory autonomy granted or delegated by a line supervisor in order to enhance performance in compliance with particular organisational principles, because delegated autonomy is deemed to be a source of satisfaction and/or a productivity driver". (Alexandre-Bailly, 2001, p. 37, our translation).
- Conquered or stolen autonomy is informal and runs parallel to prescribed rules.

The study of conquered autonomy comes within the scope of an ergonomic or process approach and it brings to light the discrepancies between job description and actual work (De Terssac, 1992; Alexandre-Bailly et al 2003). In this instance, the worker would shift away from organisational limitation and proceed in his/her own way either for efficiency or to steer away from rules deemed oppressive. It should be noted that such behaviour is not delinquent; to the contrary, it is an initiative designed to increase organisational efficiency and conquered autonomy isn't necessarily in opposition with organisational interests (De Terssac, 1992; Alexandre-Bailly et al. 2003). Whether conquered autonomy somehow escapes management or is found outside established supervisory procedures or strategies (Pagès et al., 1979), the concern is acknowledged as a significant challenge to management and labour relations (Lapointe et al., 2005; Bellemare and Lapointe, 2006). Indeed Lapointe (2006) and Lapointe et al. (2005) contend that participation and partnership, two organisational innovations that rely on increased autonomy granted to work teams and to workers, are catalysts of economic and social performance. Nevertheless, organisations are often reluctant to adopt these views, let alone implement them. Finally, both types of autonomy, conquered and delegated, are not mutually exclusive and may be seen as complementary (Alexandre-Bailly et al., 2003).

Our research is an attempt to identify the significant features of work autonomy in management discourses and we focus on delegated autonomy without leaving aside conquered autonomy.

Many studies have shed light on a wide variety of dimensions in work autonomy. Autonomy implies the existence of clearly defined objectives (Fiol et al., 1996), the granting of adequate responsibilities (Furnham, 2001) and indeed for Everaere (2001) responsibility is a direct and necessary consequence of work autonomy. Responsibility for a mission and accountability are the counterparts of autonomy. In other words, defining the objectives of a mission provides a



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foundation for the assessment of both these factors. According to Chiavenato (2000), the extent of the autonomy granted to a person is proportional to his/her responsibility, hence the importance of defining the objectives. For Everaere (2001), responsabilisation is also acknowledged in a process of identification and traceability. Finally, Cordiner (1965) contends that responsibility and accountability must be accepted and applied throughout the organisation. In management discourses, autonomy generally refers to a function. It does not follow from control but from delegation. Autonomy and delegation cannot exist independently.

Along with clearly outlined objectives, Fiol et al. (1996) stress the significance of yet another component of autonomy: the negotiating range. Breugh (1999) labels this dimension as criteria autonomy, the possibility to decide of the objectives and their assessment. Guérin et al. (1999) use the expression strategic autonomy which allows its holder to choose his/her own work objectives and purposes. Authors also often use the expression *operational autonomy* to define that which authorises a choice among the means toward solving a problem or fulfilling an objective. For his part, Breugh (1999) divides operational autonomy in two components:

- autonomy in the methods, i.e., the possibility to decide of the methods and procedures to carry out the work
- planning autonomy, i.e., the possibility to decide on planning the tasks, the work schedules, etc.

In order to be autonomous and meet the objectives set out by the organisation, a worker should be able to give orders to his/her own collaborators and have access to adequate means and resources (Chiavenato, 2000).

In a wage earning situation, the autonomous employee is granted the power either to decide or to negotiate the objectives, the methods and the planning of his/her mission. Adequate resources are allocated to the wage earner and he/she can give orders. In consideration of this, the worker is responsible for his/her decisions and is accountable for the results.

Responsibility for a mission and accountability for results
Clearly defined objectives
Negotiation range over the objectives
Autonomy as concerns methods
Autonomy as concerns planning
Power to give orders to one's collaborators
Adequate means and resources

Characteristics of autonomy in a wage earning relationship

The notion of autonomy is also familiar to managers who implement and develop semi autonomous teams of wage earners. The trend can be observed in many Québec and foreign companies who modify their work organisation and implement teams of wage-earners (Tremblay, 2007; Janz et al., 1997). According to Lapointe et al. (2005), team work is an organisational innovation practised in 45% of Québec manufacturing industries. Employers do not grant autonomy and responsibilities to the same extent in all organisations (Tremblay, 2007) but that new form of work organisation is relatively homogeneous in its intended goals. Very often, the issue is the introduction of new technologies and job enrichment. Team members are asked to become polyfunctional or versatile, which translates into organisational flexibility. Efficient operation of semi autonomous work teams involves the commitment and mobilisation of team members. Studies by Tremblay (2007) and Lapointe et al. (2005) have outlined a paradoxical



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consequence of worker responsabilisation. Where work teams appreciate the slacking of tight supervision, some form of decisional autonomy, more influence over their direct environment and job enrichment, many employees nevertheless complain about the increased pressure and the stress inherent to responsibilities, the pace of work and the work load. This type of situation could well depict Alverson and Willmott's (2002) notion of micro emancipation defined as minute gains of autonomy in exchange for increased pressure in the workplace. In their critical approach, the authors expose a darker side to expanded autonomy that Willmott (1993) has turned into the following expression: *Slavery is freedom*.

After this review of the features and issues involved in work autonomy, we turn to management discourses concerning the case of independent IT professionals. Guérin et al. (1999) define the professional as an expert who is able to recommend solutions derived from knowledge and achieved through technical skills. He/she has internalised the values attached to this status: devotion to duty and to profession, proficiency, autonomy, compliance with professional standards, peer group identification, ethics. The autonomy requirement is a feature and a founding element of professional culture (Guérin et al., 1999).

In the computer and IT sector, independent professionals are under contract with client organisations that hire their specific expertise and assign the specialist to project teams. This is one substantial difference with the logic behind the responsabilisation of semi autonomous work teams. In the *independent* system, technical expertise is sought for a specific project and in the *autonomous* setup, it is versatility, knowledge sharing and flexibility. Independent IT workers are responsible for projects, but their duty is grounded in expertise.

There are nevertheless two similarities in the autonomy enjoyed by both independent IT professionals and semi autonomous work teams. In project management as well as in semi autonomous teams, success and problem-free operation depends on the commitment and mobilisation of the individuals. Commitment to work is often considered among the core values of professional work (Guérin et al., 1999), a factor by which professionals are distinguished from other workers. Again a number of studies tend to show that autonomy and responsabilisation could potentially translate into increased stress and pressure in the workplace (Guérin et al., 1996; Bouffartigue and Bouteiller, 2002).

Where independent workers are concerned, the aims and objectives are set out in a commercial contract. The traditional wage earning relationship between the employer and the worker is replaced with the interdependence relationship typical of the client-supplier relation (Lepak and Snell, 1999). In addition, the 'job' characteristics of independent IT workers, their occupational skills and their worth on the job market make them not only professionals, but knowledge workers as well (Ang and Slaughter, 2001). One could therefore expect that these self-employed or independent workers enjoy a high degree of autonomy in the performance of their work, especially where methods and planning are concerned. Marler et al. (2002) for example suggest that the relationships between independent IT workers and their corporate clients are deceptively simple. In externalisation practices, independent workers dodge a certain form of line authority but are often similarly dependent on their client(s) for their revenues (Everaere, 2001). One may then ask to what extent is the autonomy enjoyed by independent workers different from the concept of micro emancipation (Alverson, Willmott, 2002) of regular employees. The aim of this paper is to address the notion of autonomy with respect to independent work. For each feature of autonomy, we attempt to discern whether it is applicable to independent work and why.

Methodology

This in depth survey was carried out in collaboration with the Québec Association of IT Self-employed Workers (AQIII). A first part of the data was collected in the Spring of 2007. An email was sent to the 700 members of this professional association with an hyperlink to the online questionnaire. To complement the quantitative data, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with members in the Autumn of 2007.



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Twenty-eight percent of AQIII members replied to the online survey. Of that number of participants (196), 110 returned a complete questionnaire.

A large majority of respondents are men (82%), but the percentage of women who replied to the invitation (18%) is larger than the percentage of female members of the AQIII (11%). The sample is relatively young; 71% of respondents are aged 44 or younger and 53% are between 35 and 44 years of age. More than 80% of the respondents live with a marriage partner or spouse and 55% live with a marriage partner or spouse and one or more dependent children. To a large extent, our respondents work alone: 83% have no employees nor do they sign up subcontractors. The average seniority in their status as independent workers is 7,5 years and the average professional experience in IT and computer work is 17 years. This means that most respondents had acquired sound and tested experience in IT before launching their independent career.

First, the questionnaire established a general sociodemographic profile of individual participants (age, number of dependent children). In addition, participants were required to indicate how they organise their work (objectives, means, etc

Further to the information gathered in the questionnaire, the investigation includes 10 semi-structured interviews (two females and eight males). The interviews explored the following themes: work autonomy and its extent (or limitations), the controls established by the clients, etc.

Results

Table 1 exposes some results of the survey as concerns decision making. With respect to work autonomy, it should be kept in mind that independent workers cannot give orders to their collaborators who are either employees of the client organisation or independent workers themselves. By and large, this dimension of work, i.e., authority, does not apply to independent work.

Table 1: How are the following elements determined? (% respondents)

	Decides by him/herself %	Negotiated terms and conditions - %	Client prescribed %
Deadlines	6	60	32
Outcomes	6	54	39
Budget	2	36	61
Work location	11	42	46
Holidays	43	55	2
Equipment & tools	15	47	38
Work procedures & techniques	23	54	21

Totals are below 100 horizontally where some respondents have replied "other".

The answers of our participants were compared with the identified dimensions of work autonomy in a management perspective and that process leads to the following observations.

Well defined mission and objectives

In the self-reliant work model involving a client organisation, independent IT and computer workers are managed under commercial terms and conditions; they are entrusted with a mission and the objectives are set forth in the contract. In this sense, independent workers theoretically enjoy more autonomy than wage earners whose objectives are always clearly defined. It must nevertheless be noted that the mandate of independent workers will very often change in the course of a mission. Such redefinition of the objectives, however, gives independent workers a constant update on the mapping of the project while mandates assigned to wage earners may be recalled or modified without an explanation on the reasons for such rearrangement (Guérin et al., 1996).



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The negotiation range on issues concerning the objectives

According to the results of the survey, the purpose and the objectives of the assignment are imposed by the client in 39% of instances and are negotiated in 54% of the cases. In other words, independent workers certainly enjoy a negotiation range for the objectives but it seems rather narrow as the excerpt below illustrates.

“Being an independent worker means having domain-knowledge and expertise and if something is required of us which we don't really appreciate, we can say 'No, I'm not here for that, I'm not interested'; I guess most permanent employees wouldn't have enough leverage for this. Well, even if things aren't said exactly like this, just the mention that we don't like something would have some effect. In this respect, I'd say that we enjoy more power than a permanent employee who is more dependent on the company... But we're not crazy either. Especially on long haul missions like this, team spirit needs to be developed and we can't just flatly say 'no'. It's a trade-off. For example, it's easier to negotiate the general direction if it's not appropriate or to reset the objectives if that's not what's been negotiated at the outset”.

As this consultant explains, it is easier for independent workers to negotiate the general direction of their assignment than it is for regular wage earners. Our participant nevertheless added 'we're not crazy either' which indicates that there are limits to any negotiation range. An experienced consultant summarizes the independent worker's dilemma as follows:

“If I leave a client I won't be able to return to that client later”.

“In terms of negotiation, everything depends on how hungry I am. When I'm loaded with contracts, I'm in a strong bargaining position”.

It can be said that the available range in negotiating the mission and the objectives is constrained by the risk of losing a client. Leverage on the objectives is therefore strongly coupled to expertise and scarcity.

Planning autonomy

The results of our survey address twice the question of planning autonomy. With respect to holidays, the autonomy of independent workers seems quite significant. Only 2% of them have no say on their vacation periods, 43% decide by themselves and 55% need to negotiate the matter with their client. Flexibility regarding holiday periods is confirmed in the interviews.

“I have total freedom to determine my holiday periods as long as it doesn't impact the project. It would be foolish to say 'I know everybody is working hard but I'll take my vacations at that time although it is a critical period for the project'. This kind of total autonomy is unreasonable... but then, when we are part of a team, vacation periods must be co-ordinated. I don't have children so I'm not frustrated if I can't take time off in July”.

This excerpt offers a good example of independent workers' dilemma between so-called total autonomy and reasonable limits to freedom. Generally, however, our respondents enjoy more time off or holidays than wage earners (4 weeks per year on average).

With respect to planning autonomy, the ability to negotiate deadlines also comes into play. In this matter, 32% of respondents must respond to imposed deadlines and even work overtime.

“It happened to me last week; I did 45 hours instead of 35. On this project, overruns are frequent. All projects aren't like that... In this case, I had to work overtime to meet the deadline instead of carrying over 6 months from now. Overtime is paid the same hourly rate. Consultants don't have special rates for overtime”.



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As was mentioned, processes cannot be entirely autonomous where they are by definition intertwined with other processes (De Terssac and Maggi, 1996) and therefore planning autonomy may depend on other actors assigned to the project (Janz et al., 1997).

“External factors are likely to impact work time or work organisation. For example, in some projects I work with different partners, independent workers, etc., whose availability and organisation also depend on other factors: they may cancel a meeting that I had planned. All these elements must be factored into the schedule. Changes in the program occur regularly, it's the run of the mill. This has to be managed, for example by planning flexibility in one's time table for such occurrences. Last minute meetings occur all the time for the next day or the day after. Those are usually with prospective clients. That's the sales side, an important business activity; it's hard to say 'no'. A time table must allow for such activities”.

Local practices and standards in the client organisation may also impinge on one's planning autonomy.

“In terms of working hours, telework and things like that we need to adapt to the existing system at the client's. Days of absence cause few problems. I'll often have meetings at other locations, for example they know when I'm at a board meeting and they don't mind as long as there's no gross abuse. I can say 'Thursday I'm not available' and no question will be asked. That's the only benefit”.

Planning autonomy meets stiff resistance when it comes to time table (the punch clock syndrome) and work location. Actually, for 46% of respondents the location of work is determined unilaterally by the client, 46% negotiate the matter and 11% decide by themselves. It is surprising, to say the least, to observe how independent workers are subject to rather strong pressure on these issues.

“There are controls. I am expected to be at the office 35 hours per week minimum and to use the tools... In order to be accepted in a corporate environment, delivering documents isn't enough, that's normal; one must also deal with peers, learn from that environment, adapt to it and perform the work to satisfy their needs... Isn't it how it works?”

“They (the clients) prefer to see you, to control at what time you walk in to the office, things like that... I'd say it's more than just a habit, they like to see the people, to know at what time you're in, when you're on coffee break and how long although this isn't subject to controls, they like to know you're around and that they could catch you if you cheated ... It's more for reassurance. With telework, we deprive them of these possibilities.”

According to our survey, 60% of respondents mention that they negotiate deadlines with their clients. At first sight, planning autonomy is relatively important. It is nevertheless curtailed when it comes to work location and working times. Actually, independent workers must meet the demands of their clients.

Work process autonomy

Autonomy in the choice of work process or method and tools turns out to be rather unsettled. Among our respondents, 15% decide by themselves the tools they will use, 23% decide of work procedures and techniques, and for 47% and 54% of respondents, the matter is negotiated with the clients. While 38% of respondents must accept the tools provided by the clients, only 21% need to adopt the clients' work procedures and techniques.

Such diversity in work process is explained in part by the payment method (fixed amount or invoiced on a fee basis).

“For a project on a professional fee basis, deliverables are due in two months and you have total freedom in the execution”.

“They (the clients) like to have extra control on consultants since we cost more”.



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Finally, concerning work process autonomy, self-employed workers often need to adjust to client organisations including the possibility of choosing another assignment with a different client, market allowing. This independent worker with 20 years of experience summarises the issue:

“Autonomy is always a question of balance between accepting the client's demands or losing the client. I have the autonomy that I can afford... When I have lots of money, lots of contracts, I enjoy more freedom”.

Means and resources

Means and resources allocated to meet the objectives set forth in the agreement are generally negotiated at contract signature. For 36% of our respondents, the budget is negotiated with the client but for 61% of them, the client determines the budget. It must be noted that independent workers face little resistance when they request their clients to pay the overtime.

“Since I was so committed to delivering the project on time, I requested the authorisation to do overtime and they said 'OK, do it'. It's a matter of judgement as well”.

Accountability

Independent workers are accountable to their clients pursuant to the commercial contract with them. Their autonomy thus entails an obligation of result. Again, the accountability is not directly legitimized by subordination to an employer but by market rules (an unsatisfied client will not offer other contracts to the independent worker).

Conclusion

Having identified several dimensions of autonomy in classic management discourses, we explored each of these dimensions with respect to independent IT workers' unique situation. Our critical perspective on the concept of autonomy sheds light on new issues involved in the development of novel and non-typical employment forms, including independent work or self-employment.

It may be concluded that independent workers are entrusted with a mission whose objectives are commonly defined in the assignment or mandate. The negotiating range over these objectives, however, is likely to vary widely from one independent worker to another and from one client to the next. The possibility that is offered independent workers to negotiate their objectives is therefore guaranteed.

We also identified the many forms of planning autonomy which is also the object of negotiation and trade-offs. Where autonomy on the choice of holidays and vacations seems relatively important, it seems that opportunities to negotiate deadlines and due dates is even more relative. Where work methods are concerned, situations vary widely as well. Nevertheless, the respondents express the difficulty they experience in choosing their work locations when faced with their clients' requirements. On the basis of their status, i.e., outsiders who do not belong to the organisation, independent workers hardly have a handle over the resources allocated to their projects. Finally, they must report to the client on the achievement of preset objectives. Control is not performed within the bounds of a hierarchical relationship with the employer, but in the commercial relationship with the client. This entails that control is also exercised through the law of supply and demand. We believe, as do Marler et al. (2002) and Everaere (2001), that the autonomy or independence so freely associated with the status of the self-employed worker should be read down.

Further, the results obtained are in keeping with those of Janz et al. (1997) and they confirm that belonging to a network of interdependencies is a significant limiting factor in the work autonomy of independent workers. Where a number of independent workers enjoy a real possibility of negotiation with their clients, others may only resort to minute amounts of emancipation as defined in Alverson and Willmott (2002). This finding tends to question the concept of autonomy, to underline the limits of independence and therefore to identify the concept of *discretion* as the



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preferred notion (De Terssac and Maggi, 1996). It could therefore be contended that both independent and salaried workers operate in some form of more or less constrained discretionary space.

The condition of independent workers exemplifies how the notion of autonomy is out of order in the debate between formal autonomy and conquered autonomy typical of salaried work. Yet, although many will choose independent work in order to enjoy more autonomy (Delage, 2002), the self-employed worker cannot expect autonomy without any limit. This form of employment displaces the issues of work autonomy from the firm towards market conditions. Along with the rising number of self-employed workers, the process of individualisation and accountability of one's professional destiny results in a logical issue; indeed a client-vendor relationship is substituted to the salaried hierarchical relationship and the independent worker is theoretically in a position to negotiate several aspects of his/her work. His mission, objectives, earnings and responsibilities are individualised and additionally they are often itemised in a project management process. Independent work is therefore at the crossroads of two evolving situations; the first tends toward individualisation (with objectives, responsibilities, rewards...) and the second tends towards the management of projects that built around multidisciplinary and interdependent teams.

Finally, a study of the issues borne by the concept of autonomy in self-employment or independent work leads us to question the redefinition of autonomy for all workers. Indeed with the build-up of human resources management procedures aiming to individualize and to responsabilise wage earners (Bichon, 2005; Devos and Taskin, 2005), one may ask whether the case of independent workers could offer some understanding for other organisational practices of the same type.

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