'Come play with us, you'll be rich and happy': friendship as an alternative organizing principle in a post-bureaucratic consulting firm

Lucie Noury, Audencia, lnoury@audencia.com

Thibaut Bardon, Audencia

Sophia Galière, Université Côte d'Azur

Abstract :

The literature mostly looks at friendship at work as a source of positive organizational and individual outcomes. Yet, an emerging critical literature on neo-normative control has emphasized how friendship can be mobilized to encourage self-exploitation at work. Although important in unraveling the ambivalent and complex role of friendship in organizations, this literature however looks at organizations where friendship is one element of the organizational discourse, instead of its core organizing principle. Through our case study of FriendCo, a French network of independent consultants, in which friendship is seen as foundational, we make two contributions to this nascent literature. First, we unravel five mechanisms of control at the heart of the managerial discourse of friendship, namely: diverting attention from control through fun and emotional connection, legitimating power structures through formal equality, optimizing human capital by leveraging self-development, fostering a sense of obligation through generosity and creating a sense of accountability through voluntariness. Second, we show the limits of the discourse of friendship as an alternative principle of organizing, which is very powerful in enabling self-exploitation and yet bears in itself the conditions of its own resistance.

Mots-clés : Friendship, post-bureaucratic organizations, neo-normative control, independent workers, consulting

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INTRODUCTION

For decades, the 'ideal type' of bureaucracy – characterized by 'centralization, hierarchy, authority, discipline, rules, career, division of labour and tenure' (Clegg & Hardy, 2006, p. 426) – served as a dominant model. In bureaucracies, employees are subjected to a culture of obedience exhorting them to follow orders and rules (Courpasson and Reed, 2004). In such a context, personal life in general and workplace friendship in particular should remain at the door of the organization since they are viewed as potential sources of inefficiency and inequity. Social relationships are indeed expected to be strictly instrumental, process-driven and determined by organizational participants' official roles and duties whereas personal and affective relationships are viewed as dysfunctional and undesirable (Mao et al., 2009).

Following critiques of bureaucratic forms of organizing as sources of inequalities and exploitation, since the 1980's, a growing number of organizations have adopted post-bureaucratic modes of functioning that are characterized by empowerment, dialogue and consensus rather than by rules, hierarchy and obedience (Hecksher, 1994). Post-bureaucracies do not rely on the domination of legitimate rational authority but on a 'softer' form of control expressed positively in terms of the inculcation of norms of quality, flexibility, autonomy or learning (Courpasson, 2000). Such settings are thus characterized by normative control that promotes a sense of unity and togetherness along common norms and values. In this respect, post-bureaucracies encourage organizational participants to develop emotional ties with the company and to regard each other as family members (rather than friends). Critics of the cultural engineering which take place in post-bureaucracies even argue that these settings function as very exclusive clans or cults, i.e. as close systems where an unalterable sense of identification based on sameness is expected (Kunda, 2009). All aspects of people's lives that would not fit with the corporate family are excluded, including personal relationships that do not originate from and that do not benefit the company.

Organizations have however progressively moved away from the metaphor of the family – criticized for encouraging self-exploitation through normative control (Kunda, 2009) – towards that of friendship (Costas, 2012; Wiksell & Henriksson, 2022), in what some refer to as 'biocracy' (Fleming, 2012). As organizations become flatter, teamwork and interpersonal relationship play an even more salient role in the accomplishment of work tasks (Grant & Parker, 2009), and boundaries between work and life become blurrier (Grey & Sturdy, 2007; Bardon et al., 2021). This evolution has led a number of authors to emphasize the importance of relationships at work (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003) and to take an interest in the conditions of workplace friendships and their outcomes, both for the individual and for the organization (Lincoln & Miller, 1979). Although a whole strand of literature has predominantly focused on the positive outcomes of friendship for both individuals and organizations, a more critical set of studies has highlighted the way the friendship discourse is used to encourage self-exploitation (Costas, 2012). This literature has however mostly explored the 'fun' and 'equality' dimensions of friendship, and looked at settings where friendship is an element of organizational discourse, but not its core component.

In this paper, we explore this phenomenon further in the particular context of consulting. Consulting firms have often been used as an ideal setting to study control (Alvesson, 2012), from the study of technocratic forms of control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004) to that of normative (Robertson & Swan, 2003; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Poulter & Land, 2008) and neo-normative control (Costas, 2012). Indeed, although autonomy and collegiality have long been key characteristics of professional organizing and professional work, the emergence of large managerial professional firms after the second industrial revolution has increased the role of bureaucratic controls in professional settings, with a higher level of centralization, hierarchy, authority and discipline (Brock, 2006). In line with changes in other industries, and to overcome the limits of bureaucratic forms of control, a large number of professional organizations have progressively (and concomitantly) adopted post-bureaucratic modes of functioning, inviting individuals to be themselves and develop friendly bonds (Smets et al., 2017; Costas, 2012).

Through our study of FriendCo, a network of independent consultants which places friendship at its core, we make two contributions to the literatures on friendship, neo-normative control and professionals. First, we unravel five mechanisms of control at the heart of the managerial discourse of friendship, namely: diverting attention from control through fun and emotional connection, legitimating power structures through formal equality, optimizing human capital by leveraging self-development, fostering a sense of obligation through generosity and creating

3

a sense of accountability through voluntariness. Second, we show the limits of the discourse of friendship as an alternative principle of organizing, which is very powerful in enabling self-exploitation and yet bears in itself the conditions of its own resistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. FRIENDSHIP AS A SOURCE OF PERFORMANCE

Although there is no consensus on a definition of friendship at work, workplace friendships are typically characterized by certain features such as the fact that they are voluntary, affective and based on trust. Berman et al. (2002, p.218), for instance, define friendship at work as "non-exclusive voluntary workplace relations that involve mutual trust, commitment, reciprocal liking and share interests and value". Pillemer and Rothbard (2018, p.3) argue that workplace friendship consists in "a nonromantic, voluntary, and informal relationship between current coworkers that is characterized by communal norms and socioemotional goals".

In the classic literature on bureaucracy, friendships are deemed problematic: relationships between workers are impersonal, private and professional lives remain separate, interactions are structured by formal roles and decisions are based on formal rules and procedures, consistently across the organization (Weber, 1978). It is precisely this impersonality which is supposed to ensure rationality and efficiency. As argued by Langer (2022: 5) "According to Weber, the more impersonal the bureaucracy, the more efficient it will be in the resolution of problems".

In line with classic critiques of the bureaucracy and technocratic forms of control as a source of dehumanization, inequality and exploitation (Bauman, 1989; Crozier, 1963; Merton, 1963), a recent and growing strand of literature discusses how friendship - in opposition to its bureaucratic representation as a source of irrationality and inequality - can be beneficial to individuals and organizations altogether. Friendships have been described as making work more enjoyable, more fun and thus as promoting well-being (Styhre, 2000). Friends provide instrumental as well as emotional support to each other, which is said to buffer work-related stress, help make sense of strategic decisions or even facilitate promotions, which can in turn increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995; Morrison & Nolan, 2007; Colbert et al., 2016). Others, still, have even described friendships at work as a source of personal growth. Colbert et al. (2016), for example, argue that close workplace relationships can enable individuals to 'flourish' at work and in life more broadly. In their study, participants explained that workplace friends helped them develop

professionally and personally by challenging them and providing them with advice or coaching them. This implicitly echoes Aristotelian understandings of 'friendship-virtue', which – beyond friendship as a source of pleasure or as a means to reach instrumental goals – puts the emphasis on the way friendship can help individuals progress towards wisdom: friends help each other develop personally and morally (Nicomachean Ethics, Book VIII, translated by Ameriks & Clarke, 2000). Such relationships are necessarily selfless, driven by a generous act of giving, rather than by self-interest. Finally, friendship has been described as aligned with ideals of empowerment and democratic organizing because of the principle of equality it relies on (Farias, 2016; Wiksell & Henriksson, 2002).

Even though emphasizing the positive outcomes related to workplace friendship, this literature does acknowledge that friendships in organizations do not come without tensions. Friendships can, for instance, disturb the work process, generate conflicts and thus increase stress (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). Friends can, for instance, struggle to give each other orders or negative feedback, compete with each other for promotions or let work be affected by personal conflicts (Morrison & Nolan, 2007; Ren et al., 2015). Friendships can, in addition, come in the way of formal channels of communication, inhibit knowledge-sharing (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018), reduce capacity for change and adaptation (Breslin, 2022), or challenge the authority of managers (Berman et al., 2002). Socioemotional goals can often conflict with instrumental ones, which has also been described as the 'dilemma of care allocation' in the ethics of care literature (Antoni, Reinecke & Fotaki, 2021). Friendships can also generate conflicts of interest and decrease organizational justice (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018).

2. FRIENDSHIP AS A SOURCE OF SELF-EXPLOITATION

Following invitations to explore further the role of friendship in contemporary organizations (Grey & Sturdy, 2007), critical scholars have gone beyond the identification of a 'dark side' of workplace friendships and have argued that friendship is at the heart of neo-normative forms of control which encourage self-exploitation (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Costas, 2012; Wiksell and Henriksson, 2022). They see in evolutions from a 'culture of family' towards a 'culture of friendship' in post-bureaucratic organizations, or in 'biocracies' (Fleming, 2012), the need to solve tensions generated by the use of the family imaginary (Costas, 2012). The metaphor of the family, and the forms of normative control that go along with it (Etzioni, 1964; Ouchi, 1980; Kunda, 2009), indeed entail a form of paternalistic management, an emphasis on loyalty and

5

unity which at times conflict with contemporary understandings of selfhood (Fleming, 2005; O'Leary, 2003, Costas, 2012). The metaphor of friendship instead celebrates individual differences, authenticity, playfulness and equality. Often focusing on the 'fun' dimension of friendship, this literature emphasizes how friendship is used to blur the lines further between work and personal life, divert organizational participants from pressurizing work conditions, and in turn foster commitment (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Costas, 2012). In the management consultancy studied by Costas (2012), for example, consultants are invited to socialize outside of work (by going regularly to the pub together for instance, or by playing football with their team members on Sunday) or to engage in team building activities that deliberately suppress all hierarchy. The ability of individuals to 'engage with each other in friendship-like ways' (p.385) is even taken into account when recruiting consultants. This level of socialization and friendliness, Costas explains, also fosters a sense of egalitarianism. Wiksell and Henriksson (2022) develop this idea further by studying a cooperative where friendship is opposed to hierarchical organizing and salaried work, which is associated to profit-driven, impersonal work relationships. Participants see the equality that is at the heart of friendship as very much in line with more democratic forms of organizing. However, according to Wiksell and Henriksson, by promoting friendship in the workplace, individuals ended up reinforcing control in the organization: they engage in self-sacrifice in the name of friendship and solidarity and dissenting voices tend to be perceived as threats to the community, sometimes at the expense of individual economic well-being.

	Dominant metaphor of work r.	Representation of work relationships	Dominant perspective	Critical perspective
Bureaucratic organization	Colleagues	Formal, role-based, impersonal, impartial	Source of fairness and rationality	Technocratic control as a source of dehumanization, inequality and exploitation
Post-bureaucratic organization	Family	Affective, communal, exclusive, based on 'parental' authority	Source of security, emotional support, and belongingness	Normative control as a source of self-exploitation through the negation of individual differences, the blurring of boundaries

				between work and life and the regulation of individuals' identity
Biocracy	Friends	Affective, communal, voluntary, non-exclusive, based on trust and generosity	Source of authenticity, fun, emotional connection and support, personal growth, and equality	Neo-normative control as a renewed source of self-exploitation through the celebration of individual differences, fun and egalitarianism, and an increased blurring of the boundaries between work and life

Table 1: Overview of the dominant metaphors of relationships at work

What is common to all this literature on friendship is that it assumes that workplace friendships develop in the workplace and do not precede the work relationship. Additionally, this literature – including critical studies – has predominantly looked at friendship culture within the bound of traditional organizations, from call centers (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009) to classic consulting firms (Costas, 2012). However, as emphasized by Wiksell and Henriksson (2022), friendship can also form the basis of alternatives to capitalism. Although it is not the most common occurrence of friendship in organizations, there are organizations where friendship acts "as an organizing principle and as an organizing element: that is, that we can envisage organizations founded purely and simply on friendship" (Grey & Sturdy, 2007: 158). Yet, we know little to date about what happens when friendship is claimed to be used as an alternative principle of organizing and whether it can constitute an alternative to bureaucracy. Additionally, the critical literature on friendship has mostly focused on its 'fun' and 'equality' dimensions, when the positivist literature has emphasized many other dimensions of friendship at work (from emotional connection and support, to personal growth, generosity and voluntariness for instance). As a result, we aim to explore further the role played by friendship – in all its dimensions – in post-bureaucratic organizations, where friendship forms a core organizing principle.

METHODS

1. RESEARCH SETTING: FRIENDCO

We conducted a longitudinal case study of a post-bureaucratic French management consultancy (here labeled FriendCo). Consulting, and professions more broadly speaking, is a relevant setting to study neo-normative control since it constitutes an extreme case to explore the most sophisticated and up-to-date organizational control practices (see Alvesson, 2012 for a review), from the study of technocratic forms of control in neo-bureaucratic professional organizations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004) to that of normative and neo-normative control in post-bureaucratic ones (Robertson & Swan, 2003; Poulter & Land, 2008; Kunda, 2009; Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Sturdy & Fleming, 2011; Costas, 2012).

FriendCo appears to be an ideal setting to explore our research question since friendship is not only a feature of its organizational discourse, but also its core organizing principle (Grey & Sturdy, 2007). FriendCo was founded by two very close friends – Leonard and David – who not only wanted to start a business with friends but also to create an organization in which the day-to-day functioning would be based on friendship.

Concretely, FriendCo is a network of independent management consultants who voluntarily decide to work together on projects and bill clients in the name of FriendCo. They have very different levels of experience and areas of expertise, although many of them practice executive coaching, self-development and/or managerial training. FriendCo is organized around a core group of 35 partners, who own shares of FriendCo and are legally allowed to bill clients in the name of the firm, and a large group of over 100 'free talents', who are affiliates who attend events and can work on projects with partners more or less regularly but do not own shares, do not attend governance meetings and cannot bill clients in the name of FriendCo.

Friendship as an alternative form of organizing at FriendCo has 3 main features: the absence of contractual bond between members, shared governance and coordination through mutual adjustment. As such, FriendCo's founders and partners draw on three distinct discursive repertoires all related to post-bureaucratic organizing to describe their organization: that of the platform of independent workers, of 'democratic' organizations and of 'liberated' or 'holacratic' organizations. All members are independent consultants (referred to as 'free talents') instead of salaried employees, except Leonard's assistant, to provide some stability for her. This later came to be referred to as the 'social purpose' of FriendCo: proving to the world that such a form of organization based on 'beautiful relationships' (internal documentation),

8

outside of the formal bond and obligations associated with salaried work, could thrive. FriendCo has also adopted a democratic form of organizing: each partner can vote in general assemblies, and each have the same weight in decision making, independently of how many shares they own. Leonard and David explain that in such an organization 'relationships are the organization', and that their mantra is: 'no rules, no boss, no money' (Leonard, founder), meaning that mutual adjustment supersedes standardization and that relationships come before profit. The founders insist on the fact that there is little structure and as little formal processes as possible, and that all members of FriendCo are welcome to take initiatives and implement their own ideas. Additionally, deeply rooted in FriendCo is the idea that friendship and profit are compatible: through friendship, the organization will naturally grow in a sustainable way, profit will come from these bonds and all members will benefit from it.

In 2017, however, the organization underwent a major crisis which was not only caused by a fallout between the two founders but also by a broader conflict between members on whether FriendCo is (or should be) an organization based on friendship or a much more business-oriented company. This crisis resulted in the resignation of one of its founders, Leonard, which led to the paralysis of FriendCo: all events and meetings stopped for almost three years, until two of the partners decided to revive the organization. This crisis was experienced by many of our participants as a particularly emotional time, not only professionally, but also personally, as they told us many friendships were broken. During this period, we completely lost contact with FriendCo and its members, until some of them got in touch with us again in 2020. Such an evolution made FriendCo even more relevant to explore our research question.

2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data collection was conducted in two phases: a first wave of 8 semi-structured interviews in 2017, which was stopped by the organizational crisis FriendCo was confronted to, and a second wave of 28 semi-structured interviews in 2021. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide. During the first wave, the first author interviewed the participants following a semi-structured guide. Participants were asked about their careers prior to becoming an independent consultant, about reasons for joining FriendCo, about their experience as part of the organization and its functioning as well as their aspirations for the future. During the second wave, the first and third authors interviewed the participants and also used a semi-structured interview guide. Participants who had not been interviewed in the previous wave were asked

about their career prior to joining FriendCo, reasons for becoming free talents or partners (and for not becoming partners for those who remained free talents), about their experience working for FriendCo and their interpretation of the 2017 governance crisis and how they experienced it. They were also asked about their desire to see FriendCo revived or not and under which conditions. During the first phase, one founder, 6 partners and the community manager were interviewed. During the second phase, we contacted all the partners who still owned shares of FriendCo as well as those who had sold them after 2017, as well as over 20 free talents, and were able to interview the two founders, 12 partners, 5 former partners, one former employee and 8 free talents (see appendix 1 for more details). Interviews lasted 65 minutes on average and were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. We also had several informal meetings with some of the partners and collected secondary data such as self-published literature, Leonard's resignation letter, and internal documentation such as the partnership charter or some slide decks used in general assemblies.

We adopted an interpretive approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) to uncover the different meanings attached to friendship and how they were appropriated and potentially resisted. We conducted a thematic analysis in an abductive fashion: going back and forth between our data and the literature on friendship, we identified six different discursive repertoires associated with friendship in our participants' accounts: 'fun', 'emotional connection and support', 'equality', 'personal growth', 'generosity' and 'voluntariness', all present in the positivist literature on friendship. This also allowed us to identify in our participants accounts how these were 'put to work' at FriendCo. For instance, we saw how generosity was always associated to feelings of being redeemable or even of guilt, in turn generating a sense of obligation to give back. Similarly, because commitment to FriendCo and its members is voluntary, our participants reported feeling a sense of accountability when things did not turn out the way they expected: if they were not happy with the current state of affairs, it was their responsibility to change it instead of voicing out criticisms. In turn, we could identify 5 mechanisms of control associated with the discourse of friendship: 'diverting attention from control through fun and emotional connection', 'invisibilizing power structures through formal equality', 'Optimizing human capital by leveraging self-development', 'fostering a sense of obligation through generosity' and 'Creating a sense of accountability through voluntariness' (for a detailed table of codes, see appendix 2).

Similarly, we also proceeded to code accounts of ambivalence and resistance to understand the discursive resources used by individuals to distance themselves from FriendCo and the mechanisms of control at play. We identified three main discursive repertoires: presenting growth as coming in the way of friendship, questioning the reality of friendship in the first place and questioning the implementation of friendship based organizing (rather than its core principle itself). This allows us to discuss how individuals do resist (sometimes forcefully) but without however directly questioning the way friendship can be used as a form of control. Instead, participants argue that either the project encountered major challenges, was ill-conceived from the start because instrumental goals always superseded friendship, or was not properly implemented.

FINDINGS

1. MECHANISMS OF CONTROL AT THE HEART OF FRIENDCO

Diverting attention from control through fun and emotional connection

As expected from the literature, pleasure and fun are described as central to FriendCo and are even presented as superseding economic performance.

> *In the beginning, FriendCo, it was above all the story of a bunch of friends. It had a real emotional component. We didn't even think about feasibility or profitability. It was just a bunch of buds saying 'we're gonna work together, it will be fun. (Robert, Partner)*

Socialization is central at FriendCo, through its many trainings, practice sharing events, thematic conferences and other management meetings. All these events are initially designed to incorporate elements of fun. All the summer universities organized by FriendCo include open bar parties, and thematic diners or drinks are frequently organized. David and Leonard even organized a rock concert for the members, supposedly with their own personal funds. FriendCo is described as a place people can join to avoid feeling isolated as independents, as a '*community of alter egos who are happy to be, and joyful to act*' (excerpt, self-published book). Many consultants explain having been enthused immediately by the atmosphere of FriendCo's events, especially the summer universities:

> *There was this atmosphere... I mean, I went to business school, and there was the same kind of collective hazing thing going on: we work all day, we party all*

11

night, we're a community, we're away from everything, in a remote location. It was a bit like a cult. But in a good way, it gave us a sense of community. (Mary, Free Talent)

It was magical. Really. (...) It was very festive. A bit like La fête de l'Huma [a music festival organized by the left wing journal l'Humanité]. We all met together in these kinds of very festive events. (Martin, Partner)

Consultants say this was all the more welcome that, as independent consultants, they could at times feel isolated and lack the kinds of socialization moments one can find in traditional organizations, in turn contributing to the blurring of professional and personal relations.

Beyond fun, FriendCo also bore the promise of deep emotional connections. Training sessions, in particular, were presented as fostering deep, meaningful and authentic relationships. David and Leonard implemented a training referred to as "the 21 days program", which was initially offered for free to all partners and took place over three weeks, weekends included, in a remote location (and was later on split into three separate modules of one week each). All participants stayed at the same facility, and alternated between training sessions during the day, and festive moments at night. In '*highly emotional sessions*' (Robert, Partner), participants were invited to open themselves and be vulnerable in front of each other as we do with close friends. This training was designed to '*deconstruct and reconstruct one's mental relation to others*' (Matthew), with the objective to radically change one's approach to consulting and client relationships:

In the deconstruction period, it can be very tough, very traumatic I mean. So, in the end, when you reconstruct yourself and succeed in doing so, it creates very strong affective bonds. All the people who have gone through the 21 days training together have very strong affective bonds. (Matthew, Partner)

The festive moments organized at FriendCo are seen as essential to create such intimacy and the willingness from participants to share their personal story and feelings is what, according to them, contributes to FriendCo's members becoming so close.

I did the first module of training, it was amazing. The group was great, I have very specific memories with each of them. We stayed in touch, the bonds we created were

important. I think everyone who went through this training remembers it. You spend 24h a day with the group, what you learn is very striking, and it gets quite personal, you go deep, you confide in others. (…) That's FriendCo's spirit. (Damian, Free Talent)

Such trainings are supposed to create the conditions for successful joint work. One participant (Lisa), for instance explained that she would never work on projects with someone who has not gone through this training program, as it creates '*shared DNA*'.

General assemblies were also conceived as spaces fostering strong intimate connections and requiring friendship to function: because people were friends, they could speak their minds and be authentic, they could argue with each other in sometimes very intense ways without damaging their relationships, because they trusted each other:

> *You are going to see this as collective hysteria, but we've had some meetings, when we were only about ten partners, all very close, where we all ended up crying. We were so committed to each other, so honest with each other, that we managed to tell each other very personal, very strong things. (Matthew, Partner)*

As a result, FriendCo is defined as a place where people can also count on each other: where '*If people feel down, they just need to call, there will always be someone by their side*' (Leonard, founder). This was directly echoed by many of our interviewees who explained that they experienced this solidarity firsthand, such as Nathan, who underwent eye surgery and could no longer work, and experienced this solidarity as '*precious*'.

We know from prior literature that fun, at the heart of neo-normative forms of control, contributes to diverting individuals' attention from control. Here, we found that the perception of emotional connection and support reinforces this dynamic. Indeed, by emphasizing fun and emotional connection, individuals downplay – and at times even explicitly deny – the economic or transactional nature of interactions at FriendCo. As mentioned previously, one of the mantras of FriendCo is '*no rules, no boss, no money*', meaning that relationships between members are neither transactional nor based on formal authority, as in a bureaucracy, but instead altruistic and based on mutual adjustment. Because members trust each other and care for each other, they say they naturally come to value each others' input in a fair way and that money never triggers any conflict:

With James, it's easy. We've known each other for a long time. We know our comfort zones, our struggles. He knows what I'm worth and what I do, and vice versa. So when he gives me work, he knows there won't be any problem, that I will do it like it's my own client, that I won't hide anything from him, that he will keep the account, etc. (…) And the other day, on one of my projects I had promised him a daily fee and, due to some misunderstandings, I billed the client less than I initially thought I would. So I told him and I said 'Listen, I'll take less, but I want you to get what I promised, to keep my word.' And he said 'no no' and we split in half. You see? Easy. (Andrew, Partner)

Many consultants go even further and naturalize the relationship between friendship and performance, and present it as non-problematic and absent of tensions. Robert (Partner), for instance explained that FriendCo enabled consultants to '*offer global responses to clients, with a higher level of credibility than if people were developing a proposal on their own*'. By doing so, consultants deny the economic ambition of FriendCo and its partners and contribute to invisibilize the instrumental nature of relationships between members who work together on client projects.

Legitimating power structures through formal equality

At FriendCo, beyond having fun or connection on an emotional level, being friends means treating each other equally and welcoming individual differences, whether in approaches, in sales or in experience. At the heart of FriendCo is the idea that, no matter how financially successful consultants are, they all have something to bring to the table and the potential to enrich discussions, or to contribute to the economic development of the organization. Informants often highlighted how much they valued the inclusiveness of the organization and explained that diversity in recruitment was one of the strengths of FriendCo, what made it different from other consulting firms:

At FriendCo, people who don't break the mould don't make it. People who make the most of FriendCo they are… they break the mould. Everyone has a touch of madness somehow. (Damian, Free Talent)

FriendCo gathered a lot of people around it. Not necessarily only experienced consultants. There were coaches, a pharmacist, an architect even! People who were interested in organizations. (…) I think this brings a lot. We could have a cabinet-maker,

14

I don't know! I think it would bring a lot. We had teachers, philosophers… We gathered many different people around us. (Thomas, Partner)

In line with this inclusive approach, the founders decided that each partner should be granted the same voice. FriendCo thus adopted what is referred to as the '*one person, one vote*' principle of shared governance: "*that means when free talents and partners discuss something, everyone has one vote. And every voice is heard",* explains Leonard (Founder).

Members of FriendCo refer to this as the culture of '*palaver*' (excerpt, self-published book), which consists in having friendly discussions, even in case of disagreement, until the best argument wins, and a common decision can be reached. Considering all consultants as equals, and resolving issues through discussions rather than hierarchy, is presented by informants as an ideal form of organizing:

> *The idea that no matter how much you weigh, you have one vote, that was interesting. (…) The absence of sales targets for example, the fact that there was no boss, no hierarchy… all of that… it was attractive, I was attracted to that. (Thomas, Partner)*

> *Trust came from the culture of palaver: the quality of interactions relied on rhetoric: talking, debating, disagreeing. If there was a problem, it was managed through palaver, not through contracts and lawyers. (Lea, Former Partner)*

Friendship is presented as both the condition and the outcome of this principle of equality in organizing, with explicit references to post-bureaucratic forms of organizations, where formal hierarchy is kept to a minimum:

> *This idea of shared governance, this idea of 'one person one vote', it was a little holacratic, a bit new age, in line with flat organizing, yeh we're all friends, all brothers, we love each other, we party, work like crazy and we get along. (Frank, Partner)*

The belief is the value of shared governance which is enabled by friendship is so strong that it contributes to invisibilize power structures. Against a vision in which diverse partners would enrich each others' perspectives through lively but respectful debates, some members describe an organization where, like in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, '*some were more equal than others*' (Peter).

Leonard was worth ten, David was worth ten … so 'one person one vote' in reality, it's not what was happening. That's always been the problem. (Anna, Free Talent)

Leonard was saying one person one vote, but actually, what he expected from the partners is that they would carry on his project. He acted like a boss 'that's my company, I'm the founding father, and I want it this way'. (Matthew, historic partner)

They said that although the founders created a project based on equality between friends, they behaved in a paternalistic way, attempting to dominate them, influence their decisions and stay in control of the organization.

Some informants also emphasized that informal hierarchies were created based on economic success or gender which gave some consultants more power and influence over others:

There were differences… probably on sales and on what people did or brought to FriendCo. And often there are people, I won't say their name, but people who say 'I billed all my projects through FriendCo and that's like 220 000 last year so shut your mouth.' Basically 'What did you bring?' Ok, I'm exaggerating a little, but that was basically it. At least it's what everyone heard because it sounded very clear. (Alex, Former Partner)

Even if it was 'one person one vote', the issue was also to be listened to when you were talking! As a woman, sometimes I have had to ask to be listened to a bit more. There weren't many of us among the partners. (Patricia, Former Partner)

And yet, because of the shared-governance principle, this remains very much hidden and informal up until the governance crisis and isn't openly discussed in any of the governance meetings, where '*it seemed that decisions had already been made*' and where, as described by Alex above, inequalities in revenues, in particular, led a number of partners to feel illegitimate to take part in discussions and censor themselves, or to be excluded from them. Yet, even though they pointed out inequalities, many consultants nonetheless explained understanding the heavier weight of the founders in decision-making or agreeing that their arguments were less legitimate than others'.

It's true that they (David and Leonard) had a strong influence, more than any other member. Whether they wanted it or not. I think that Leonard… he refused it, he refused

to see that in reality a group needs a leader and that, no matter what, he was this leader. (Felix, Partner)

Optimizing human capital by leveraging self-development

At FriendCo, friendship is presented as a way to make people flourish professionally and personally both through fun and by combining expertise: *Come play with us, you'll be rich and very happy,* Leonard told us. Friendships supposedly '*create the conditions for the development of talent*' (excerpt self-published book) since members seek to enrich each other in the service of a meaningful project. They present themselves as role models whose objective is to help others reveal their true potential and grow.

A large number of our interviewees supported these statements and explained that, through the relationships they built at FriendCo, they managed to grow both professionally and personally. They explained how training, mentoring or even simple advice provided by others '*changed their life*' (Peter), were '*a revelation*' (James), '*lit up something*' in them (Anna), which allowed them to progress and flourish.

> *It was a real turning point in my career when I joined FriendCo. It really helped me discover a new occupation which I am now very passionate about. I became a coach thanks to FriendCo. It was really important. I met fantastic people. They passed on a lot. David, Leonard, Robert, Matthew, they passed on something that allowed me to do the job I do today. They lit up something. (Alex, Partner)*

This is particularly the case of the '21 days' training, which consultants referred to as '*transformational*' or as '*a slap in the face*' because it forever changed the way they see and practice their consulting job. They explain that these trainings challenged considerably the way they look at clients, understand their needs and even their own self-definitions as professionals and as individuals.

> *I met people like David, or Richard, whom I really like, and whom I think are leaders in terms of FriendCo methodology, the training tools… but it's more than training tools. It's almost a philosophy of life. Maybe that's strong, but I think it's very deep. If you really use the tools, it changes your life. It's very powerful.* (Peter, Partner)

David and Leonard claim to have deliberately opened the doors of FriendCo to people who would not have been able to join any traditional consultancy because of their lack of experience or because of their niche positioning, out of desire to help them grow.

> *'We allowed some people to enter a partnership when they would never have made it partner anywhere, never! (…) We thought that if we gave people some keys, everyone could do everything. I had this fantasy that if you gave people information, competence, they could do it all' (David, founder).*

The promise of learning is closely associated with the admiration that many members express towards the founders and other historic partners of FriendCo. Alex (Partner), for example, described David as '*Someone (he) admire(s) a lot.*', who is '*gifted, strong, inspires (him)*' and explained that when David asked him to '*come play with them, come kick the ball with them*' he saw in FriendCo an opportunity for growth.

However, there were also some implicit instrumental expectations behind the desire to grow as a person and to help others grow: that of maximizing one's human capital in the hope of developing business. In this logic, development is actually subordinated to business growth. Behind the founders' and some partners' desire to help others grow lies the objective to see one's own business flourish. Indeed, when partners bill clients in the name of FriendCo, they give about 10% of the contract to the organization. When free talents want to bill through FriendCo, they need a partner to sign the contract and they retribute them with 20% of the fee. When partners work together, they also share fees according to each member's contribution. Helping others grow can therefore be quite lucrative, even if it is primarily presented as altruistic.

Some consultants even explained that – despite the praise of diversity – the methodological tools presented in the trainings in fact serve as recipes aimed at maximizing profit:

> *There was one partner who kept saying 'hey newbies, do what I do you'll see you'll make some cash'. This was repeated over and over. For me this is poison, FriendCo wasn't supposed to be a clone factory. The opposite of that.* (Alex, Partner)

Additionally, by attracting new partners, existing ones could make a profit by selling some of their shares of FriendCo. In this system, prospects of self-development are a powerful argument to attract new recruits. Some free talents and partners reported that some partners – particularly

the founders – had been rather insistent to convince them to join, as explained by Jack (former Partner):

> *They (David and Leonard) talk a lot about relationships. They have tools to build relationships. (…) But David wanted to sell me shares by all means, shares for like 30 000 euros. He was ready to loan me the money and everything. (…) I remember telling him at some point 'Listen, I have already said no four times, the fifth time it will be a definite no to everything because you are becoming very insistent. David he's a born salesman. His slogan is 'there's no money issue between us, if you want to join FriendCo, I'll loan you the money, I don't want money to be a barrier.*

In many ways, at FriendCo, relationships are put to work. Partners and free talents themselves, when joining FriendCo, do not only expect to grow as individuals but also to receive future economic value for their own business. When Leonard or David tell potential recruits '*come play with us'*, they also tell them that it will enable them to be '*rich'*, meaning that it will help them make their business flourish, and this is indeed what many members aspired to and held FriendCo accountable to.

Fostering a sense of obligation through generosity

At FriendCo, being friend not only means helping others flourish personally and professionally, but also doing so selflessly. Gratuity, altruism or selflessness are presented as a key values at FriendCo: '*FriendCo doesn't create obligations: freedom, trust, friendship, relations, caring, this is what works*' (excerpt, self-published book).

Members can access best practices, trainings, expertise, networks, or advice, comfort and solidarity, all for free, and this is emphasized greatly by the founders and many of the historic partners:

> *'Everything was shared, knowledge… We gave everything. And we gave it for free. Everything was free' (David, founder).*

> *We organized summer universities, thematic evenings to make people come. We worked on projects, shared our knowledge. All of that was done for free. We told people 'we give, we give, we give, just come!'. (Matthew, partner)*

Partners often emphasize everything they have given to the organization over the years. They explain that altruism and selflessness are at the heart of friendship and that, when giving, people should not expect anything in return. This is illustrated by Leonard, who explains having given a lot to other members of FriendCo out of pure love, even after having felt betrayed by some of them:

> *I loved everyone, even those that hurt me in return (…) whatever people do, I'll keep reinvesting in them, it's a matter of faith, of love. (Leonard, Founder)*

This vision is shared by many of the interviewees who describe the members of FriendCo – and particularly its founders – as people who are '*not even aware of how much (they) gave*' (Peter) and who '*embody the magic of the project*' (Martin).

> *I didn't understand how it could work. I mean I was told 'Don't worry, you'll be able to eat'. 'But what do I need to do in return?' They didn't ask for anything in return. (Jonathan, Partner)*

Some consultants explained feeling '*forever grateful*' towards FriendCo, because the people it allowed them to meet enriched them and stayed with them, both personally and professionally, for the knowledge and experience they shared. Such perceived generosity, in spite of official claims of gratuitousness, nonetheless creates a sense of obligation, as individuals feel compelled to give back. Generosity leads members of the organization to feel redeemable: many interviewees explained that although '*nothing was asked in exchange*' for what they had been given (Jonathan), they felled compelled to give back. They told us that they felt they had received so much from FriendCo, its founders or some of its influential partners, that they felt redeemable, so much that they were indebted to it:

> *I felt redeemable. I thought 'I profit from this organization, but I'm not financing it, although it's here to support me.' And people were very benevolent, saying 'it's ok if you don't sell', but in practice, what I heard was…I am not enabling the organization to succeed. (Thomas, Partner)*

> *I took the first module of the 21 day program again after it was billed. I did it again because I had done it about 5 years earlier and I needed a reminder. And I thought it was interesting. And I had done it for free the first time. So I felt a little bit obligated to*

come back and pay for it. To give back you know. I didn't have a lot of money, but I wanted to pay back. (Mary, Free Talent)

This feeling of redeemability is used by the founders to encourage counter-giving. While claiming gratuity, they also encourage people to donate to the organization whether in cash, (e.g. initial financial investment, payment of the annual fee, payment of a percentage of the turnover they generate), in time, or in content (e.g. knowledge, network, training facilitation, proofreading of proposals, etc.), which is referred to as '*pro bono*'. Such a behaviour is praised by the partners, who emphasize how redeemable some people feel and applaud people who give back to FriendCo:

> *Several times, consultants came to me saying 'I would like FriendCo to bill me, because what it gave me saved me. It has value, and I want to pay for it. We gave so much, sometimes without even realizing, that people felt they would never be able to give back. (Leonard, founder)*

As a result, consultants invest a lot of time or money in the development of FriendCo:

> *I give a lot. But honestly, it's not that much. (…) This pro bono time, I offer it to FriendCo (…) it's like a good balance. This has been lost in most organizations, we have very unilateral relationships, saying things like 'I give you this, it's normal because you pay me' but… there's no exchange. I receive from FriendCo, I'm a partner so I paid something for it, ok. But I get so many benefits from it, intangible ones also, like relationships, friendship, support. (Nathan, Partner)*

> *I do a lot of volunteering for FriendCo. I used to do a lot of network management, building the community of consultants. I was very committed to that. I worked… yes, I was very active in volunteering. (Ben, Partner)*

They can even experience guilt when they don't. Patricia, a former Partner, for instance explained that the pro bono system relied on '*fragility and guilt*', on making people feel like if they wanted '*to be part of the group, (they) had to give their time*', which she says could only work for those who were already quite successful and could afford to give some time for free. This even leads some participants to internalize their own responsibility when not receiving what they expected from FriendCo. Ben (Partner), for instance, explained that no one gave him

21

work, in spite of what he felt had been promised to him before becoming partner, but that it was '*his fault*' for '*not selling projects in the first place*'.

Creating a sense of accountability through voluntariness

At FriendCo, relationships are chosen and so is the commitment to the organization. This is particularly visible through another one of the mantras of the organization: individuals are 'free and responsible'. This means that they are not imposed any constraint: they willingly enter the organization, can choose who they wish to work with, the approach they want to use, how much they wish to bill clients or even how much they want to work. This also means that they are free to decide how and if they want to contribute to the development of FriendCo itself (through the facilitation of seminars, participation in committees, the development of the brand, or the organization of events for instance). There are no formal obligations other than to pay the annual partnership fees (around 2000 euros), no sales target, no staffing objective. This is something that is deemed very attractive in FriendCo:

> *I do not expect others to feed me. I am not going to start expecting people to find business for me, and I am not naïve. I am free and responsible. I make my own business and if I work with others at FriendCo, it's out of desire, not out of obligation.* (Jonathan, Partner)

We already saw above that, in spite of the absence of formal objectives, the logic of giving and counter-giving leads individuals to dedicate a lot of time, money and effort to the development of FriendCo. This dynamic is actually reinforced by the idea that individuals are free to make voluntary commitments, but that they are nonetheless responsible. Freedom comes with responsibility, which means that even though commitment to FriendCo is voluntary, one cannot expect to be provided for by the organization, which is often described as what salaried employees would do. Lisa, for instance, explains:

> *If there are expectations, you are going to be disappointed. Your expectations are of no interest to me. But tell me about your aspirations, your intentions, why you are here to do. But you are the one responsible, not me. (Lisa, Partner).*

As we can see from this quote, behind the idea of responsibility lies the idea that the organization cannot be accountable for individuals' actual learning, development, business growth or for the quality of interactions because it is directly dependent on what individuals are

willing to do to make it happen themselves. As explained by Richard, for example, this absolves the founders who can use this idea of freedom and responsibility to deactivate any kind of criticism about unmet expectations:

> *We are a learning and responsibilizing organization. Everytime something negative comes to my mind I remember this. I think 'After all, you are responsible and you are an active member of FriendCo. If you are not happy with the way things are, it's your job to change them.' That's something very interesting. In the beginning, I didn't get this. David and Leonard were telling me all the time 'if you're not happy, do something'. (…) You are free and responsible. It forces us to face what scares us the most in life: this freedom, this capacity to choose. (…) Very few organizations offer this possibility.* (Nathan, partner)

> *People like David and Leonard always manage to show you that everything is your fault. They explain that if you want things to be done differently, it is your responsibility to change them. It's an irrefutable argument.* (James, Partner)

On many occasions, consultants explained that their expectations towards FriendCo had not been met or that they felt promises of professional or business development had not been entirely kept, but they very often blamed themselves for it. This was the case for Natalie, for instance, who explained that it was her responsibility if FriendCo was not always what she wanted it to be:

> *It's also my responsibility. At some point, in this type of organizations, you need the commitment of all members to move the project forward. (…) When I see the level of commitment of some people like James, or Matthew, and others (…) whenever I said something they always told me that all I had to do was to become a Partner.* (Natalie, free talent).

In the end of the day, it is FriendCo's members, themselves, who are accountable for what the organization can deliver. This fosters a sense of duty to contribute, while maintaining the conviction that it is by choice:

> *I've always given a lot at work. I gave a lot of my time, a lot of my life, but that's by choice, or because I was unconscious, but that was my desire, that's how I have felt fulfilled. (Steven, Historic Partner)*

2. RESISTANCE TO THE FRIENDSHIP DISCOURSE

One of the reasons why these five control mechanisms were so apparent in our data, is that many participants were at least ambivalent towards their experience of working at FriendCo, if not at times very critical. At the time of our second waves of interviews, FriendCo has been shut down unofficially for three years without any training, meeting or other event being organized. For many of our participants, this is a very big disappointment. Some say they feel manipulated and are still very upset, usually because they lost a great deal of money in the process (since the shares, which they sometimes bought for 10 000 euros a piece, now have no value), or because they say they felt betrayed by dear friends. They talk about '*heartbreak*', '*losing friends*' or '*breakups*'. Many are waiting to see what will happen. Others say they miss the organization they used to know. A few partners are trying to revive the project, under a different umbrella. All have had time to reflect and develop multiple rationales to explain why FriendCo failed and why it died with the resignation of Leonard. What is however noteworthy, is that even though our participants' retrospective accounts reveal the mechanisms of control at play at FriendCo, it is usually not what they deem responsible of the downfall of the organization. They do not see the fact that friendship was at the heart of the organizational project as what enabled (self)exploitation. Instead, they question whether it was actually friendship all along. First, some participants – especially amongst historic partners – explain that the initial project was indeed virtuous, but that it couldn't be maintained because FriendCo grew too much, too fast. This is, for instance, what Robert told us:

> There was always a lot of crying at the end of the 21 day program. It was wonderful, sometimes. That's something we said to each other, the old chaps, about FriendCo. We said: 'you see, when it's 30 people around the table, no one cries anymore, but when it was 5 or 6 we cried. It's very important. This emotional dimension, it cannot exist with 35 partners the way it did with 7 or 8*. (Robert, Partner)

Because of growth, they say, a sort of distance between members has developed and what used to make self-development, palaver and generosity possible was no longer there.

Some participants also explained that even if FriendCo was presented as a project based on friendship, to the founders, it really was '*their baby*'(Steven, Historic Partner). Participants say the founders were not ready to let it leave the nest and make its own decisions: they only wanted shared governance as long as members agreed with them. Some describe these tensions as a

'*teenage rebellion*' from FriendCo's consultants who wanted to emancipate themselves from the founding fathers, in turn using vocabulary closer to the family metaphor. Others explained that, even though they praised autonomy and insubordination, the founders in fact wanted to be recognized as charismatic leaders asserting their authority over the organization. Some referred to Leonard as a '*guru*', who actively manipulated others to his own benefit:

> *It was a very difficult time, first of all personally speaking, because I broke up with Leonard. It's an affective breakup, yes. The end of a friendship, of an affective bond. When I saw Leonard put a lot of affective pressure on people… It's tough to fight it (…) he would impress anyone, anywhere… when it can be useful to people that's great, but when it's for his own interest and you don't know where it's going, when you feel manipulated… the line is quickly crossed. (Steven, Historic Partner)*

Finally, some participants also resisted control by questioning the instrumental nature of relationships at FriendCo. Some members felt manipulated by founders and historic partners who '*advocate(d) a model that they d(id) not even apply to themselves*' (Sarah, free talent) and who had prioritized their own economic interest over the well-being or the economic interest of the community, presenting friendship and economic objectives as mutually exclusive:

> *FriendCo was precious to be able to get big clients. That's a major issue for freelancers, before working for a client, you need to be referenced and that's a long and difficult process. (…) But there was no transparence. FriendCo was referenced, but this was done individually by partners who had done it to get in certain organizations, but who didn't necessarily want to share it with everyone. (…) There was a contradiction between the individual self-interest of the partners and collective interest. There were strong personalities, too strong, who didn't necessarily let collective interest come first. (Patrick, Partner)*

Many however explain that in spite of what happened at FriendCo, they still believe in the ideal of a friendship based organization and what it represents.

> *I have always been very proud of FriendCo, for me it was very innovative. I still have a feeling of belonging, to me I'm still part of this community. It is sleeping, but I'm still very proud of it.* (Sylvie, Free Talent)

The initial idea was beautiful and it's totally trendy. (...) We need organizations like FriendCo because freelance work is terrible humanely speaking. No work relationship... you need people to push together in the same direction. (Thomas, Partner)

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Through our study of FriendCo, we extend current understandings of friendship in the critical literature which focus on the way the friendship discourse contributes to self-exploitation through the encouragement of fun, authenticity and equality (Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Costas, 2012; Wiksell & Henriksson, 2022). The literature has indeed insisted so far on the way post-bureaucratic settings characterized by a culture of 'friendship', rather than a 'family' culture (Costas, 2012) use friendship as a means to encourage playful self-expressions and the reconciliation of work and life, for instance by encouraging friendly socializing outside of work, and promoting organizational democracy, with the intent to foster high levels of organizational commitment and to encourage self-exploitation (Costas, 2012; Fleming, 2009; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2020; Wiksell & Henriksson, 2022). We extend this understanding of friendship by looking at a setting in which friendship is not only peripheral to the work and control does not solely take place around the work task (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009) but where friendship *is* the organization (Grey & Sturdy, 2007). This allows us to advance our understanding of the control mechanisms at the heart of the managerial discourse of friendship. The literature has discussed how injunctions to 'have fun' or 'be oneself' contribute to diverting individuals' attention from control (Fleming, 2009; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Here, we add that encouraging emotional connection and denying the economic aims of the organization also contribute to this operation of diversion. Our study also unravels other control mechanisms which are complementary and contribute to the recuperation of personal relationships for organizational purposes. Wiksell & Henriksson (2022) have discussed how equality can lead to self-exploitation. We add that it can also contribute to legitimating power structures by encouraging self-censorship and justifying inequalities, in turn invisibilizing power asymmetries. Our findings concomitantly show that promises of mutual growth, at the heart of the managerial discourse of friendship, also play a central role in neo-normative forms of control, as relationships as directly put to work to generate more business, even though the transactional nature of relationships is always denied. We also show how generosity and voluntariness both contribute to self-exploitation by creating an illusion of choice and freedom

26

and in turn drawing on individuals sense of guilt and responsibility to encourage them to give time and money to the organization and to internalize critique.

This has implications for professionals and professional firms more broadly, as post-bureaucratic forms of organizations, and digital platforms more specifically, spread within the field (Cross & Swart, 2020; Garcias & Noury, 2021). Historically, there has always been a vast number of independent professionals operating autonomously on the side of large bureaucratic professional firms (Cross & Swart, 2020). With the development of networks such as FriendCo and digital platforms which promise to support independent professionals in their work, whether by providing them support in administrative tasks, opportunities for self-development, and business leads (Garcias & Noury, 2022), algorithmic forms of control and their impact on professions have gained a lot of interest. Our study shows that in non-algorithmic platforms, despite aspirations to freedom and professional autonomy, neo-normative forms of control – especially relying on the discourse of friendship - may be particularly powerful to generate the commitment of professionals.

Secondly, our findings also show the limits of the discourse of friendship as an alternative principle of organizing. As discussed above, it can be extremely powerful in attracting individuals and generating commitment to the organization, which is particularly striking in the context of organizations relying on self-employed workers who are not formally subordinated to the organization, as they would in a more traditional bureaucratic setting. Yet, at the same time, and compared with the 'family' metaphor which dominates the post-bureaucracy, the friendship one seems to bear in itself the conditions of its own demise. As much as it can be extremely powerful to create engagement, because it denies the economic aim of the organization (or places it second) and assumes friendship and performance always go hand in hand, it can easily generate critique. At FriendCo, even though the ideal of a friendship-based organization is never questioned, and even if critiques revolve more around the authenticity of friendships at FriendCo, or around the wrongful implementation of such an ideal organization, resistance was fierce and led to the resignation of one of the founders, and to the downfall of the organization.

Our study opens up a number of avenues for further research. First, it would be interesting to explore other kinds of settings where individuals may have less autonomy and a higher level of dependence to the organization, as in the case in digital labour platforms for low skilled workers

for instance (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). It would also be interesting to study the discursive repertoires individuals draw on to respond to such attempts to coopt their social lives in these kinds of settings and whether this generates similar responses than those of FriendCo's consultants. Finally, our article also invites us to explore further the limits of the reach of the discourse of friendship, especially as it may generate strong negative emotions and disidentification, within and outside the organization, and how potentially emerging critiques may be recuperated by these organizations.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 1 – Participant list

	Participant*	Role	1st wave	2nd wave
1	Leonard	Founder	1	1
2	David	Founder		1
3	James	Partner	2	
4	Nathan	Partner	1	
5	Steven	Partner		1
6	Matthew	Partner	1	1
7	Thomas	Partner		1
8	Robert	Partner		1
9	Ben	Partner		1
10	Peter	Partner		1
11	Patrick	Partner		1
12	Andrew	Partner		1
13	Jonathan	Partner		1
14	Felix	Partner		1
15	Lisa	Partner	1	1
16	Martin	Partner		1
17	Alex	Former Partner		1
18	Patricia	Former Partner		1
19	Jack	Former Partner		1
20	Sam	Former Partner		1
21	Lea	Former Partner	1	1
22	Chris	Free talent	1	
23	Anna	Free talent		1
24	Mary	Free Talent		1
25	Christina	Free Talent		1
26	Damian	Free Talent		1
27	Natalie	Free Talent		1
28	Sarah	Free Talent		1

29	Gwen	Free Talent		1
30	Sylvie	Free Talent		1
31	Alice	Former employee		1
		TOTAL	8	28

APPENDIX 2

Table 2 – Table of codes

1st order codes	2nd order categories	3rd order categories
Partying	Fun	Diverting attention from control through fun & emotional connection
Having dinners and drinks		
Going on training trips		
Blurred boundary between work and life		
Depth of relationships	Emotional connection	
Intensity of emotions		
Intimacy		
Trust and solidarity		
Loyalty		
No boss, no rules, no money	Invisibilizing the economic nature of relationships	
Relationships as non instrumental		
Fun and emotional connection as a source of performance		
Praising diversity in recruitment	Equality	Legitimating power structures through formal equality
Shared governance		
Absence of formal hierarchy		
Paternalistic management	Unchallenged domination	
Development of informal hierarchies		
Self-censorship		
Legitimation of inequalities		
Professional and personal development through training, shadowing or advice sharing	Self-development through friendship	Optimizing human capital by leveraging self-development
Learning through fun		
Learning by working together		
Admiring others for their professional knowledge and competence		
Making profit out of the development of others	Subordination of self-development to business objectives	
Expecting future economic value		
Altruism, selflessness of founders and members	Generosity of members	Fostering a sense of obligation through generosity
Giving time, advice, business leads, knowledge, money		
Feeling redeemable	Obligation to give back	
Feeling guilty		
'Free and responsible'	Voluntary commitment	Creating a sense of accountability through voluntariness
Absence of formal obligations / of quantified objectives		
Feeling accountable	Accountability	
Blaming oneself		
Silencing critiques unless one does not implement a solution		

1st order codes	2nd order categories	3rd order categories
Geographical distance	Growth coming in the way of friendship	Discursive repertoire of resistance
Impossibility to maintain emotional depth		
Heterogeneity of motives to join FriendCo as it grew		
The founders were not friends, they wanted to act like 'fathers'	Denying the centrality of friendship at FriendCo	
The founders were charismatic leaders who wanted to assert their authority		
Instrumental goals came before friendship		
Reasserting the value of the project	Critiquing the implementation of friendship based organizing (vs. the principle itself)	
Blaming failed operationalization of the principle of friendship as organizing		