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SPECIAL ISSUE CALL FOR PAPERS

(Re)Conceptualizing Middle Managers' Roles in Modern Organizations

Submission Deadline: 15 September 2019

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BACKGROUND TO SPECIAL ISSUE
Middle managers, the decision-makers linking the strategic apex and operating core (Mintzberg, 1989: 98), are at the heart of organizational processes (Floyd & Lane, 2000; Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk, & Roe, 2011; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). For instance, middle managers translate organizational strategy into operational goals and inform top managers about the progress of implementation (Floyd & Lane, 2000; Rouleau, 2005). Middle managers also contribute to strategic renewal by experimenting with novel practices and championing initiatives to top managers (Floyd & Lane, 2000; Glaser, Stam, & Takeuchi, 2016; Heyden et al., 2017; Heyden, Sidhu, & Volberda, 2015; Tarakci et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, middle managers have a strong legacy in several fields of research, including strategy, organization theory, organizational behavior, and organizational design.

These organizational advantages, however, come at a cost for middle managers. An increasingly loud chorus calls for eradicating middle management ranks altogether (Economist, 2011; Gratton, 2011; Jacobs, 2015; Mims, 2015) and middle management ranks are often the initial targets of reorganizations. For example, Lloyds Banking Group eliminated 15,000 middle management positions in an effort to save £1.5 billion a year (Gratton, 2011). ING started its

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recent transition to greater agile management by firing the middle managers first (Kerr, Gabrieli, & Moloney, 2018). In a similar vein, prominent organizations such as Valve, Zappos, Morning Star, and Gore-Tex advocate (middle) managerless organizations (Puranam & Håkonsson, 2015). Other organizations have oscillated in their stance towards middle managers. Google, for instance, slashed middle management positions only to reinstate them a few months later (Garvin, 2013). Similarly, Github—another widely celebrated flat organization—has recently introduced middle management ranks to buttress their exponential growth (Burton et al., 2017). Accordingly, whether flatter or steeper hierarchies help or hurt team and organizational performance remains an area of heated debate (Anderson & Brown, 2010; Tarakci, Greer, & Groenen, 2016).

Similar reconsiderations of middle managers are likely to continue to be advocated with the recent surge of management concepts such as Holacracy (Robertson, 2015), Podularity (Wal & Gray, 2014), Teal organizations (Laloux, 2014), delayering (Ostroff, 1999), and Agile Management (Darrell, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016). These popular approaches view middle managers as a cost, favoring flatter organizational hierarchies where individual team members hold authority and decision-making responsibilities, and those left in the middle, if any, will be expected to play narrower facilitative roles in information-sharing and decision-making. Similarly, Gratton (2011) emphasizes that technology can substitute several roles that have traditionally been the domain of middle managers, such as communicating strategy, monitoring performance, and providing feedback. Therefore, middle managers are under increased pressure to justify their existence and value for the modern organization.

To sum up their current position, middle managers face the challenge of increasing expectations of their involvement in organizational processes while their added value is simultaneously being called into question. The burden on middle managers even translates into emotional and physiological tolls on their well-being. By virtue of their being enmeshed between sometimes conflicting expectations of top- and lower-levels, middle managers experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, hypertension, heart disease, and disruptions in cognitive performance and focus (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017; Mantere, 2008). Left unaddressed, this toll on middle managers can also become counterproductive for companies, undermining crucial organizational processes such as adaptation and strategy implementation (Vuori & Huy, 2016).

AIMS AND SCOPE OF SPECIAL ISSUE
Attempts to create value in the modern organization through technological innovations and organizational reforms call into question the role of middle managers in the future. To reconsider this role, this timely special issue aims to provide a central platform for state-of-the-art thinking and evidence. The ensuing discussion will serve to critically evaluate the relevance of middle managers in modern organizations, seriously reconsider how and where middle managers fit in contemporary strategy and organizational processes, explore how middle managers themselves are affected by and make sense of key changes, and develop core theories and introduce auxiliary theories to middle management research. The aim behind the initiation of this discussion is to document a commensurate evidence base to inform scholarship and practice and to shape a research agenda outlining the pressing challenges facing middle managers and the middle management role in contemporary organizations.

We propose to lay the groundwork for understanding the contributions of middle managers in the context of the most defining changes in current and future organizational landscapes, placing middle managers front and center in a coherent research program. The topics below provide an indicative, but non-exhaustive, list of questions that can be tackled through

conceptual, quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method approaches, drawing on a variety of theoretical lenses and paradigms.

1. How will new technologies, practices, and business models shape the role of middle managers across industries, nations, and cultures?

2. How do changes in middle management relate to the functions and/or dysfunctions of hierarchy in contemporary organizations?

3. How and under what conditions will middle managers promote or resist discourses of change in contemporary organizations? How do emotions, sociomateriality and embodiment play a role in redefining the roles and identity of middle managers?

4. How will organizational capabilities and routines become disrupted, and how can new ones be created, as organizations shake-up their middle manager cadres, introduce new technologies, and redefine role expectations?

5. How are leader-member exchange (LMX) processes affected by how different organizational actors give meaning to the changing roles of middle managers? How do conflicts, power struggles, and identity clashes emerge and become resolved as teams and hierarchies are reshaped?

6. How do redefined roles of middle managers hone or challenge well-established perspectives and theories? And, how do new perspectives—such as practice theory, actor-network theory, and translation theory—help us to understand the redefined role of middle managers?

7. What methodological developments have the potential to advance a middle management research agenda?

SUBMISSION PROCESS AND GUIDELINES

- Manuscripts will be reviewed according to the JMS double-blind review process.

- Submissions should be prepared using the JMS Manuscript Preparation Guidelines (see: http://www.socadms.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/JMS-Manuscript-PreparationGuidelines.pdf).

- The deadline for submission is **15 September 2019.**

- Manuscripts should be submitted by e-mail to business.jms@durham.ac.uk

- The guest editors will be available during the following symposium at Academy of Management Conference 2018 in Chicago: "Reconsidering Middle Managers' Strategic Role in Modern Organizations" on Tuesday, 14 August 2018 3:00PM - 4:30PM at Swissôtel Chicago in Alpine II.

- For informal inquiries related to the special issue, proposed topics and potential fit, and/or the conferences below, please contact the guest editors at jmsmiddlemanagement@gmail.com

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