

SELF-ORGANIZATION AS A DRIVER OF SOCIAL CHANGE?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

Agile working practices and the continued development of management strategies have been much discussed. The occurrence and implementation of these so-called innovative structures varies from region to region and depends on local economic systems and political conditions.

Although the discourse around methods and models like Teal Organizations, Sociocracy, Holacracy, or Servant Leadership draws the attention of various stakeholders, one group seems to have been forgotten so far: The people who work within these structures, usually employees. Their view on the topic is not visible in any source, even though their voice should not only matter, but be seen as expert inside knowledge.

Most methods and models state that it should be the goal of the organization to help their employees thrive, so they are overall more happy, comfortable, confident people, which in turn helps to create a healthy work environment and, in the end, even a more sustainable world. One can assume that different types of Self-Organization can have positive impacts on people, company, and planet but there is – at least for the latter – no evidence, if and how Self-Organization can deliver on that.

Restructuring work routines, taking on more responsibility, and pursuing work with a sense of meaning all together can be quite demanding and a challenge for the employees that usually takes longer than the company expects. We assume that not all employees might be happy about changes like this because a), Self-Organization is not for everybody. Some people just want to get their work done and do not want that type of holistic connection to their job. And b), it might add even more stress and pressure to perform better to already busy lives and, therefore, will

help neither employees nor the company and for sure not society (as some models imply).

We hypothesise that since we grew up in a system that measures and compares everything from early childhood on, getting a great deal more freedom and trust from your supervisors to do your work as you see fit can lead to a better performance. Not because employees experience more meaning in their work but because they are afraid of underperforming and, therefore, to be accused of being lazy or of taking advantage of the new structures. If that were the case, it would not be good news for companies and certainly not for employees either: The implementation would likely show performance improvements initially, but it would not be feasible to retain. Rather, it would promote meritocracy.

As we noticed that the voice and opinion of the employees is missing, we did a little research, assuming that a great deal of companies use the well-being of their employees as an surface argument to implement Self-Organization while their actual goal is to either improve performance or their reputation as an employer (employer branding). However, if Self-Organization is implemented for those reasons, can it actually benefit all? Or do the employees pay the price? We wanted to know how employees experience the implementation of Self-Organization and conducted a quantitative survey in Switzerland.

Limitations of the survey and empirical approach

The rather low return rate of the target group in relation to the higher return rate of team leaders and people in management positions limits the reliability of the study but at the same time supports some of our pre-made assumptions.

1. Companies might not have forwarded the survey to their employees, which would lead to the question of why they did not do so. Some of them probably thought that their employees were not entitled to answer those questions since they feel it is the duty of the management or they do not know, if their employees (already) know enough about Self-Organization. Others might not have wanted to let the employees use their working hours to complete the survey.
2. The employees who did receive the survey did not respond to it. This could mean that they did not have time to do it, or that they did not feel that their opinion was truly asked for. This in turn could indicate that they do not have enough time or energy.
3. Surveys like this one in general tend to be filled out and returned either by people who support the cause or people who are dissatisfied with the cause. In this case we noticed a tendency towards a pro-attitude towards Self-Organization. This could have led people to give more positive answers to the questions because they wish for a "good" outcome of the study.
4. About one fourth of the sample is organised without the typical job positions that we know from hierarchically structured organisations.

It should be mentioned that we did not distinguish between different models and methods of Self-Organization and the state of the participating organisations regarding their transformation process. We wanted to include all organisations that are interested in the topic and who are before, in, or at the end of the transformation, or even never went through a transformation process.

Instead, we created the "self-organization-score" (SOSC) which, on our view, reflects how Self-Organizations would ideally be. With this prototype score, we aimed to include all the different kinds of models and methods, but it might not resemble the view of Self-Organization as a management tool. Some variables also correlate with one another, which should be improved in further studies.

It cannot be determined adequately, if the findings of the survey are representative because we do not know the exact size of the population. We assume that the study is not representative for the target

group. However, it probably is representative for higher positions such as management and team leaders. Therefore, the findings are only valid for this sample (N=241). However, the conclusions can still be transferred and be useful for similar organisations. The study delivers a first impression on how employees feel within an environment of Self-Organization. However, the key findings should be questioned and discussed so more surveys can be conducted to validate, enrich, or disprove the findings in representative qualitative and quantitative studies.

Key Findings and Summary

Self-Organization-Score SOSC

50% of the sample has a score between 41 and 52 points, out of 100 possible points. Around 8% reach more than 76 points. The mean value is 52 points, and the median is 53 points.

Changes through implementation of Self-Organization and wishes for the future

The most frequent changes through the implementation of Self-Organization are firstly, change of and secondly, abolition of hierarchy. Almost equally often mentioned were wage transparency, improvements towards fairer wage systems, and, in general, better working conditions, such as shorter hours or better benefits for parents. The sample wishes for further improvement of working conditions, a wage system that is fair, change of hierarchy, and wage transparency.

Options	Change	Wish	Total
Change of Hierarchy	140	73	213
Abolition of Hierarchy	91	54	145
Wage Transparency	61	68	129
Fairer Wage System	60	83	143
Better Working Conditions	58	112	170
Facilities to Rest	31	59	90
Better Food Options	30	29	59
No Change/Wish	15	15	30
Better Salary for all	10	52	62

Employees Wellbeing

- The higher the SOSC, the higher the general job satisfaction.
- There is a difference in stress levels: employees with a higher SOSC have a lower level of stress.
- Employees with a higher SOSC have a higher level of general life satisfaction.
- A higher sense of purpose and higher ability to unfold personal potential support those improvements significantly.

Political Dimensions of Self-Organization

- The sample displays a clear tendency towards the political left wing.
- The change in hierarchical structures may lead to personal political emancipation.

Challenges

- Directive understandings of leadership exist in most organizations and are difficult to unlearn, especially when things do not go as planned.
- How Self-Organization is presented to the employees and implemented in the organisation is crucial for its development. The better employees understand cause, goal, and plan and actively participate in the process, the higher the SOSC and satisfaction with the process.
- The decrease of personal power and increase of shared power in the organisations is accompanied by an increase in stress during leisure time.

Summary

To avoid disappointment, we recommend the following guidelines:

- Realistic expectations. Are there enough time and other resources available and are possible challenges reflected in this time and these resources? The implementation of Self-Organization is hard work and is most likely not the solution to current issues in the organization.
- Attitude. Seeing Self-Organization as a management tool is most likely not sustainable when the goal of the implementation is economic success or employer branding.
- Participation. The Implementation works best when there is clear communication about the plan, steps, goal, and purpose. A great deal of orientation and time need to be provided to get the pro-

cess started. It will not unfold by itself by simply telling employees they can start now.

- Reflection. Find a way to discuss the upcoming frustrations and questions on a regular basis. Communicate that it is a collective process that can only evolve when people speak up to find solutions rather than hold grudges until something goes wrong and then blame it on Self-Organization. All employees need room to grow into it but that room needs to be provided.

We conclude that Self-Organization does hold a great deal of potential for employees, organizations, society, and even the environment. However, if the goal of the implementation is more success, it will not improve things long-term – especially if the shift in the power dynamics causes more stress or longer working hours. Besides the upcoming shortage of work forces, there is certainly no desire to increase the rate of employee burnout. If implemented carefully, Self-Organization could help improve working conditions for an overall better and healthier work environment and could lead to more sustainable economies. A decrease of power abuse cases could be expected as a desirable side effect. If politics cannot agree on solutions, maybe organisations and the scientific communities can test progressive solutions together and make them accessible.

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The study in German can be ordered or downloaded at www.anny-klawa-morf.ch/selforganisation.