How is mass-production of professional services possible? Since professional services are credence goods, consumers rely on signals of expertise, like credentials and professional behavior of the service provider, to assess the quality and value of the service. Yet economies of scale in mass-production require nonprofessional workforce, which lacks the expected professional credentials and appears to be poorly equipped to project expert authority. Moreover, the low-wage, low-discretion job conditions of mass-production are antithetical to the ideal of professional work and thus seem to provide poor incentives for assuming and maintaining professional identity. By analyzing a case of contemporary tax preparation work in the United States, this paper argues that nonprofessional workers assume and project expert authority while delivering mass-produced professional services, despite the poor job conditions. Aspects of worker selection, training, and interactions with clients, as well as a firm’s efforts to project a professional image, are identified as factors contributing to the emergence and the maintenance of expert authority in nonprofessional workers. The distinction between structural and cultural aspects of professionalism is discussed as a promising direction for studying professionalism in nonprofessional workers and relating job design to worker identity.

Editor’s Comment
What is the fate of professional work in the contemporary economy? In this paper, the author explores the phenomenon of mass production of professional services, describing how tax preparation has been standardized and automated to lower costs in large tax-preparation chains. These chains hire primarily non-CPA workers on a temporary basis during tax season at a low wage and provide workers with proprietary information systems that allow...
limited discretion in their interactions with clients. Yet these workers develop a “professional identity” through their training and their client relationships that gives them a sense of expertise and makes their jobs worthwhile despite the poor working conditions. The discovery of this sense of professional identity among non-professional workers raises questions about the impact of organizational culture and structure for changes in professional work.

Beth Bechky, Action Editor

INTRODUCTION

Professional work in contemporary economy is undergoing a profound transformation as professional services are performed and procured on an increasingly large scale. At the core of the change are standardization and automation of many tasks constituting professional work (Barley & Tolbert, 1991; Timmermans & Berg, 2003; Vallas, 1989). Tasks that traditionally have been performed exclusively by professionals are delegated to subordinate occupations or nonprofessional workers who rely on expert technology to substitute professional training. Even traditionally high-status professions are not immune to this change: in medicine, nurse practitioners armed with diagnosis-support systems now see patients in retail store clinics for ailments that previously fell within the jurisdiction of physicians (Galperin, 2016); paralegals rely on sophisticated software to provide legal services for situations that previously required a lawyer (Segal, 2011); and tax preparers—some without any professional credentials, but armed with tax software—compete with accountants. The knowledge-intensive work is undergoing a change reminiscent of deskillling in manufacturing, where craft work was replaced with standardized, automated, and cost-efficient production processes that relied on lower-skill, lower-cost labor—a transition that altered the very nature of manufacturing (Stone, 1975).

These changes are a boon to the professional services firms that can harness the economic benefits of scale by using expert technology in combination with less credentialed and less expensive workforce. But mass-production of professional work also challenges these firms in a way that deskillling in manufacturing did not. Professional services are credence goods (Darby & Karni, 1973), so their quality is difficult to assess not only prior to consumption, but also after the services are rendered. As a result, a consumer’s best proxies for quality—and therefore, for the value of the service—are the perceived qualifications of the provider and the experience of receiving the service (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007). In traditional professional work, providers signal their qualifications with formal credentials—for example, a professional license or a degree from a professional school—and project expert authority in their interactions with clients using symbolic means acquired during professional training (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Freidson, 1973; Goffman, 1961). In mass-produced professional services, the delegation of work to nonprofessional low-wage workers eliminates these antecedents of professionalism. Frontline workers are still central to the consumer’s experience of the services, yet they lack professional training and credentials and thus are poorly equipped to project expert authority. Mass-production of professional services therefore necessitates a trade-off between the economic efficiencies of scale, which can be achieved with less credentialed or nonprofessional workforce, and the value of the service that results from professionalism and expert authority of the workers.

Yet, the audacious goal of large-scale professional firms is to have it both ways: to use low-cost labor while delivering high-value services. As the case of mass-produced tax preparation services presented here suggests, such a goal might be within the realm of possibility. The largest tax preparation chains like H&R Block, Liberty Tax Services, and Jackson Hewitt operate thousands of offices across the United States and strive to compete with tax practices run by credentialed accountants while employing tens of thousands of seasonal tax preparers, most of whom have no professional credentials. The firms carefully build their brand image to be associated with professional accounting services and specifically emphasize the professionalism of their workers. The success of such strategy depends, in large part, on loyal cooperation of workers and their assumption of the professional role. As the analysis below suggests, the workers do cooperate and play the role. That finding is puzzling considering the job conditions they endure. Tax preparers in mass-production jobs are often paid close to minimum wage, work with minimal discretion, and are expected to routinely perform low-status tasks like marketing and cross-selling, which they see as antithetical to their professional role. Preparers appear to be acutely aware of the nonprofessional nature of their employment, and yet they show commitment to clients characteristic of a professional practice, invest their own time and money in acquisition of firm-specific skills to increase their expertise, and generally display predisposition toward their work that suggests “consummate,” rather than “perfunctory” worker performance (Williamson, 1975, 1985). How is such professional orientation possible among nonprofessional workers in the context of low-paying mass-production jobs? How can
these temporary workers project expert authority, given their lack of professional credentials and training, and why do they do that, given the poor job conditions of mass-production?

I answer these questions using qualitative and quantitative data on tax preparers’ work and find that the professional orientation of nonprofessional workers is shaped by several key factors. Some of them—worker self-selection, screening, training, and monitoring—have been previously suggested as ingredients of a strong organizational culture (Van Maanen, 1991). Others—like the perception of workers by customers, which reinforces the workers’ professional identity, or the flaws in the expert software support system that force the nominally disempowered worker to assume decisive expert authority—are less appreciated as sources of professionalism. I consider how these factors together may constitute a strategy to engender and support professional identity in nonprofessional workers. The firms’ marketing efforts to project a professional image not only contribute to the general perception of their respective brands, but also influence the selection of workers and permeate the daily organization of work in the office, worker training, and perhaps most important, interactions with clients. The clients’ expectation that the tax preparers are experts helps workers to maintain their expert identity as distinct from their employee identity, tying the former to the content of their work and the latter to the job conditions. Such separation allows the workers to assume an identity of an expert under conditions of mass-production jobs that would seem antithetical to such identity.

Insights from this case inform our understanding of contemporary professional work, and as I discuss below, may be useful for understanding an even wider array of cases. Lab technicians in science (Barley & Bechky, 1994), copier repair technicians (Orr, 1996), Disneyland ride operators (Van Maanen, 1991), maternity coaches (Turco, 2012), and Apple store “Geniuses” (Segal, 2012) have all shown a similarly split, internally conflicted worker identity that defines their daily experiences of work. These workers harbor a high-status professional identity (in a wider, cultural sense of the word) that they derive from the content of their work, and that is in sharp contrast with the low-status job conditions they endure. I discuss the generalizability of patterns identified in contemporary tax preparation industry and the durability of professional worker identity in mass-production service work after presenting the empirical case.

DATA AND METHOD

This study primarily builds on three sources of data: interviews with tax preparers, an 8-week-long ethnographic observation of their training, and a survey. First, I conducted 50 in-depth, open-ended interviews with tax preparers across different organizational settings, of which 28 interviews were with tax preparers working in large tax preparation firms. The interviews were conducted in 2011 and 2012, in person (36 interviews) and by telephone (14 interviews). The in-person interviews were conducted during visits to tax preparation offices in the Eastern region of the United States. The telephone interviews were conducted to generalize beyond one geographic region. To recruit tax preparers for the telephone interviews, I sent e-mail invitations to a small, geographically stratified random sample (n = 103; response rate 14 percent). The sample was drawn from the sampling frame of all tax preparers in the United States who have applied for a Preparer Tax Identification Number (PTIN) with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which represents virtually every tax preparer and tax professional in the country.

Second, I conducted an 8-week participant observation of tax preparers’ training at TaxCo—one of the large national firms—and some observation of their work. Specifically, I attended a TaxCo introductory tax course that all tax preparers attend prior to their first season of employment with the firm and which serves as the main recruitment mechanism at the firm (more on this below). The training covered basics of individual income tax preparation and, most importantly for this study, focused on TaxCo’s internal organization of work, including the proprietary software-based expert system. Instructors and training materials also dedicated a significant amount of attention to questions of professional ethics and tax preparers’ responsibilities at TaxCo. In addition to the training observation, some of the workers I interviewed in person allowed me to observe their work in the office for short periods of time immediately before or after the interview. I took handwritten notes during those nonsystematic observations.

Third, I used data from a nationally representative online survey of tax preparers at TaxCo. Although the survey was originally conducted for a separate study, a subset of the questions and responses provided data that are directly relevant here. In that multi-part survey, respondents were randomly assigned to see some parts of the survey, but not others. Some of the

\footnote{1 TaxCo is a pseudonym. Some identifying details in the data presented here were changed to preserve the anonymity of the preparers and their employers.} \footnote{2 I observed some administrative aspects of daily office functions, but not the individual tax interviews—the interactions between a client and a preparer during which the preparer collects detailed financial information from the client—due to the sensitivity of such information.}
survey parts contained questions relevant to this study. Depending on the question, the relevant sample size therefore changes from 131 to 209 respondents, and the samples can be thought of as random draws from the same population, with replacement. Specifically, a subset of survey respondents provided free-text answers to questions pertaining to their perceptions of work conditions at TaxCo, perceptions of their work, and their employment situation outside of the seasonal work as tax preparers. I manually coded those short answers and treated them as additional qualitative and quantitative data. Another subset of respondents filled out a standard battery of questions on professional identification, which allowed me to evaluate the consistency of my qualitative data interpretations by assessing correlations between professional identification and individual preparer characteristics. Response rates and relevant details of the respondent samples are summarized separately for each set of results discussed below.

In addition to these primary data sources, I collected internal documents on training, marketing, and employment that were available to prospective and current employees of the firm, as well as public archival documents on tax preparation work form the IRS Return Preparer Office. These archival documents formed the secondary source of qualitative data. Finally, I used detailed quantitative datasets on tax preparers obtained from the IRS through Freedom of Information Act requests and data on individual income tax filings to verify broader points about the tax preparation industry, as detailed below.

I iteratively coded the interviews, field notes, and archival data, using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For organization and coding of the qualitative data, I used Atlas.ti qualitative data-analysis software. The coding produced themes related to the content, organization, and perception of tax preparers’ work. This paper focuses on work identity and motivation themes.

MASS-PRODUCTION OF TAX ACCOUNTING SERVICES

The tax preparation industry in the United States is dominated by a few large firms that mass-produce tax accounting services. Specifically, out of approximately 151 million tax returns filed by the U.S. households in 2015, 79 million (52 percent) were done by a paid preparer and of those, about 14 million returns were prepared at one of the three largest tax services firms: H&R Block, Jackson Hewitt, and Liberty Tax Service. Tax returns at these firms are prepared every year between January and May, by approximately 120,000 seasonal tax preparers working at over 19,000 establishments across the country. At such scale, the three firms may significantly influence the implementation of fiscal policy in the United States and the welfare of millions of American households (Ayres, Jackson, & Hite, 1989; Barr & Dokko, 2008).

To perform tax preparation work efficiently on such massive scale, large tax service firms rely on a heavily standardized and automated production process, in which the work of nonprofessional frontline workers is guided by a proprietary software-based expert system that provides both the scripts for tax preparers’ work and the tools for quick and accurate preparation of tax returns. The reliance on expertise-encapsulating technology is paramount, considering that only about 6 percent of the workers employed by the three largest firms have a professional credential-like Certified Public Accountant (CPA) or Enrolled Agent (EA), and only about half of tax preparers working at these firms have a college degree. The prevalence of tax preparers without credentials reflects the fact that a professional license is not required for tax preparation in all but four states in the United States [see Albert, Galperin, & Kacperczyk (2016) for a discussion of licensing in that industry]. In 2011, the IRS attempted to institute mandatory credentialing for preparers, which required passing a test and thus was effectively licensure. But the credentialing requirement was short-lived, as it was overturned in courts in 2014.

The field of tax preparation therefore lacks the licensure boundaries typical of well-established professional jurisdictions (Galperin, 2016), but the accounting profession has retained cultural jurisdiction over taxes. To the extent that large tax service firms can sell their services as professional accounting work, they compete with professional practices run by CPAs and EAs. My analysis of ZIP-code-level data from the IRS suggests that while there is some stratification of CPA- and non-CPA-led practices across ZIP codes by median income (which approximates average tax return complexity), there is a significant overlap in markets targeted by the three big tax preparation firms and those with CPA practices. Figure 1 illustrates this overlap. The figure plots distributions of income per household in four types of ZIP codes: (i) those that have only CPA practices, (ii) those with both CPA practices and establishments of at least one of the three large tax preparation firms, (iii) those that only have large

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3 Author’s calculations based on 2016 Electronic Return Originators listing and 2011 IRS PTIN holders public file obtained from the IRS.

4 Author’s calculations based on 2011 IRS PTIN holders public file and the survey data described below.

firms’ establishments and no CPA practices, and (iv) those where preparers are neither CPAs nor are in the three large firms. It is apparent from the plot that ZIP codes with only CPA practices have higher income per household than those with only H&R Block, Jackson Hewitt, or Liberty Tax Service establishments (the first and the third boxplots, respectively). However, the income distribution of ZIP codes in which CPA practices and at least one of the big three firms are copresent, represented by the second boxplot, is similar to the distribution in CPA-only ZIP codes. About 47 percent of all ZIP codes with tax preparation establishments fall into this category of shared markets, and the median income in such shared markets is somewhat higher than that in the CPA-only markets. Although this does not rule out within-ZIP-code market segregation, the significant market overlap suggests a potential for direct competition between accountants and large tax services providers. Further, limited available evidence suggests that the fees charged by the large firms and CPA practices are comparable and that the large firms provide most of the services typically provided by CPA practices.\textsuperscript{6}

Without professionally credentialed workforce, large tax preparation firms must rely on the appearance of expertise to convey value of their services. And that appearance depends on individual tax preparers working at these large firms. Despite the automation of much of the work, preparation of a tax return at the firms requires face-to-face interaction with a consumer—a tax interview during which tax-preparers collect tax-relevant information about a

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Boxplots of income distributions in ZIP codes that have different kinds of tax services providers}
\end{figure}

The lower side of each box shows the 25th percentile of income, the upper side shows the 75th percentile, and the white line inside shows the median income. Whiskers show minimum and maximum values (extreme outliers were excluded). Based on the sample of 16,622 ZIP codes that had at least one tax preparation establishment in 2015 (60% of the 27,679 ZIP codes in the United States that had individual income tax returns filed in 2015). Boxplots represent, from left to right, 3.8%, 47.5%, 11.4%, and 37.4% of that sample. Data sources: IRS Individual Income Tax ZIP Code Data for 2015 tax season (2014 tax year; available at https://www.irs.gov/uac/si-tax-stats-individual-income-tax-statistics-zip-code-data-soi) and Electronic Return Originators listing for 2016 (obtained from the IRS by the author through a Freedom of Information Act request).

\textsuperscript{6} A CPA or EA-led practice charged $209 on average to prepare an individual tax return in 2011. Jackson Hewitt charged $208, H&R Block charged $190, and Liberty Tax Services charged $170, on average, for a tax return preparation. Complex tax returns incurring fees of several hundred dollars are not uncommon at the three large firms (Sources: National Society of Accountants 2011 Fee Study; H&R Block 2011 Annual Report; Liberty Tax Services 2012 Annual Report; Jackson Hewitt 2010 Annual Report; Author’s field data).
client’s life and finances. The interview is also an opportunity to develop and maintain a social relationship between a preparer and a client—a relationship that is strategically important for maintaining client base and market share. Even the automated tax preparation work thus still revolves around preparer–client individual interactions, which make individual tax preparers’ work identity and fit with expert role critically important for maintaining expert authority—and therefore value—in delivering the services.

Large tax preparation firms strive to project a professional image of their brands and aspire to compete with accountants. Although the firms often mention the large scale of business operation in their advertising and marketing material, which could reduce customer uncertainty about the quality of services by emphasizing the organizations’ reliability and accountability (Zuckerman, 2010), the firms also strategically employ language and imagery of professionalism. They refer to workers as “experts” and “Tax Professionals” with years of experience and many hours of specialized education, and emphasize the high level of the workers’ tax knowledge. Liberty Tax Services website, for example, features the following description of the firm’s services:

[We're] well versed in the complexities of self-employment, home based businesses, and [other tax situations] ... Friendly, knowledgeable tax filing experts and results you can trust: that’s the Liberty Tax guarantee.7

Similarly, H&R Block describes itself in the following way:

H&R Block is one of the world’s largest tax services providers, utilizing more than 100,000 highly trained tax professionals and having prepared more than 550 million tax returns worldwide since 1955.8

Consistent with these descriptions are television advertisements. In a representative example by H&R Block, a prototypical tax preparer proclaims: “I’m a tax professional! That’s all I know.” Then another one says: “We know and we understand tax laws and tax theory.” And the third one claims: “I’ve done twenty five thousand tax returns. You might say I’ve got some experience.”” In this way, the firms employ imagery of scale with rhetoric of professionalism and experience, emphasizing the expertise of individual workers. These claims of expertise create an overall image of a brand that serves a function similar to that of formal professional credentials, signaling high quality of work.

Such rhetoric is a core component of image professionalism, which Kipping (2011) identifies as a deliberate strategy of management consulting firms to increase perceived value of their services. Yet, the traditional explanation of image professionalism strategy does not apply in the context of mass-produced services. The elite professional services firms, like the consulting firms Kipping considers, can substitute formal high-status professional credentials with high-status educational credentials of their workers—for example, an MBA from Yale or MIT—effectively claiming that professionalism follows from the elite training of these workers. Such strategy is inherently limited to firms whose workforce comes from a small, high-status, and relatively expensive segment of the labor market. The economies of scale in mass-production of services come from using workers with low or inexpensive credentials. Absent the substitute signal of individual worker’s quality and status, the image professionalism strategy of tax preparation firms then requires, at the very least, a workforce susceptible to the message, willing to cooperate with the firms’ efforts, and capable of acquiring the means to project expert authority in interactions with clients.

This requirement is challenging. First, lack of formal professional training means that the workers have not acquired a professional identity independent of a specific job. Once they are on the job, the nonprofessional work conditions of mass-production should result in weaker professional identity (Wallace, 1995; Wallace & Kay, 2008; Walsh, 1987)—that is, workers performing routine, automated tasks should not see their jobs as professional. Second, the jobs provide poor economic incentives for playing a professional in such conditions. Performance of professional identity has to be genuine to be effective, but on-the-job internalization of an identity that usually requires rigorous formal professional training demands a substantial effort from a nonprofessional worker (Hochschild, 1983). Such effort would seem to be well above the level that a low-wage mass-production job would warrant. In sum, mass-production of professional services relies on a workforce that has neither the benefit of professional training nor the incentives to exert the effort required for the satisfactory performance of the expert role absent such training. Yet tax preparers at TaxCo seem to be playing a professional role—thereby supporting their employer’s efforts to maintain professionalism of its service offering—while enduring low-wage, low-status job conditions of a mass-production job.

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Job Conditions at TaxCo

My interview and survey data suggest that tax preparers are acutely aware of how far their job conditions are from the ideal of professional work, which would include ownership of relationships with clients, high status, high level of discretion in performing expert tasks, and would exclude nonprofessional or low-status “scut” work (Huising, 2015). Specifically, tax preparers know that they do not own their relationships with clients and that their wages signal the low status of the job. Preparers also report being treated by their employer as low-level service workers who are required to do low-status sales and marketing tasks as part of the job.

For instance, although noncompete agreements are common in contemporary knowledge-intensive work, preparers interpret them as evidence of the gap between the ideal of professional work and the reality of working at TaxCo:

I [have] a lot of returning clients and [if I left TaxCo,] they’d probably go elsewhere. There is a restriction that if you work for TaxCo and you leave, you can’t take [your] clients for two years. That’s in the contract. And TaxCo will threaten lawsuits . . . And if I were to leave—I someday will leave TaxCo—my clients will not understand why they can’t come to me and have their tax return done, because they probably think that we work here, like, you know, in the hair-cutting business? They’re self-employed, and they rent a chair. Well, we’re not treated that way at TaxCo. I wish we were, and we’d be our own little boss that way, but TaxCo chooses not to do it that way.

(Tax preparer at TaxCo, 11 years of experience)

Preparers also know that they are seasonal contractors hired for the duration of a tax season (generally, from January to the end of April), with no guarantees that they will be hired again. They are acutely aware of how inadequate their wages are for a claim of holding a professional job. The hourly wage paid to tax preparers at TaxCo ranges from about the level of state-mandated minimum for the least experienced workers to about three times the minimum wage for the most experienced preparers. The employment provides no benefits like health insurance or retirement plan contributions. Quotes from interviews illustrate a common understanding among tax preparers of the low-wage, low-status nature of the job:

The compensation in my opinion is low, relative to the amount of knowledge you’re supposed to have, or that’s required. The tax law is complicated in the United States and it’s not easy for the average person to figure out, so it requires a lot of [continuing] education . . . In my opinion, the compensation does not appropriately reflect the level of the required professional skills. And it is certainly a topic of conversation by a number of other employees . . . Even [tax preparers who] have been around for a long time still think they are not being paid enough. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 2 years of experience; emphasis added)

Every two weeks there’s a payday . . . They do it, I guess, as a courtesy, because people need something to live on, [although] you know, it’s not a living wage. I mean, frankly, you’re not gonna make much money doing this. You can’t make a living doing it. And it’s seasonal, for heaven’s sake. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 11 years of experience)

Not only do preparers see their wage rates as inadequate, but they also complain about uncompensated (or symbolically compensated) tasks, like reviewing tax returns of prospective clients that were done at competing tax preparation firms:

I am not happy about pay. The job description for a tax preparer keeps changing every year, in terms of how much we have to put in for free. [To do work] for which we don’t get commission. And that’s beginning to grow more and more, it’s becoming a part of the job description. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 4 years of experience)

Finally, tax preparers systematically complain that the firm treats them as low-status clerks and requires them to perform sales and marketing tasks that preparers see as unprofessional “scut” work. The annual directives to undergo training for such tasks compound the damage to the professional image, by highlighting the low-discretion, bureaucratic nature of the job:

The required [annual orientation] meetings are a total waste of time. Every year, [these meetings are] prescribed from headquarters. [If you don’t put in the time and miss the meeting, you can’t work the next year. It’s totally down-dictated, no exceptions made. It’s treating us like kindergarten[ers], it’s demeaning, and it’s the stupidest waste of everybody’s time. And everybody who sits through the meetings says that, not just me. The meeting is not about tax code, it’s not. It’s mostly marketing stuff. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 11 years of experience)

To go to these [meetings] where a part-time manager comes in and tries to tell you how to do things . . . I mean, they have the right to tell you what time to be [at work] and what to wear, I don’t have a problem with that. But they want you to do all these side marketing stuff and promote and sell product . . . That just doesn’t
add any value to the customer. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 6 years of experience)

These interview responses map well onto the pattern in survey responses from a larger, more representative sample of preparers at TaxCo. A subset of respondents provided short, free-form written answers to the following question: “Please think about your position at TaxCo. What is lacking for you? Please list three most important things that contribute to your job dissatisfaction.” The list of grievances and the associated frequencies are presented in Table 1.

Tax preparers most often mentioned low or unfair pay (37 percent of respondents). Other grievances on the list pertaining to the quality of employment arrangements included low work hours (mentioned by 14 percent of respondents), required uncompensated work (12 percent), no recognition, appreciation, or respect from TaxCo (10 percent), seasonal, temporary nature of employment (6 percent), and no opportunity for advancement (2 percent). For example, one of the answers reads:

Doing [promotional tax returns] for no compensation may help TaxCo but has no renumeration (sic!) for me. I consider it a waste of my time despite the fact it helps TaxCo . . . For a man with a masters in Finance, CFP,CLU and five years of teaching Law school, the $9.00 per hour is a joke. I do it because I love people and doing taxes.

Another response reads:

I truly believe that the complex way they pay us is designed to screw over the tax professionals. Every year we work harder AND WE GET PAID LESS FOR WHAT WE DO! (Emphasis in original)

These quotes illustrate a pattern: the employment conditions, wages particularly, are perceived as incommensurate with the effort tax preparers put into the job, nor do they reflect the expected level of expertise. Of all the grievances, five types signify violation of the professional work ideal. First, describing pay as unfair presumes higher value of the work than what is recognized by the firm (mentioned by 16 percent of respondents). Second, no control over fees charged to the client signifies lack of professional discretion (mentioned by 16 percent). Third, the required marketing tasks like giving out flyers on the street are perceived as “scut” work outside of the scope of relevant professional expertise (mentioned by 11 percent). Fourth, lack of recognition, appreciation, and respect from the firm signals that the firm does not see its workers as professionals (mentioned by 10 percent). Finally, six percent mentioned selling products like tax refund loans—which are problematic to the professional work.

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<tr>
<th>Frequencies of Listed Reasons for Job Dissatisfaction at TaxCo</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Responses</td>
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<td>Low or unfair pay</td>
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<td>Low pay</td>
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<td>Unfair pay</td>
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<td>Lack of leadership or support from management</td>
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<td>No control over fees</td>
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<td>Poor technological resources</td>
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<td>Low client volume/low work hours</td>
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<td>Required uncompensated work</td>
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<td>Marketing tasks</td>
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<td>No recognition, appreciation, or respect from the organization</td>
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<td>Corporate HQ office is ignorant of job realities</td>
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<td>Lack of proper administrative and scheduling support</td>
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<td>Lack of adequate training</td>
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<td>Lack of adequate staffing</td>
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<td>Clients uncultured in taxation</td>
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<td>Uncooperative colleagues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Push to sell corporate products to clients</td>
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<td>Seasonal, temporary work</td>
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<td>Untrained colleagues</td>
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<td>Lack of technical support in office</td>
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<td>Unfair scheduling</td>
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<td>Pressure to produce revenue</td>
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<td>Confusing and inconsistent set of corporate products</td>
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<td>No opportunity for advancement</td>
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<td>Unfair allocation of clients in the office</td>
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<td>Dishonest clients</td>
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<td>Unprepared clients</td>
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<td>Brand marketing disconnected from office reality</td>
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<td>No respect from clients</td>
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<td>High client turnover</td>
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| Notes: Out of 146 respondents who saw the question, 131 provided nonempty responses. The length of responses in the sample varied from 10 to 3,063 characters, with the median response length of 127 characters. Each response was coded as identifying one or more reasons for tax preparers’ job dissatisfaction at TaxCo. Data source: author’s survey of TaxCo preparers. Preparers not only because they are unrelated to the job’s core professional expertise, but also because they are perceived as harmful products—jeopardize the moral imperative of professional service. Overall, 47 percent of the respondents to the question mentioned at least one of these grievances.

In sum, tax preparers see their jobs as having employment characteristics that are incompatible with professional work. Yet, the very pattern in which they complain about job conditions suggests that
the conditions are inadequate for their expert roles at the firm. Indeed, tax preparers at TaxCo clearly displayed professional orientation toward their work.

Professionalism Despite the Job Conditions

The tax preparers whom I have interviewed at all three large tax services firms, including TaxCo, projected a professional orientation toward their work, appeared committed to their relationships with clients, and maintained expertise through continuing education. Without having gone through formal professional training and socialization, preparers approach their work role using a general cultural template of professional work as morally motivated work (Sandefur, 2007). They perceive tax preparation work to have three related motivating goals that together constitute a professional ideal of service to: (i) help clients by solving a complex problem of tax compliance that threatens the clients’ well-being, (ii) educate clients about the content of the problem and the proper ways to approach it, and (iii) use the moral authority of an expert for good—that is, to engage in social control and prevent tax fraud. I consider these motivating goals in turn.

First, in interviews, preparers consistently emphasized the ability to help people, to save clients from trouble, as an important aspect of the job:

I like doing taxes. I like helping people. Most people that come into the office don’t know a thing about taxes. They’re nervous. And you get great pride out of being able to help someone with their taxes and also calm them down. People get very nervous when they come in to do their taxes. They don’t know what’s going on. They don’t know how [to prepare a tax return] themselves. They’re just the basic person walking around the street, just doesn’t want to deal with taxes. So we deal with it for them. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 12 years of experience)

I think the biggest thing is just trying to make [clients] feel comfortable. I think what you want to make sure is how do they feel...How did they feel when they came in? Anxiety? How did they feel when they left? If they still got anxiety, you probably didn’t do the right thing. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 5 years of experience)

Helping clients to solve tax problems brings pride and respect:

[The relationships with repeat clients do] make you feel like somebody really respects what you know, and they treat you as an expert, and they look to you for advice. And that’s a very powerful feeling. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 11 years of experience)

Second, preparers see their role as an expert-educator and a mentor who can teach clients about taxes as a social obligation:

I like to explain to the clients the meaning of taxes. People come in and they just want to get it over with. They just want to get that [tax refund] check—that’s their mentality. They don’t think that as an entire society, taxes pay for some of the benefits that we get...that as a society, we have a responsibility. So I try to teach them about what taxes are all about. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 4 years of experience)

I have a lot of regular clients and it’s fun to see them every year and help them through things. I mean, most of Americans don’t even know what their taxes are, what it means. So really it’s kind of an educational process. It’s a give-back to teach people, about what’s going to actually happen to them. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 6 years of experience)

Being able to protect and educate clients and to tell them “what’s going to actually happen to them” is a powerful social position, one that is commensurate with professional status.

The third motivating goal of tax preparation work, as preparers perceive it, is closely related to the power to educate clients. The expert status allows—and obliges—preparers to see themselves as agents of social control who have the moral authority and the moral obligation to prevent clients from filing a potentially fraudulent tax return:

[In this work,] it’s important to me to help people get what they’re entitled to and to refuse to give them what they’re not entitled to. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 5 years of experience)

It’s not our job to be a policeman. It’s not our job to blow the whistle on anybody. We don’t call the IRS with information about a tax preparation, but we have a due diligence requirement that comes with that point where you have to sign your name to a tax return. And if you’re signing your name to information which you have every reason to believe is incorrect and is made up and can’t be supported, then you have an obligation to refuse to do it. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 7 years of experience)

Dealing with the risk of dishonest clients and the risk of inadvertent participation in tax fraud is a persistent theme in tax preparers’ description of their work. Preparers have economic incentives to prepare as many returns as possible, working in the most time-efficient way, but they also have the duty to exercise due diligence while collecting tax information from a client. With limited resources to
verify any tax-relevant information disclosed by clients, preparers rely on their interactions with clients to make moral judgments about clients’ trustworthiness. Even when inaccurate information could be attributed to a client’s laziness, as social control agents, preparers may side with the tax code requirements, rather than with the client:

If you honestly believe that it could be a fraudulent tax return, then you have the right to say you’re not gonna do the taxes, if you just don’t feel comfortable. [When a client claiming rental business deductions] tells me, “I’ve got the same exact expenses as last year,” I tell them, “No, you don’t and I will not do your taxes until you come in with the right figures.” (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 5 years of experience)

In sum, tax preparers approach their work as morally motivated professional practice, with the mission to protect, educate, and control their clients.

This approach to tax work seems to result in the level of commitment that can be expected in the context of high-status professional practice, but it is puzzling in the context of the precarious job conditions preparers’ face. Their commitment manifests in two ways: personal, emotional investment in relationships with clients and investment of time and money in continuing education to better help the clients. First, tax preparers see their interactions with consumers not as transactions, but as professional-to-client relationships. Despite knowing that they lack formal ownership of their client relationships, they build and maintain such relationships in a personal way, as if they are building and growing their own professional practice:

I’ve had clients now [who] come to see me every year . . . . So, you get to know people, a little bit about them and their finances and personal lives and everything. So I feel like I’m taking care of a family member. I want to do my best for them, you know? (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 6 years of experience)

I have this long-term client who comes in every year, and one year she said, “You know, I really like seeing you. I really enjoy doing my taxes with you.” And I said, “Well good, thanks.” And she said, “I don’t think of you as working for TaxCo. I happen to think of you as my tax person whose office just happens to be in a TaxCo office.” And I thought that put it very nicely. I took that as a great compliment. She didn’t think of me as this TaxCo person, but as somebody who just happened to work there under the company’s roof. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 11 years of experience)

A job is a job . . . But it’s really the relationships you build that is exciting. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 2 years of experience)

Second, this commitment to clients supports commitment to train for the job, to be able to do it better:

A lot of the people that we serve regularly are people that have more challenging [tax] situations. So, you’re required to know more to serve them better. And so, I do all this extra studying, and know the tax law or can research it—to have the resources, [in case] I don’t know the answer when [a client is] sitting in front of me. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 2 years of experience)

Tax preparers may thus see access to tax education, provided by their employers for a fee and to be completed on the worker’s own time, as a benefit of their employment, and not as unpaid job-specific training:

TaxCo allows you to pay twenty dollars per year and take any course they are offering, whether it’s instructor-led or just computer-based training. Where can you get an educational opportunity where you only pay twenty dollars per year? . . . . The education is important because then you can advise [the clients] along tax lines. You could advise them to maximize their tax benefits. So, in order to do a better job, of course education is important. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 4 years of experience)

The good thing about [this job] is the amount of continuing education that we are provided with, and the opportunity to expand our knowledge. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 4 years of experience)

As I discuss below, a major goal of the training is to teach preparers how to use the proprietary software tools in specific tax situations and—at least nominally—only a minimal understanding of the tax code is required to successfully use the software. Because of the focus on proprietary software, training thus develops firm-specific skills, yet preparers are willing to pay for it to support their expert role.

Given that preparers view their work role as professional, their commitment to the welfare of clients and their investment of time and money in job-specific training seem natural. But why do preparers see their role as professional, considering their job conditions? Put differently, why do they benefit their employer by maintaining professional identity and expert authority in delivering the services, if they see their compensation and job characteristics as unfair? Answering these questions is crucial to our understanding of what sustains this industry, because the underlying mechanism is the linchpin of the large tax services firms’ strategy.
The industry of mass-produced accounting services exists by solving this question.

**SHAPING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AT TAXCO**

An organization that depends on a particular set of skills and motivations of its workers will select, train, socialize workers, and organize their work in a way that maximizes those skills and motivations. Consistent with this expectation, three aspects of work at TaxCo contribute to the formation of tax preparers’ professional identities: selection of workers, socialization into the job during training, and organization of work in TaxCo offices. Another aspect—tax preparers’ relationships with their clients—is influenced by TaxCo indirectly, yet could be a powerful motivator for preparers to play the expert role, to keep abreast of changes in tax code, and to return to TaxCo season after season despite the dissatisfaction with job conditions.

**Worker Selection**

The first aspect to address is selection: who are the tax preparers at TaxCo? What are their demographic characteristics? Perhaps more important, what other employment opportunities do they have outside of working at TaxCo? My survey data provide some insights into these questions. These insights are somewhat limited: the sample is not entirely representative of the TaxCo workforce, and it provides data only on the characteristics of the preparers who worked at TaxCo when the survey was administered, so we have no data on those who applied, but were not given a job, nor on those who left TaxCo. Nonetheless, the observed characteristics of TaxCo’s workers are informative and, as the data below suggest, these methodological concerns are mitigated by the apparent diversity of the sample and the wide variation of worker characteristics.

Preparers’ individual characteristics are summarized in Table 2. Table 3 correlates these characteristics with professional identification using a regression framework. Preparers’ age, work experience, and professional certification were self-reported by survey respondents; the indicator for having a college degree was coded from reported level of education; and the number of certified professionals (CPAs, tax lawyers, or EAs) in the office was coded from publicly available data.

Employment situation outside the tax season time (i.e., May to December) was coded by analyzing preparers’ free-text responses to the question “What do you do when the tax season is over?” Finally, professional identification was coded as an index (mean value of all answers) based on a standard professional identification scale (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for the index was 0.79).

The first notable feature of the sample is diversity of the TaxCo workforce in age and work experience. Although the preparers’ average age is 55, it ranges from 19 to 82; similarly, the average work experience in tax preparation is 11 years, but it ranges from no experience to 40 years. The second notable feature is that the level of formal education and credentialing supports the notion of nonprofessional, low-cost workforce required to realize the economies of scale in mass-production: about half of the survey respondents do not have a 4-year college degree, 83 percent have no professional license or credentials, and most of those who do, have only minimal credentials like a state tax preparation license. The latter fact is in part driven by preparers’ location, as 9 percent of the overall sample works in one of the four states with a registration requirement for tax preparers.

Tax preparers reported a wide range of employment situations off-season, and outside TaxCo in general. Over a quarter have another full-time job, and 19 percent reported having another part-time job. A nontrivial number of respondents (11 percent) are retired, 5 percent own a business; another 5 percent are actively looking for a job; and 3 percent are unemployed off-season. Survey respondents also often identified their primary trade as different from, or at least, alternative to, tax preparation. The range of occupations highlights the diversity of the workforce. Preparers reported working as substitute

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10 To assess the nonresponse bias, I compared the sample of survey respondents to a random sample of all TaxCo preparers on several observable characteristics. Specifically, I manually coded education, professional certifications, and years of experience for 250 randomly selected TaxCo preparers, using publicly available data. I found no difference in work experience, but statistically significant (though relatively small) differences in education and certification. The survey sample had a smaller proportion of preparers without a college degree ($0.49$ vs. $0.60$ in the random sample, $t$ test $p < 0.05$) and a smaller proportion of preparers without any professional certification ($0.83$ vs. $0.94$ in the random sample, $t$ test $p < 0.001$). These differences mean that the survey sample has slightly more preparers with valuable labor market credentials than the average at the firm.

11 Note that these and other codes for employment off-season are not mutually exclusive. For example, some preparers have reported being retired and holding another part-time job.
teachers, waiters, auto-mechanics, ministers, investment advisers, landscapers, insurance and real estate agents, store cashiers, factory workers, nannies, casino workers, farmers, administrative assistants, government clerks, embroidery artists, and part-time college instructors. Because of the diversity, too few respondents belong to any one trade for it to be considered an analytical category. Notably, TaxCo itself provides some limited employment opportunities off-season, by keeping a few offices open year-round to serve late filers and business clients and by offering tax courses to preparers and to the public. Accordingly, 17 percent of survey respondents reported working at TaxCo year-round offices and 7 percent reported teaching the tax courses.

With such a broad array of backgrounds, which characteristics are associated with stronger professional identity as a tax preparer? Table 3 provides a list of regression coefficients that suggests correlations between the individual characteristics and the strength of professional identification. It appears that the more preparers lack outside signals of status, the higher their professional identification. For instance, the most consistent positive predictor of higher professional identification is not having a college degree—it is associated with professional identification about half of a standard deviation higher than for those with a college degree (significant at $p < 0.001$). Not having a professional license or certification is associated with a similar positive effect on professional identification, although it is estimated with less precision ($p < 0.10$ in models 1 and 2). It is worth noting that while being a stay-at-home parent, by itself, is not associated with significantly stronger professional identity, those who also lack a college degree have a full standard deviation higher professional identification on average (significant at $p < 0.05$). Professional identification is somewhat lower among those who are retired ($p < 0.10$) and those who both work at TaxCo off-season and teach TaxCo courses ($p < 0.01$). Notably, professional identification is higher for those who teach TaxCo courses, but do not work for TaxCo off-season (model 3, $p < 0.001$). As I consider below, this may result from two competing forces shaping the professionalism of tax preparers—high-status role of a tax expert, and a low-status role of a seasonal low-wage worker. That is, the culture of TaxCo training may be providing support for the professional identity, whereas job conditions experienced during off-season work at TaxCo may support the awareness of being a low-status worker.

In sum, tax preparers appear to compensate for the lack of other signals of status and respectable social identity by identifying more with their role as a tax preparation expert. As a result of self-selection, recruitment, and turnover, TaxCo’s workforce is diverse, yet it is united by its apparent need for a higher-status identity. TaxCo offers a culture that is fertile ground for those who are willing to realize such an identity and to assume expert authority through company training.

### Table 2

**Summary Statistics for Individual Preparer Characteristics and Off-Season Employment Responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional identification</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in 2012</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience as a tax preparer, in years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not have a 4-year college degree</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is a stay-at-home parent</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has no professional license or certification</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has state-required certification</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a full-time job</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has another part-time job</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works at TaxCo off-season</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaches tax courses at TaxCo</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is looking for other jobs</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owns a (non-TaxCo) business</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed off-season</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of CPAs, EAs, or JDs in preparer’s office</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Based on coding of free-text answers of 209 respondents at TaxCo. All variables except professional identification, age, experience, and number of CPAs/EAs/JDs are coded as 0/1 for individual respondents and are not mutually exclusive. That is, a respondent may have reported both being retired and teaching tax courses for TaxCo off-season. **Data source:** author’s survey of TaxCo preparers.
Training for Professionalism

Training at TaxCo can be classified into three basic categories: (i) courses that introduce basic topics of individual income tax preparation to would-be preparers, (ii) annual update courses at the beginning of each tax season that cover most important changes in tax code for the year and provide information on non-tax-preparation products and services (much despised by preparers), like refund anticipation checks and audit insurance, and (iii) continuing education courses that cover a wide range of taxation topics, from military households, to foreign income, to small business taxation. The first category—the introductory course on tax preparation—is of special interest to this analysis, since it is the main source of worker recruitment for TaxCo, the firm’s opportunity to select future workers for fit, and the first socialization of the (future) preparers into the culture of professionalism at the firm.

The introductory course is a peculiar form of recruitment (although common for all large tax preparation firms), in that it externalizes many of the firm’s costs of initial applicant screening and training. TaxCo starts advertising its tax preparation...
courses to the public after a tax season is over and describes the courses as an opportunity to learn how to prepare your own taxes, or even how to prepare them for others. In a careful, non-legally-binding language, advertisements suggest that the courses may provide an opportunity to work as a tax preparer at TaxCo. Although there are no publicly available data to support the notion that such courses are central to TaxCo’s recruitment practices, anecdotal evidence from the introductory course I took suggests just that. Out of the 24 people who regularly attended the introductory course, all 24 have applied for work as TaxCo preparers during the last week of training, after taking the final exam for the course, and only one was hired. The course required a payment of about $300 fee and consisted of about 70 hours of instruction, including textbook-based exercises and practice sessions using TaxCo’s software system. It provided initial training in the use of TaxCo’s proprietary expert system (among other topics), as well as an opportunity for TaxCo instructors to closely observe each student’s knowledge, behavior, and performance of tax preparation tasks—screening paid for by the job applicant.

The course I attended was held in a TaxCo office that is otherwise not used by the firm after the tax season is over. The instructors were two longtime preparers at TaxCo, whose occupational backgrounds are representative of the diversity of TaxCo preparers: throughout the year, one instructor works as an emergency medic, and the other owns a small computer repair business. The instruction time was dedicated, in roughly equal amounts, to three subjects: basic concepts of individual income taxation, like exemptions, dependents, deductions and credits; strategies for conducting a tax interview and managing clients; and tax preparation exercises using TaxCo’s proprietary tax software. Although the first subject—taxation concepts and tax code—would seem to be the closest to an ideal of professional training, as it concerns abstract knowledge, the culture of professionalism manifested itself the most during the parts of the training dedicated to managing clients and using the expert software system. Professionalism permeated the two subjects in various ways.

Clients were brought up often during the course, some of them fictitious and some real, but all required careful, thoughtful attention of the preparer. Fictitious clients appeared in textbook exercises, and students in the course dutifully entered such clients’ information—their names, ages, marital status, income, even fictitious social security numbers—into TaxCo’s tax preparation software. Such clients’ problems were relatively “clean,” in that they implied no emotional involvement and could be solved by knowing the correct answer according to the tax code. By contrast, instructors illustrated textbook scenarios and abstract tax concepts with anecdotes from their personal experiences, often giving colorful descriptions of real clients. Three basic moral principles were evident in the discussion of those clients. These principles map well onto the components of the professional role that tax preparers reported in interviews: the need to help clients, educate them, and to enforce the civic duty of paying taxes. To convey the point that the job of a tax preparer is to save (financial) lives, for example, one of the instructors recalled having a client who had just gone through a difficult divorce, had lost her job, and was facing uncertain financial future with two kids and no financial support. The client’s income for the year had been less than $15,000, but the instructor was able to claim Earned Income Credit for the client that resulted in a tax refund larger than half of the client’s income. The instructor recalled that the client was “in tears” after learning about the big refund and came back to the TaxCo office the next day with a gift of chocolates, thanking the preparer for “saving her life.”

The clients also need to be educated about taxation and socialized into compliance, and the instructors made it clear that it is the preparer’s responsibility to do so. Occasionally, clients need to be managed in a way that prevents them from cheating the tax system. As one of the instructors put it, “[Some clients] come in, and they have read every book out there and they try to scam you. And you have to be able to catch that, because you put yourself on the line.” Beyond fulfilling the preparer’s role as an agent of social control, such training of clients to properly perform their role as taxpayers adds efficiency: a return of an “educated” client can be prepared more quickly, since all of the data are ready to be entered into the tax preparation software. The instructors made it clear on several occasions, however, that a preparer should maintain the decorum of expert work and not make it obvious for the client that their tax return took only a few minutes, instead of, say, the allotted hour. The preparer should instead try to spend the allotted time working with the client, because otherwise the client may not see the value in the service.

TaxCo’s tax preparation software—or “the system,” as the instructors referred to it—was the focus of much discussion even outside the frequent hands-on software exercises. The system appeared in instructors’ stories as an entity both powerful and flawed; at times, it was a source of help and support in a preparer’s work, but equally often, it was a source of trouble and required special skills to navigate. On some occasions, the

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12 This perception of the software system has close parallels to the perception of the scientific process by lab technicians (Barley & Bechky, 1994) and of the printing equipment by Xerox technicians (Orr, 1996), suggesting that tax preparers at large firms may be the technicians of accounting, as I discuss below.
instructors insisted that students in the course follow the system script exactly, to ensure a smooth workflow. An excerpt from my field notes illustrates that:

While using the system to do the hands-on exercises, most students in the class get stuck and call on the instructor for help. After helping several students with apparently similar problems, the instructor calls for everyone’s attention and asks everyone to stop using the mouse to navigate through the software interface. She insists that the best approach to using the software (the only correct approach, in fact) is to “Tab” through all the fields in the forms on the screen and to answer the system’s questions in order, and fully. That is—to follow the script exactly.

However, preparers were also expected to develop both the minimal abstract knowledge of the logic behind the software decisions and the contextual expertise required to overcome the limitations of the rigid scripts when the scripts clash with the “messy” reality of an unusual tax situation. The abstract knowledge helps to maintain decorum of expertise when a client questions the results produced by the software. For example, while discussing refundable child credit, the instructor suggested that “whether or not the computer does [the computation] for you, you need to be able to talk to [the client] about the credit.” Contextual knowledge is required for recognizing and dealing with situations where the software fails to produce a correct result. For instance, referring to her recent clients, the instructor discussed a gay couple who were legally married according to state law, but not according to federal law. The clients therefore had to file their state returns as a couple, but their federal returns as two “single” filers. Since TaxCo software prepares federal tax returns first, the system transferred the filing status of these clients onto their state tax returns incorrectly. The instructor then described a series of manual corrections and interventions required to “trick the system” into producing the correct tax return. Thus, the very functions of the system designed to encapsulate accounting expertise and to make the work of tax preparer simpler by automating tasks may require tax preparers to develop insights into both the peculiarities of the tax code and the logic of the software that needs to be corrected. In other words, the system generates obstacles that require the preparer to assume expert authority to overcome and proceed with the work.

In sum, my observations of the initial training of tax preparers suggest that the training provides them with a powerful cultural toolkit, useful for performing the role of a professional and for maintaining expert authority. The courses also may be the first opportunity for the preparers to learn about job conditions at the firm and to start internalizing the separation between the poor conditions and the idealized image of tax preparation work. During the course I attended, there was no extensive discussion of job conditions. When the instructors announced that TaxCo offices in the district are hiring and mentioned the starting hourly wage for the positions (that was slightly higher than the state minimum wage), course participants were visibly disappointed. All of them applied for the job nevertheless, justifying the application in conversations by a wage growth potential. The few times work conditions at TaxCo came up in the discussion during the course, the instructors were shifting back and forth between saying “we, at TaxCo” and referring to TaxCo as “them” and thus signaling some cognitive distance between the preparers and the firm. As I show next, tax-training courses may be the only opportunity for tax preparers to participate in a semblance of an occupational community, as the organization of daily work in a TaxCo office provides few avenues for forming or maintaining such a professional peer group.

Organization of Work in the Office

Two aspects of professionalism at TaxCo appear early in the introductory training and are prominent in the everyday operation of TaxCo offices: the language of professionalism—for example, referring to other preparers in the office as “tax pros”—and the corporate identity—colors, logo, and the TaxCo brand name. Saying “tax pro” to refer to a TaxCo preparer became the norm by the second session of the introductory training I attended and was a universal reference to TaxCo colleagues in my interviews and survey data. The term helps to avoid the ambiguities of referring to tax-accounting work done by someone who is not an accountant and reinforces the idea of individual professionalism.

Other components of professional image in the organization of office work are the standard rules regulating professional appearance of the offices—interior design, branding, and dress code—and internal titles that obscure preparers’ lack of credentials. Specifically, while the low-status aspects of tax preparers’ employment like their low wages and their seasonal contractor status are not visible to the consumers because of the strong American cultural norm of not sharing information about compensation, the preparers’ lack of professional license is masked with internal titles that workers receive at the firm (e.g., “Senior Tax Consultant”). Similarly, lack of formal or professional education is obscured with the information on the number of hours a worker has accumulated in tax-related continuing education offered by the firm. Finally, the proprietary software system plays an important supportive role by guiding the
work of preparers. Notwithstanding an occasional (if systematic) mishap of the kind described earlier, the software performs all the calculations required to prepare a tax return, and perhaps more important, offers a script for projecting expert authority. Preparers reported relying on the software throughout the tax interview. As one preparer described it,

“Certain answers [by the client] to certain [tax] questions automatically have the software give us a pop-up window with a suggestion and something that might be pursued as a logical extension of what we just asked.” (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 7 years of experience)

Not only does the software suggest questions to ask during the tax interview, it also provides explanation for tax concepts and procedures that may answer some of the clients’ questions. As a result, the preparer’s expertise hinges on their ability to use the expert software system effectively, rather than on deep knowledge and understanding of the tax code.

Preparers view the software system with some ambivalence, acknowledging that much of their expertise—the abstract knowledge—is encapsulated in the software, but also pointing out that the software cannot replace the tacit, relational expertise required to prepare taxes well. As a preparer who has been in the industry for some time remarked:

Technical knowledge [of the tax code] is absolutely necessary, but the truth is that good software and knowing how to use it, that’s a lot of the work that previously would be done [by a tax preparer]. [But] there is an aspect that the software doesn’t do, although it does it somewhat, which is reminding you to ask the right questions. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 15 years of experience)

The relational aspect of expertise becomes important not only when a client’s tax situation does not fit the software script, but also when a preparer’s authority is challenged. In a telling example, the same preparer described a client who insisted on a tax deduction that the preparer considered inappropriate. The preparer remarked that the software may be used as a tool to convince the client in such cases:

It is easier to go to the section on the Schedule A, [manually override the software, by typing] in the 75 bucks or 100 bucks or whatever [the client insists on], and let [the client] see that I’m doing it, [and that it] wouldn’t change anything. [Our] software is set up so that it shows what the standard deduction is and it shows what has already been entered into the Schedule A, to deduct against it. And so [I can show] these two numbers and it’s pretty plain that if you can’t make the number in the middle go higher than the one on the top line, there’s not much point to [insisting on the deduction]. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 15 years of experience)

Preparers also used the software to manage difficult clients on the level of the firm. The software allows a preparer to place a note about a difficult interaction with a client, who, for example, insists on deductions that the preparer considers fraudulent. Because all prepared tax returns are kept in a shared database and are connected to clients using social security numbers, a client who walks out of one TaxCo office after a preparer refused to submit a return and walks into another TaxCo office to try his luck again can be identified and stopped, since any preparers working with that client will see the note attached to the client’s file and thus will avoid potential trouble.

Sharing notes via the software system is one of the very few avenues for TaxCo preparers to communicate with their colleagues. In general, the organization of daily operations at TaxCo offices is not conducive to emergence of a strong occupational community of tax preparers. Interactions with other preparers in the office are rare and lasting relationships are even more so, for several reasons. First, the nature of tax preparation work requires minimization of exposure of a client’s information, so the bulk of the work is done one-on-one with the client, separated from other clients and preparers by a cubicle wall and by the norm of speaking softly, to not be overheard. Second, preparers’ schedules are such that the selection of coworkers who are present in an office at the same often changes, which reduces the chance for repeat encounters. Similarly, the seasonal nature of the job and the turnover from year to year, combined with occasional reassignments of preparers to different offices within a geographic area, further lower chances of repeat encounters with other preparers in the office. As a result, most preparers interact repeatedly only with their office manager, who handles work schedules and coordinates administrative tasks of the back office. Office managers do not have to be (and often are not) trained as tax preparers, so relationships with them, even if they go beyond transactional, do not contribute to the formation of a strong occupational community.

In sum, work organization in the office helps to create a context where nonprofessional frontline workers may appear to consumers as experts. But, it is the workers who are at the forefront of the consumers’ experience. The success of image professionalism hinges on the workers’ performance of the professional role. Although some participation of the workers in the firms’ efforts to project an image of professional work
may be enforced bureaucratically—for example, by enforcing a dress code—and through training, a genuine performance of professional identity is likely to demand a level of worker cooperation that cannot be achieved by fiat. However, the performance can be—and apparently is—helped by a receptive audience of clients who nudge preparers into the role and offer a way to separate the expert role from the shortcomings of a TaxCo job.

**Relationships with Clients**

In addition to all the efforts by TaxCo to engender professionalism in its nonprofessional workforce, the role of clients in preparers’ work stood out in interviews, as a factor sustaining their professionalism and a recipe for coping with the apparent inadequacy of mass-production job conditions. Tax preparers’ description of their engagement with the job followed a pattern: preparers often reported that they decided to work at TaxCo for the extra income the job provides, then realized that the income is not adequate for the kind of work they do, yet stayed on the job because of the relationships with clients and the ability to be experts. They stayed because the job—and the clients—allowed them to assume the role of professional:

We make very, very little. I am the very top-level employee and my earnings at TaxCo for the last year were approximately $8,500. So it’s an insignificant amount of income, even though I am compensated more than the average person working here . . . And we have to put in a lot of time that we’re not paid for. Twenty percent of the returns I did, I wasn’t compensated a penny for. We were expected to do [promotional tax returns] for clients at no charge—very, very time consuming.

But I enjoy socialization with the clients. And certainly, at any cocktail party or after-hours, my work is very interesting to anybody else. I got tons of stories to tell and I can also provide information on a general level. [This work] is worthwhile to me in many ways. You know, helping people, really. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 5 years of experience)

You know, a lot of people do this for the part time extra income, and that’s not on my radar, so I just do it because I find it rewarding. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 6 years of experience)

I did taxes for TaxCo for eight year. And I loved doing it . . . I had several examples where I did something that I was truly proud of as a Christian, helping people make their lives better through my knowledge in working with TaxCo. So I did find the work rewarding . . . It didn’t pay all that much. TaxCo didn’t pay all that well, in my opinion. But I worked with really good and really competent people. I got really good training. I got better every year and I got more loyal clients every year. So it was, in a lot of ways, rewarding for me to do taxes. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 8 years of experience)

The imagery of a powerful, respected role of an expert is in contrast with the frustration about the job conditions the very same preparers’ experience. This tension between the low-status employment conditions and the high-status, attractive content of the work is sustained over time—an ever-present, yet apparently not debilitating cognitive dissonance. As one preparer stated to me in an e-mail:

I have limited commitment to my employer, but considerably more to the nature of the work I actually do . . . The singular feature that keeps me coming back each year is the continuity of interaction with clients, of which I have many returning ones each year. Much lower in my motivation is any positive feeling about working for TaxCo as a corporate employer. Tax preparers are paid little more than hourly hamburger-flippers at McDonald’s. So there is obviously some other motivation than financial compensation that keeps us coming back tax season after tax season. (Tax preparer at TaxCo, 11 years of experience)

This tension—between the work with clients and the job at TaxCo—may be the core of pseudo-professionalism, supported by the clients’ perception and treatment of the preparer as experts. The poor employment conditions do not inhibit professional identity of the preparers, even though the workers are well aware of them. On the contrary, the inadequacy of job conditions turns the preparers’ attention to the more meaningful content of their work, thereby anchoring their worker identity in the expert role.

**DISCUSSION**

The case of tax preparation work suggests a strategy for mass-production of professional services. Firms use low-wage, nonprofessional workforce and expertise-encapsulating technology to deliver professional services. Frontline workers do not hold professional licenses and have not gone through formal professional training and socialization, yet they maintain professional identities by relying on the cultural elements of professionalism. These elements are supplied, at least in part, by the employer.
firms that use the language of professionalism in their internal and external communications and maintain professional decorum in offices. Selection and training of workers for fit with the role of an expert, combined with low-cost turnover, help to assemble a workforce that is receptive to professional ideology. When the workers encounter the poor job conditions of mass-production that seem inadequate for the claim of professional practice, they rely on the meaningful content of the work to maintain their professional role. The expert role is reinforced by clients who see and treat the nonprofessional workers as professionals and thus provide intrinsic rewards for adherence to the role.

The case presented here begs two related questions: how generalizable is the strategy of cost-efficient professionalism beyond the tax preparation industry? And how sustainable is the strategy, given workers' discontent with poor job conditions and the professional aspirations they may internalize by assuming the expert role? The first question requires considering the distinction between structural and cultural components of professional jurisdiction. As I discuss next, automated professional work relies on technician occupations to substitute for a lack of structural components and to satisfy the cultural requirements for expertise. The question of long-term sustainability of the strategy requires, in turn, the consideration of occupational identities of technicians. Together, these questions illuminate the stability of subordination settlements between occupational groups.

Structural and Cultural Aspects of Pseudo-Professionalism

The possibility that TaxCo competes with accountants by using nonprofessional workers who play professionals requires a reexamination of the relationship between structural and cultural components of professionalism—license and expert authority. Weak jurisdictional control of the accounting profession over tax preparation allows firms like TaxCo to operate within the bounds of accountants’ jurisdiction and to effectively practice the profession without a license. Moreover, the firms are not deterred by the accountants’ cultural authority in questions of taxation, but instead appropriate the profession’s ideology to support professional aspirations of its nonprofessional workforce while substituting formal expertise with software. The case of tax preparers thus contributes to the discussion of deprofessionalization (Haug, 1988; Rosen, 1999; Wallace & Kay, 2008) by showing not only how far from the romanticized ideal of a professional the realities of professional work may get when licensure is weak, but also that this idealized image may be used by organizations as a cultural prop to capitalize on professional work, without involving professionals in the work process. Although a stronger license would not guarantee immunity from deprofessionalization for accountants, as suggested by cases in other professional domains [see, e.g., (Galperin, 2016) on retailers’ invasion of medical jurisdiction], it would likely shift the balance of power between the firms and the professionals in the labor market. The firms would have more difficulty capturing economic rents arising from the profession’s cultural legitimacy.

More important, the case requires a perspective on professions that goes well beyond not just the boundaries of a license, but other structural aspects of professions like credentialing, associations, and professional schools. The centrality of cultural elements of professionalism in the case suggests that professional identity needs to be studied in workers who have few formal credentials or no credentials at all. Studies of fledgling occupations (Nelsen & Barley, 1997; Turco, 2012) take steps in that direction, but the present study extends this work by focusing on unlicensed practitioners operating in a jurisdiction of a well-established profession and seeing themselves as members of that profession. Since professional identity can shape perception of work and self in workers outside of formal professional ranks, it is more consequential for the labor process than we thought before. The utility of professional ideals is not confined to setting a moral standard for members of the profession or to serving as an ideological foil that justifies the profession’s monopoly over work (Sandefur, 2007). Indeed, the very fact that the ideal of a morally motivated professional worker has wide cultural legitimacy implies that professional ideology has normative influence on identities of people outside of the profession.

Lessons from the case of tax preparers therefore apply to other occupations and industries with low level of credentialing, discretion, and pay, to the extent that workers in those jobs are susceptible to professional ideology. Research on technicians (Barley, 1996; Barley, Bechky, & Nelsen, 2016) suggests that many contemporary jobs fit these requirements. Barley (1996) observes that technicians are a distinct category of occupations that straddles the traditionally assumed divide between knowledge work and manual work. As expert knowledge becomes encoded in software and automated production (Abbott, 1991), the range of technical occupations and the number of workers in those occupations are growing. A unifying characteristic of technicians is that they “manage the empirical interface,” typically playing the roles of buffers or brokers (Barley, 1996: 421–423). As buffers, they insulate a superordinate occupation from the “messy” empirical reality (e.g., as lab technicians do
for scientists, or sonographers for physicians), whereas as brokers, they mediate between groups of users and specialists (e.g., computer technicians who broker between software users and system administrators), and do not have a clear subordinate relationship with any occupational group. Another common characteristic of technicians is that abstract knowledge—how things ought to work—comprises a minor part of the technician’s expert role, whereas relational, contextual knowledge—how things actually work—is central to the technician’s expert authority. Tax preparers fit such definition of technicians in that they rely less on the abstract knowledge of the tax code and more on the contextual knowledge of how to assess trustworthiness of clients’ information, or how to apply or circumvent a rigid software script.

Like other technicians, preparers can be buffers and brokers. They are occupational descendants of clerical workers supervised by accountants—a role that is still formally recognized by the IRS in its classification of the occupation\(^{13}\) and that is still common in smaller CPA and EA practices. Such supervised preparers are parallel in status and responsibility to similarly subordinate technical occupations in other professions, for example, paralegals in a lawyer’s office, or nurses in a physician’s office. But at TaxCo and other mass-producers of professional services, the superordinate professionals are absent from the organization of work in offices and their expertise is encapsulated in software. So, instead of buffering accountants from the empirical interface of clients, who provide often unclear, inconsistent, and even untrustworthy accounting facts, tax preparers buffer the rigid scripts of the accounting software from the messiness of clients’ information. Since TaxCo management, and not the accounting profession, controls software design and use, constraints imposed by the software on the discretion of tax preparers signify their subordination to managerial, rather than professional authority.

Such occupational subordination to management may be problematic to the extent tax preparers and other pseudo-professionals internalize the professional logic, which is inherently at odds with the logic of bureaucracy (Freidson, 2001). Barley, Bechky, and Nelsen (2016) find professional logic in the language of technicians across many distinct fields of work, science, medical testing and imaging, emergency response, and information technology. Technicians talk about professionalism to define their work, locate themselves in the occupational hierarchies, and make sense of their jobs and careers. But Barley and colleagues also observe that technicians do not use the talk of professionalism to engage in political work of advancing their occupation’s professional standing. This observation is puzzling not only because theories of professional work commonly assume that occupational groups are expansive, but also because technicians, just like tax preparers at TaxCo, appear to be sensitive to actions of the management or superordinate professionals that signal lack of respect for their expertise.

### Durability of Subordination Settlements and Rationality of Workers’ Consent

Why do tax preparers and technicians in professional fields in general refrain from advancing their status inside organizations and the status of their occupation in the larger division of expert labor? Such lack of ambition seems to violate a central assumption in theories of professionalization that occupational groups seek to grow in power and status (Wilensky, 1964). It also contradicts the common interpretation of growth in licensure and credentialing as evidence that occupational groups engage in political work to achieve closure (Kleiner & Krueger, 2010; Weeden, 2002). In discussing the micro-foundations of interprofessional competition for jurisdiction, Abbott (1988: 65–68) notes that professional ambitions are most likely to create tensions in subordination settlements in shared worksites, since assimilation of expert work tasks by subordinate occupations offers a pathway for jurisdictional expansion. And yet, just like technicians in other occupations, tax preparers complain about lack of respect for their expertise from management, but show no inclination to improve their collective standing. Barley et al. (2016) observe that technicians rarely participate in professional associations, only hold licenses or certifications if superordinate professions mandate them (like in medicine), and often oppose raising education requirements for their occupations.

What could explain such acceptance of the subordinate role in the face of poor job conditions, some of which, like the lack of respect from the employer, violate even the modest expectation for being respected as an expert locally in an organization? One contributing factor may be the foregone low capacity for collective action. Tax preparers have few opportunities to develop local occupational communities because of erratic schedules and high turnover, lack of licensure and continuing education requirements that could provide venues for socializing, and the sensitive nature of client tax information that discourages team work. Another possibility, more generally applicable to technicians, is that the centrality of contextual, worksite-specific knowledge in technicians’ expert identities leads to weak occupational

consciousness—recognition that workers across different organizations belong to the same occupational group. Such recognition may be a cognitive precondition for collective action.

The third possible answer concerns the general relationship between worker identity and motivation. Theoretical critiques of the agency theory (Baron, 1988; Kreps, 1997) have long emphasized noneconomic sources of motivation. The critiques build on empirical studies of work in industrial sociology and suggest that workers may attribute their motivation to intrinsic or extrinsic incentives by observing their own action in the context of specific job conditions. Organizations therefore may induce meaning in routine, low-wage work, by influencing workers’ understanding of their work. The professional ideology directed at the firms’ workers imbues work with meaning and provides a moral motivation to excel. A job becomes a vocation, an induced calling that is importantly different from the traditional definition of calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009): the meaningfulness of the work arises after the worker had taken the job and had found the economic incentives lacking or inadequate. Professional identity thus turns into a compensating differential (Stern, 2004), but only after the worker had already chosen the job.

Industrial sociology suggests a mechanism underpinning this effect of identity on motivation by using a metaphor of a production game. In his classic study of manufacturing work, Burawoy (1979) asks what normative commitments make it rational for workers to consent to exploitation—that is, to perform well on the job despite unfair job conditions. Burawoy argues that workers perceive the exploitative production process as a game, in which they are motivated to participate and excel. These “games [arise] from worker initiatives, from the search for means of enduring subordination to the labor process, but they are regulated, coercively where necessary, by management” (Burawoy, 1979: 85–86). The researcher’s task is to study what shapes the rules of these games. As Freeland (2001) suggests, “to extend the analysis begun by Burawoy in Manufacturing Consent, we must specify the ways in which nonrational commitments and workers’ identities are shaped and given substance by the material relations in production” (Freeland, 2001: 448). The case of tax preparation work offers one answer: professional ideology. The case suggests that consent principally results from the process that ties worker identity to the ideal image of an accounting professional. The game is to fulfill the obligations that come with this role, and poor job conditions just make the game more challenging, without changing the goal.

The context of service work brings an important wrinkle to this model by highlighting the importance of customers who may support, or even demand, that workers play professional roles. Such coercive customer power has been suggested before. For example, Van Maanen (1991) notes that customers impose role adherence on Disneyland employees:

“[The pressure to adhere comes] not from supervisors or peers but from thousands of paying guests who parade daily through the park. The public, for the most part, wants Disneyland employees to play only the roles for which they are hired and costumed. If, for instance, Judy of the Jets is feeling tired, grouchy, or bored, few customers want to know about it. Disneyland employees are expected to be sunny and helpful; and the job, with its limited opportunities for sustained interaction, is designed to support such a stance . . . . Ride operators learn swiftly from the constant hints, glances, glares, and tactful (and tactless) cues sent by their audience what their role in the park is to be, and as long as they keep to it, there will be no objections from those passing by.” (p. 70)

Pressure to excel need not be overt or negative; it may come from incentives of deference and appreciation that customers confer on individual workers in routine interactions, as long as the worker performs the expected role.

The case of tax preparers therefore allows us to generalize beyond manufacturing—the context where the arguments for consent-producing games were originally formulated—to service work, which is inherently people-facing. Most technicians face some type of clients. The possibility that clients’ expectations shape the incentives for technicians to assume the professional role is a promising direction for further research. Clues that such expectations are important can be found in the existing research on technicians and pseudo-professionals: patients pressure radiologists and sonographers to provide a diagnosis, which is formally a doctor’s prerogative (Barley et al., 2016: 140–141); new parents support the expert-identity rather than the employee-identity in maternity coaches, who then provide advice that is motivated by professional norms rather than profit (Turco, 2012); and intraorganizational clients reward experts with deference and compliance if the experts are not averse to doing their share of “scut” work (Huising, 2015). Research on professional ideology as a firm strategy therefore would benefit from understanding the importance of clients’ susceptibility to such ideology as a scope condition for cost-efficient mass-production of professional services.
CONCLUSION

By finding that beliefs shaped by professional ideologies make nonprofessional workers tolerate poor jobs conditions and thereby allow an industry of mass-produced professional services to exist, this paper opens an important direction of research on expert work. It suggests studying professions as cultural institutions that provide morals on which workers build their identities (Anteby, 2008), while paying close attention to the dynamics of work (Burton, Cohen, & Lounsbury, 2016). To understand how these institutions shape our lives, it is important not to look under the proverbial streetlight by restricting our inquiry to professional workers or professional organizations. Instead, looking at the effects at the margins of the professional work—at nonmembers who identify with the cultural aspects of professions—is instrumental for understanding the work and professions’ role in society.

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REFERENCES


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