



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS RESEARCH: A
ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT
Volume 15 Issue 3 Version 1.0 Year 2015
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-4588 & Print ISSN: 0975-5853

Non-Conventional Organizations – the Messengers of the Future in the World of Organizations and Management

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GJMBR - A Classification : *JELCode : M19*



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



Non-Conventional Organizations – the Messengers of the Future in the World of Organizations and Management

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I. INTRODUCTION

What will the organization of the future look like? This is a question we often pose to business leaders, but very few of them take a visionary leap and look beyond the next few days and months in an attempt to reveal the future of their organizations or of organizations in general. We, as organizational development consultants, continually direct our clients towards better, more effective and more “modern” organizations. But what do we mean by “modern”? Though we are charged with offering inspiring and innovative solutions, just how innovative are they? Most of our clients want to be shown solutions that work, solutions that, moreover, have proven track records. This inherent conservatism in approach may produce better organizations for the present, but will such “conventional” solutions produce organizations best prepared for the world of business in ten, twenty or fifty years’ time?

While preparing the Organizational Development World Summit 2010 in Budapest, the authors got closer to understanding how the organization of the future might look (Németh, 2009). In this article – which might be regarded as a theoretical introduction to the study of future organizations – we review our approach to the exploration of the structure and functioning of future organizations, and we

introduce our central concepts that might serve as a basis for further thinking.

II. THE CONCEPT OF A NON-CONVENTIONAL ORGANIZATION – ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORLD SUMMIT 2010

This event served as the global meeting of organizational development professionals, connecting a wide range of professional disciplines and societies. Alongside the objectives of mutual inspiration, knowledge sharing and networking opportunities, the event also had an “historical” goal. We wanted to analyze how the organizational development profession – and indeed organizations themselves – has evolved over time, from the origin of the profession in the late 1940s, to current practices and on to the foreseeable future. The non-conventional organization (NCO) program was specifically established to explore the future of our practice and of organizations. To facilitate this exploration, we spotlighted some inspirational organizations at our conference, organizations that are outstanding in terms of performance, sustainability and many other criteria. In short, we endeavoured to identify those organizations that are trendsetters and that can serve as blueprints for not only today’s managers but also for current and potential entrepreneurs – as well as for consultants, as the agents of change – in terms of their structure and their operation.

III. GRASPING THE FUTURE OF ORGANIZATIONS – A SNAPSHOT OF POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO ANALYZING AND DEFINING AN NCO

How can we peer into the structure and operation of future organizations? There are several widely used methods for predicting the future of organizations and plotting its possible variants. These methods are mostly based on strategic planning processes (Loveridge, 2008; Costanzo & MacKay, 2009; Mintzberg et al, 2002). There are up to forty accepted methods at present according to the methodological handbooks (e.g. Glenn & Gordon, 2009; Jackson, 2011), and all these essentially follow the main steps of

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the general foresight paradigm delineated by Voros (2003). Despite the wide methodological palette available and the economic and social necessity to elucidate the future of business (e.g. Slaughter & Bussey, 2006), studies on the future of organizations have still applied only a very limited range of the available approaches and methods.

In the last few years, most descriptions of future organizations have been founded on scenario-based studies (e.g. Laubacher & Malone, 1997; Gray & Hovav, 2007). These studies were based on identifying major determinant forces (or "drivers") in different business fields and aimed to describe those organizational, leadership and operational models that could provide efficient, sustainable operations in the predicted business environment of the future.

In the 2007 PricewaterhouseCoopers study *Managing Tomorrow's People*, which attempted to forecast the nature of business and of organizations in 2020, the most probable future scenarios were examined based on the possible interactions of four antagonistic pairs of "global forces". These four pairs were business fragmentation vs. corporate integration, individualism vs. collectivism, globalization vs. reverse globalization, and the axis of technological penetration: "I control technology" vs. "Technology controls me". Based on these, three feasible economic realities were conceptualized, together with the associated corporate metaphors. The so-called "blue world", which combines the fulfilment of integration and individualism, will probably be ruled by monumental, hierarchical corporations ("Corporate is king"), while the "green world", emerging from the combined forces of integration and collectivism, will be characterized by companies organized along different values ("Companies care"). In the "orange world" of fragmented businesses the competitive advantage of "Small is beautiful" will be typical, and these small enterprises will emerge from the constantly changing social networks of individual employees. The PwC study describes the management practices of each corporate form in detail, and this way it gives quite an accurate picture of the prospective inner structures of the organizations.

The well-known disadvantage of this approach lies in its weakness in incorporating unusual and unexpected changes and the dynamic nature of the future (Schwarz, 2009). The hypothetical future cannot be any more diversified than that allowed by the creativity of the researchers composing the scenario. Just as in the case of Ashby's Law (1958), we cannot disregard certain frameworks. Another possible method of delineating the future, including the future of organizations, is through extrapolation of trends occurring in the present. Applying this approach we can only forecast the continuation and strengthening of currently existing processes (e.g. Cetron & Davies, 2010; Feldman, 2010).

We may base our presentation of the structure and operation of future organizations on the predictions and assumptions that have already been presented in the literature on management science (e.g. Hesselbein & Goldsmith, 2009). Even without an exhaustive review, we are able to summarize those key characteristics identified by contemporary academic authors and current business leaders of organizations that might best survive in both the current business environment and, moreover, proliferate in the business environment of the future. Three such characteristics are flexibility, agility and the preparedness for continuous change. These characteristics make assumptions about future organizations based on the continuation of diversified environmental states (which are almost unpredictable even today) and the necessity of corporate adaptation to these states. Another approach, which emphasizes the importance of individual and corporate identity as a stable point (often originating from the actual inconsistency of the environment believed to be constant), makes strong assumptions about the corporate culture of future organizations. The authors forecast the emergence of organizations that have a strong inner identity (rather than those characterized by processes that permit flexible, continuous inner changes): such organizations provide an extraordinarily stable environment to their members.

While preparing our research, we decided that in addition to a combination of academic knowledge and extrapolation methods based on contemporary mainstream trends, we should also incorporate the idea of organic development into our approach.

IV. DISCUSSION – WHO IS THE ENTREPRENEUR THAT CAN CREATE SOMETHING TRULY EXCEPTIONAL?

A full review of the literature pertaining to this question, which is almost big enough to fill a library on its own, is beyond the scope of this paper; however, we might provide a short summary of the identity of such an entrepreneur limiting ourselves to the outstanding work of Urban (ed. 2010) and a selection of other important analyses (Salgado-Banda, 2005; Audretsch et al, 2010; Dabkowski, 2011). According to Schumpeter (1934/1980), an entrepreneur is a person who is an owner of a small business in a competitive environment who manages to create a better management system, and who introduces new, innovative products and processes (Gray, 2002, p61). Entrepreneurs are individuals who operate an enterprise in the profit or non-profit sector and whose business behavior is characterized by innovation, growth, taking risks, reorganizing resources, and creating workplaces (Schumpeter, 1934; Knight, 1921; Bolton, 1971; Stanworth & Gray, 1991; Storey, 1994).

In a broader framework, entrepreneurs are individuals who operate a business enterprise and are growth-oriented. Their management capabilities and their focus on setting and achieving goals create added value to the customer, conferring a competitive advantage on their enterprises. Schumpeter (1934) also defines the entrepreneur as an agent of change, one who combines the concept of a product or service, or the use of the available resources, in an innovative way (e.g. Schultz 1975). This latter definition is a particularly fruitful one for the authors in the context of the evolution of organizations.

V. THE BASIS OF THE EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

The evolution of operational dynamics in the corporate world is believed by some authors to follow similar principles to evolutionary biology. In a given niche (where a market segment is equated to an ecological niche) the organizations (the “living creatures”) compete with each other to survive and proliferate (expressed in terms of making a profit, realizing business goals, etc.). Those organizations having characteristics that provide a competitive advantage in the market place and which can best adapt to the prevailing environmental circumstances are better able to prosper (Kieser & Woywode, 2006). A new idea, either for a product or for the *modus vivendi* of the organization, can create added value and thus provide a competitive advantage. László Mérő (2007) gave the name *món* to these organizational phenomena. In our approach, being an NCO is a *món*, or a combination of a number of them (a *món*-pattern), which differs from the organizational *món*-pattern specific to the given period of time.

VI. NON-CONVENTIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: TRACKING IMPERCEPTIBLE ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT

While preparing for the conference, we were looking for existing organizations which already have in place operational practices that we predict will be successful in the future, either the methods these organizations use or their organizational structure. We were looking for organizations that seemed to be able to successfully “pass on” their advanced, unorthodox practices to future generations of organizations. Both the existence of unorthodox practices and the ability to pass them on were defining characteristics in our view. We termed these exemplary, inspiring organizations non-conventional organizations (NCOs). We were looking for organizations and organizational practices which can be considered in the eyes of the futurists as “weak signals” or “future signs” (Ansoff, 1975; Hiltunen, 2010).

Since we had to conduct a complete search process, we had to provide a precise definition in order to be able to identify such non-conventional organizations. While formulating this definition, constantly interpreting it and working on its premise, we encountered many and mostly unforeseen questions. The process of considering and attempting to answer these questions took us significantly closer to establishing and forming our own ideas and expectations regarding the organizations of the future.

a) *Our definition consisted of two criteria*

i. First criterion

a. *The organization must show an above-average performance, or have the potential for such performance in its own field of operation or industry.*

ii. Rationale for the first criterion

Those organizations that exhibit poor performance in their current environment, that are not successful, and that lack the potential for success in the future, are less likely to survive to a future time. After exhausting their reserves and losing their investors, they will struggle to remain participants in the present: they also lose their ability to pass on to the future the advanced practices they were using. Thus, they will not play any role in the future; we cannot use them as exemplars. The evolutionary process makes its selection.

iii. Our dilemmas regarding the first criterion

1. Our first dilemma emerged from the interpretation of the word “organization”, specifically whether we should include project teams which were specifically established to achieve a single concrete goal. For instance, should we consider the election campaign organization of Barack Obama – which we regarded as being non-conventional because of their creative use of statistical methods and the Internet – an “organization”? Is it necessary for an organization to work continuously? In our opinion it is not, and we made our decision accordingly. We believe that these one-time or transient organizations can also serve as extraordinarily inspiring examples for the organizations of the present and future; they can pass on their characteristics to the future simply by being memorable, embodied in the *món* established and created by them.
2. In our initial definition we only used the word “success”. But by which criteria can an organization be considered successful? If it is financially successful? If it endures? (and, in this case, how long must it endure?) It seemed logical to establish several parallel success criteria, but to use them in a search process seemed to be impossible.

In addition to the difficulty of defining success as a business concept (especially given the “cult of

success" characteristic of the present day and the speed at which information and efficient solutions spread), we also assumed that the modern operating methods of those organizations considered successful are actively imitated and adapted by competing companies. As such, they would not fit our next criterion. They are no longer the "new" innovative thinkers, rather they are determinative agents of already existing trends: they have become trendsetters. These organizations might be considered the "NCOs of yesterday". In connection with this dilemma, we will mention as examples the car manufacturers Toyota and Ford. Ford were pioneers in the field of standardized production, in the use of the assembly line, technological sequence, etc. Toyota, on the other hand, can be considered one of the NCOs of the 1970s and 1980s because of their development of a number of innovative methods, such as lean, Just in Time, kanban systems, value-oriented management, 5S, etc. (Likert, 2004; Spear & Bowen, 1999; Likert & Hoseus, 2008; Hirotaka et al., 2008). Both organizations incorporated some unusual, sometimes unique solutions in their time; however, the adaption of those solutions is already remarkably widespread in the corporate life of our days. There are some organizations, for example Google, that have built themselves up by combining some of their new, innovative móns and some older ones, in doing so establishing a highly successful organization (Iyer & Davenport, 2008; Hagiu & Yoffie, 2009).

Consequently, and as a compromise, we resolved to use both high performance and the potential for high performance in our definition. We defined performance by the evident or potential achievement of the goals set by the organization. We assumed that those organizations that could achieve their own goals would be able to endure. Performance, on the other hand, does not necessarily mean financial success or satisfied customers and employees. For example, we considered the Hotel Panda in Budapest a good example of our definition. This three-star hotel works almost exclusively with employees with some sort of learning or physical impairment. The enterprise works, in the sense that it has endured; it offers a service to its clients and provides a job for its employees. We can consider it a well-performing organization, but not necessarily, in today's common meaning of the word, successful; for example, there is no Hotel Panda chain.

iv. Second criterion

Success and the related dilemma of imitation have a direct and close relationship in the second criterion for our definition.

The abovementioned high performance of an organization must be reached by an unusual, non-conventional method of operation, by value proposition, a unique business model and management, or by a unique process system.

During our research, simply having a unique product or service was not in itself enough to achieve the status of NCO.

v. Rationale

We wanted to capture the essence of non-conventionality in this point. The list is only for guidance, but it also represents our own open approach we wanted to apply during our search. We found it important that innovation be a central element of the operation of the organization, that is, it had to unequivocally contribute to the high performance or make high performance possible.

vi. Our dilemmas regarding the second criterion

We faced two serious dilemmas during our research created by the second part of our definition. The first one is the previously discussed question of uniqueness, of novelty, that underpins the organization's success. For example, can we consider the web-based commercial models of eBay or Amazon.com unique? Is the business model of Anytmeeting.com unique in that it provides all the necessary systems for its clients to hold webinars completely free of charge? Is the idea of "full vertical ownership" (motivational share options available for the whole employee group) special? These solutions are interesting but clearly not unique. Webshops and business models based on free services are widespread these days, but in the 1980s and 1990s these models were NCOs.

The dilemma of judging "uniqueness" can be resolved into several questions. The first question is the one illustrated by the examples above, that is, the question of "absolute uniqueness": Does the organization show an attribute or characteristic that we have not seen before? The second question is whether the organization exhibits a unique characteristic combination (*món-combination*). For example, does it make Radical Inclusion, the boutique consultant company, which is conventional in many aspects, "unique enough" in the way they apply fully virtualized internal co-operation processes? Looking for the answer to this question leads us, theoretically at least, to the next question, which is to identify the typical *món-combinations* of an era (in terms of the variables of time, geography, economy, or the ecosystem of an enterprise). How unique should an NCO be? Answering this question completely reaches far beyond the scope of this article, but it may be worthwhile to have a look at how we might begin to tackle it. For example, one recent analysis identified the typical characteristics of a successful start-up and its typical development curve, highlighting the optimal structure of the group, the business model, and its financing (Marmer et al., 2012). Such an analysis could help us recognize successful start-ups that do not fit the typical *món-combination* or "conventional" model.

The uniqueness of the *món*-patterns, based on the evolutionary approach, must be defined in relation to the environmental conditions of the given organization. Those current surveys presently known to us concentrate on the ranking of the business environment (e.g. cities, countries, industrial branches) along the lines of a specific viewpoint-system rather than on a differentiated comparative analysis. To our knowledge, there have only been a few case studies in which the characteristics of successful organizations in a given environment have been studied. In an analysis that examined Israeli start-ups (Chorev & Anderson, 2013), business factors were categorized according to how important they were to the ecosystem and to the start-ups' ultimate success. Among the most important factors were strategy, the business "idea", marketing, and the loyalty and expertise of the employees; less important ones were judged to be management, public relations, and research and development; the least important ones were the economic and political environment (Magos & Németh, 2014).

Our second dilemma about the second criterion was in judging whether non-conventional character is central to the organization, or more precisely whether the uniqueness we believed to have identified in the organization did indeed significantly contribute to its performance. Is the unique, regularly changing management structure of the counselling company Vialto (which is based on the controlled rotation of the senior circle) a central element of their success? Do the logistics innovations of the Indian company Akashaya Patra, which provides food to children to help them perform better at school, play a significant part in the company's work? To what extent do the spiritual teachings followed by both the founders and healers of the Aravind Eye Hospital contribute to the operational efficiency and celebrity of the hospital? Based on the correspondence with the people involved and the documents that we collected, we decided that the answer is in the affirmative in each case.

VII. CONCLUSION

In summary, we were looking for organizations that have introduced a significant degree of innovation in some field (or fields) of their operation, but do not yet have a large number of followers applying this innovation. Our search focused on mutations, positive deviations from the ordinary, and exclusively ones that are capable of survival. In addition, the organization must demonstrate its uniqueness not only in its phenotype but in its genotype as well, on the level of the organizational DNA (Morgan, 1998; Neilson et al, 2003; Bray et al, 2011; Baksin, 2012). We were looking for organizations that were already employing the potential operational methods of the future organizations and that

show the potential to be effective, indeed successful, in the future with the help of these methods.

In order to classify those organizations we found, we established a 2x2 matrix categorization system (this can be viewed at the end of this article, complete with examples). One of the dimensions in this matrix was the organizational phenomenon, expressed either as an introverted or extroverted factor. For example, a HR process or a development in organizational culture is an introverted factor; on the other hand, a development valuable to the clients of the organization, e.g. self-service or wandering in the warehouses of IKEA, are extroverted: these reach over the boundaries of the organizations. Our other chosen dimension for the matrix was whether the organizational phenomenon/innovation affects value creation directly or indirectly. Using the examples above, the introduction and operation of an innovative talent-management system does not provide a direct contribution to the value creation, rather it contributes indirectly; on the other hand, in the IKEA example we can definitely speak about a direct contribution, although we have highlighted only one element of the value-creation chain (Porter, 1995).

a) *Detour: Tracking down the non-conventional organizations*

In the preparation phase of our research we mainly used as sources of information to reveal NCOs Internet forums, innovation webpages, community networks, industrial sources, and recommendations from fellow consultants. After identifying interesting candidates, we tried to clarify through personal contact whether the given organization matches our research criteria and also whether they might wish to join our conference program. Eventually, we identified just over a hundred possible NCO candidates. During the analysis of our research we found several possible explanations for this relatively low number of NCO candidates.

It is conceivable that we established a definition which was too strict, even in its current modified form. We might have been able to include more organizations as candidate NCOs by leaving out the first criterion. However, this would have meant us discarding the importance placed on the evolutionary aspect.

During our research, we also identified the difficulty in acquiring information as a main obstacle. Our research team found it particularly difficult to gather sufficient information and impressions related to our first criterion. Notwithstanding the practical difficulties, we finally came to the conclusion that the number of NCOs is indeed quite small. Whether this small number means that we should be concerned for the flexibility and endurance of present or future organizations is a pertinent question, but one that we cannot begin to answer in this current article.

b) Examples for the non-conventional organizations

i. Radical Inclusion

Radical Inclusion is a consulting company that provides services to organizations anywhere in the world. Their main field of service is the reform and improvement of work processes through the introduction of tools for virtual cooperation, and the support subsequently given for the professional application of these tools. However, the true non-conventionality of Radical Inclusion does not lie in the service it provides, but in the way their own internal operation has perfected this virtual cooperation. The members of the five-strong team of the company live in four different countries. They have no personal contact with each other in their everyday work; they communicate through different technical solutions (e.g. Skype, phone, AIM, cloud-based document libraries, forums). They have built up their shared virtual work surface according to a definite system, and there you can find a virtual client space, a coffee room for joint relaxation and inspiration, as well as their personal work surfaces. According to the founders, in the first year following the foundation of the company they met up only virtually and never face-to-face.

The key element of the company's strong performance, in addition to the virtual or blended work processes they offer, is their own special *modus vivendi*, which gives them maximum credibility in the eyes of their clients in the field of virtual organizations.

ii. NESsT

During our research, the global organization NESsT also caught our attention by virtue of its distinctive operating model and the philosophy that lies behind it. Combining the models of venture investment and philanthropy, the organization applies the approach of "Venture Philanthropy". Using this approach they support social enterprises, that is, organizations working for social objectives. However, their support is not limited to financial aid; NESsT handles the money given for good purposes as investments. Through a wide range of consulting services, experience sharing and other tools, it builds on the initial success of the investment so that the clients' social objectives are sustainable, as well as ensuring the initial investment is financially worthwhile. The combination of the two operational models – venture investment and philanthropy – makes this organization unique.

We determined that NESsT was successful by virtue of the steadily growing number of organizations they support and the growth of the capital available for this support.

iii. Mumbai Dabbawalas

This Mumbai-based food distribution company employs several thousands of couriers, most of whom are illiterate or lacking basic educational skills. With their help they deliver daily more than two hundred thousand

home-cooked meals in lunch boxes from the residence of their clients where they are prepared to work places and schools all around the city, often to places which lack an address or telephone number (e.g. construction sites). They also do this with such punctuality and reliability that they can manage to compete with the services of professional logistic companies that employ high-tech equipment. Their reported error rate is 1 in 1,000,000, equivalent to the results of the six sigma methodology. The success of these food couriers, evidenced not least by the winning of numerous international prizes and invitations to give presentations at countless conferences, is based on the efficient inner organization, trust and strong loyalty. In the maintenance of the system the common ownership and the equitable share of wages within the organization, which has a flat management structure despite it having 5000 members, plays an important role (Covell, 2009).

c) The non-conventional organizations of the recent past

During our research, we identified several organizations whose unique operational models and special practices have already been copied by other organizations. We have not included these organizations in our research, but some of them are worth mentioning as the trendsetters of yesterday. Studying their examples can guide us in understanding how the NCOs of today might affect the world of the organizations of the near future.

i. Amazon.com and ebay.com

These two companies have remained pioneers in e-commerce over the last couple of decades. They have established the world's biggest webshops and social "marketplaces" (Darren, 2004; Ho, 2008). Virtual commerce is an orthodox solution today; however, the success of these organizations raises the question as to which new commercial platforms we might see in the years to come.

ii. Zara (Inditex group)

The world-famous clothing retailers achieved an industry-level competitive advantage by shortening the design and production cycle for their merchandise. In contrast to other retailers whose seasonal collections are typically planned one year in advance, this shorter cycle has allowed Zara to keep their customers' interest by offering them fresh collections in the same season (Ferdows et al., 2004). Control of the entire production process, from the design stage to the clothes hitting the shops – a kind of democratization of the fashion industry – has played a key role in the success of the Inditex group (Bonnin, 2002). Zara was able to step out of the circle of expectations and, in the vernacular of the time, "think outside the box". Which will be the next box that high-output manufacturers leave behind?

iii. *Southwest Airlines (SWA)*

Southwest Airlines was the pioneer of the budget airline business model (Raynor, 2011; Kaplan & Norton, 2004). To offset the loss of revenue from sales of cheaper airline tickets, the company cut back on extra services (in-flight meals, waiting rooms, etc.). Although these steps might first have appeared as a loss in value for the passengers, the airline was able to increase the number of flights per day on a given route and also fly to more destinations, thereby increasing the interconnectivity of their network. Their operational model has since been copied by several other airlines. The example of Southwest raises the question as to where the boundaries of services lie: which are the elements of service that will no longer be provided free of charge in the next few years?

iv. *NetFlix*

The NetFlix organization has an original way of managing its talents and high-performing employees. It places great emphasis on its corporate values, aligning selection of new employees with these values and making them clear to new recruits; these values also permeate the workplace. The organizational culture is founded on understanding and logic rather than being rule-based. In the terminology of transactional analysis, NetFlix treats its co-workers as “adults” and it counts on their intelligence, encouraging their creativity in an inspirational and supportive atmosphere, instead of just expecting them to adapt to certain rules (as “children”). There are no performance bonuses; on the other hand, the workers can work in excellent, comfortable premises (Mc Cord, 2014).

	Indirect effect on creating values	Direct effect on creating values
Effect outside the organization	ZARA (Inditex)	Radical Inclusion; NESst; SWA; Amazon; Ebay; Toyota; Ford;
Effect within the organization	Semco; Vagas.com; Statoil; NetFlix	Mumbai Dabbawalas

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