

# **ENACTING NEW WAYS OF ORGANIZING: EXPLORING THE ACTIVITIES AND CONSEQUENCES OF POST-INDUSTRIAL WORK**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Our empirical study of an interactive marketing company explores how post-industrial work is constituted through the ongoing daily activities of organizational actors drawing on diverse backgrounds to accomplish project-based work. These actors engage in four types of work practices: negotiating agreements, concurrent designing and building, coordinating across boundaries within the organization, and collaborating with clients. As individuals interact across their occupational differences, new ways of working are both enabled and constrained, resulting in intended and unintended consequences for both individuals and organizations.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the current organizational environment of market globalization, rapid technological change, shortened product life cycles, and increasingly aggressive competitors, dramatic changes are occurring with respect to the way work is done (e.g., DiMaggio, 2001; Lewin & Volberda, 1999; Volberda, 1996). As knowledge and skills become domain specific, work is accomplished through the horizontal collaboration of different groups rather than through a vertical chain of command (Barley, 1996). In the context of this increasingly horizontal distribution of expertise, we use an occupational perspective to analyze how post-industrial or non-bureaucratic ways of organizing work are accomplished through members' everyday practices, and what the consequences of such organizing practices are for individuals and organizations.

## **RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS**

Adweb (a pseudonym) is an end-to-end interactive marketing company founded in 1995, which develops web-based products for a range of organizational clients. Adweb generated revenues of \$200million in 2000, having experienced average annual revenue growth rate of 175% since 1998.

Adweb competes in a highly uncertain and rapidly changing environment. Changes in the nature of services over the past five years have increased the technical complexity of projects, required the collaboration of diverse specialties, and obliged firms such as Adweb to stay on top of constantly changing media and information technologies. Product development work at Adweb is carried out in interdependent, multi-specialty teams with fluid authority relations and an emphasis on learning and speed. All Adweb teams use new media and information technologies

extensively, both to create their clients' websites and to coordinate with one another during their product development work.

Our field study, conducted over five months in 2001, focused on the everyday project-based practices of members in one of Adweb's larger offices, located in the Northeast U.S. We conducted 100 formal and informal interviews with members from each of Adweb's specialties and with senior executives. We observed two complete projects: a three-week project involving a "pitch" for a furniture retailer, and a six-week project involving product "discovery and planning" for an insurance company. We also reviewed some of the extensive documentation (on paper and the global Adweb intranet) generated by the organization and team members.

Our orientation to data collection and analysis was exploratory; we used inductive, qualitative techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), informed by our focus on practices and consequences associated with non-bureaucratic ways of organizing work, while remaining alert to emerging issues. Analysis consisted of multiple readings of the interview transcripts, field notes, and documentation, and the identification and coding of activities and issues related to the everyday work of Adweb members.

In our analysis, we focused on what people *do* in order to, as Barley and Kunda (2000) suggest, "identify types of work, specify dimensions along which work may vary, and articulate relations between work practices, situational contingencies, and organizational patterns" (p. 85). These practices are constituted by members as part of the ongoing structuring processes through which organizations are produced and reproduced. They are instantiated at the micro-level, but they reflect macro-level influences. After identifying a set of recurring practices, we re-examined them to understand their consequences for the work, workers, and the organization.

## **ENACTING NON-BUREAUCRATIC WAYS OF ORGANIZING AT ADWEB**

We found that Adweb members enact non-bureaucratic ways of working through four project-based practices: *negotiating agreements*, *concurrent designing and building*, *coordinating across boundaries within the organization*, and *collaborating with clients*. Adweb members draw on and use this repertoire of practices repeatedly in their everyday project-based activities, thus enacting and sustaining a non-bureaucratic logic of organizing. We also found that engagement in these practices generated a number of unintended consequences.

Adweb teams are composed of members from the four major specialties employed at Adweb: Client Services, Project Management, Creative, and Technology. Members of each specialty bring different occupational orientations, experiences, values, and interests to the projects. Client Services is interested in a smooth relationship with clients. Project Management wants to ensure that projects come in on time and on budget (although, in spite of their title, they lack hierarchical authority over projects). Technology is concerned with building a reliable and scaleable website. And Creative is focused on generating a breakthrough aesthetic vision.

Team members engage in *negotiating agreements* about client projects around these different interests and values by sharing information and expertise, attempting to influence others to adopt their own point of view, and making intermediate and non-binding compromises regarding the work. Such negotiation involves an elaborate series of interactions in which members support

their own position and critique others. This negotiation enables project team members, especially those from Creative and Technical, to voice their differing interests and concerns, and engage in provisional agreements that lead to a more inventive and robust interactive website.

Team members engage in *concurrent designing and building* activities to produce their client's website. This practice of designing the conceptual and building the material aspects of the product concurrently is comprised of three major activities: collaborating electronically, using differential expertise, and iterating. Simultaneous designing and building is accomplished through electronic collaboration within and across specialties, each bringing to bear its own expertise. Because of the compressed timetables and ongoing compromising, team members iterate among inputs from various individuals throughout the project. This process ensures a highly integrated product, where iterative activities allow clients to add specifications at various times and Adweb members to continually experiment and apply their latest learnings to the product at hand.

Adweb members engage persistently in *coordination across boundaries* by such ongoing activities as planning and monitoring. Work is coordinated at Adweb using detailed project plans, tight deadlines, and frequent meetings. Project Managers hold regular meetings to encourage coordination (so that the different specialties stay connected with each others' activities), and to monitor project progress (so that projects can be delivered on time and on budget). Such activities keep everyone knowledgeable about the project, allowing different team members to take the lead at different times, depending on the requirements of specific projects.

Since many of Adweb's web-based products become deeply integrated into their client's core business and their critical information systems, Adweb engages in a high level of *collaboration with clients*. This practice includes activities of communicating and co-developing, which interconnect the efforts of Adweb and client members, highlighting potential difficulties, and facilitating additional work on the project.

### **Unintended Consequences of Adweb Practices**

The four practices we identified at Adweb were also found to generate a number of unintended consequences. While the practice of negotiating agreements enables a highly creative product, it also leads to spending significant time in meetings, communicating extensively via email, dumping information on team members, proceeding without full agreement, and considerable offline lobbying. In addition, members feel the need to be constantly available to ensure that their perspective is taken into account in the constantly shifting provisional decisions that are made. Concurrent designing and building at Adweb often leads to a highly integrated product that incorporates continuous learning, but it may also lead to friction across specialties around differing work practices, communication patterns, and temporal rhythms, and to neglecting content in the interests of speed. In addition, since this concurrent creation is so interdependent and time pressured, workers feel the need to work intensively so as not to be a bottleneck on the project. The practice of coordinating across boundaries within the organization enables product delivery on time and on budget, but the extensive focus on process also results in extensive time spent in meetings, a diminished focus on content, and some resistance on the part of Creative and Technology members to what they see as overly detailed planning and monitoring of Project Management and Clients Services. This coordinating practice also reduces team members'

control over their own time and the intense pacing leads them to work long hours. Finally, collaborating with clients ensures that the final web-based product meets the client's needs and interfaces with the client's internal systems, but it may also result in aggressive timelines, miscommunication, and extensive documentation to prevent later lawsuits. The high level of collaboration means that team members feel compelled to be constantly available to clients and to match their temporal rhythms to those of the clients, often leading to extended work hours.

### **ENACTING NEW WAYS OF WORKING: AN OCCUPATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

Our analysis of the field study data suggests that the non-bureaucratic logic of organizing evident at Adweb is accomplished through the practices of negotiating agreements, concurrent designing and developing, coordinating across boundaries within the organization, and collaborating with clients. Through these practices, members enact Adweb's particular way of organizing work, which reflects some of the structural, cultural, and technical characteristics of post-industrial work. Through these ongoing activities, the work of Adweb is enabled and constrained, resulting in both intended and unintended consequences for individuals and the organization. In making sense of these practices, we found it useful to adopt an occupational lens. Van Maanen & Barley (1984, p. 287) define an occupational community as "a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; whose identity is drawn from the work; who share with one another a set of values, norms and perspectives that apply to but extend beyond work related matters; and whose social relationships meld work and leisure."

As Adweb members engage in the practice of *negotiating agreements*, they enact a decentralized project-based structure with an interdependent, horizontal division of labor, regularly shifting job responsibilities and distributed authority. Through these activities, members from diverse specialties bring multiple perspectives, interests, values, and experiences to the project, thus enabling creative friction, innovativeness, and adaptability. But these are accomplished not simply because of new structural arrangements within the firm, but because project members represent different occupational orientations and draw on these throughout the project to voice a multiplicity of interests and concerns. The synergistic results evident on many Adweb projects are generated through the activities of members navigating across different occupational boundaries, and are ongoing accomplishments that are neither given nor free of consequences, such as information overload, proceeding without agreement, political maneuvering, and pressures for continuous availability. Seen through an occupational lens, both the synergy and the unintended consequences reflect a guarding of highly valued occupational identities. These different identities both enable and constrain the practice of negotiating agreements.

An occupational influence can also be seen in the practice of *concurrent designing and building*. Adweb members from different specialties each employ their unique abilities and knowledge about web-based products as they create interactive websites in parallel. In doing this, they enact a culture of diversity, rapid learning, and speed, and utilize new technologies to facilitate the parallel activities of design and production. The activities of interacting electronically, using differential expertise, and iterating enable cross-disciplinary participation on the same project and concurrent engagement by multiple parties. However, the dependence on expertise from different occupational groups can lead to a pressure to be constantly working in order to ensure one's occupational voice is included. In addition, conflicts and incompatibilities may arise on the project as team members from different specialties attempt to meld their different work,

communication, and temporal practices. These diverse practices are not easily standardized across specialties, but instead are embedded in a bundle of activities and associated interactions that are critical to the work of particular occupational communities, and deemed essential to their members. Where differences in occupationally-based practices cannot be reconciled or leveraged, time is wasted, content is sacrificed in the interests of speed, and the resulting product may lack substance and coherence.

The practice of *coordinating across boundaries* inside Adweb may similarly be seen to relate to occupational issues. The coordination activities of planning and monitoring are, in part, a response to some of the difficulties encountered in a product development process that requires cooperation across occupational communities. Because no one person possesses all the expertise to lead the team, and no hierarchical position has been created to serve this role, project plans, meetings, and deadlines are used to integrate work and complete it in a timely and effective manner. Team members use new information technologies to enable the coordination of their work across time and distance. When these activities and technologies work well, they enable the production of a coherent product and the smooth integration of multiple project tasks across disciplinary and temporal boundaries, facilitating on-time and on-budget execution. However, everyday engagement in these activities is rarely seamless, and when team members from one specialty seek to impose (whether intentionally or not) their own standards, interests, work plans, and evaluative schemes on members of other occupational communities, the autonomy of these other occupational members and their control over their own work is threatened. Some members' efforts to control occupational work through detailed plans, meeting check-ins, tight deadlines, and focus on process rather than content, are consequently met with resistance from other members who are marching to different occupational drummers. This sometimes threatens the multiplicity, synergy, and creativity of the product and process.

The practice of *collaborating with clients* constitutes highly permeable firm boundaries that allow rapid adaptation to customer needs. In this practice, occupational influences are tempered by client-firm differences in interests, values, and skills. Adweb members may assume that client members from the same occupational community (e.g., Technology) share their values and interests, but modification of these interests and values by firm interests may lead to breakdowns in communication and missed deadlines. In addition, discrepancies in expertise between client and Adweb members mean that clients do not always understand what is being requested by Adweb members, and lead Adweb members to engage in detailed documentation for later proof that they had, in fact, discussed particular items with their counterparts at the client organization. Adweb members also feel they must extend their workday to match their temporal patterns to those of the client, often at the expense of their own occupational rhythms and values.

The four project-based practices, when engaged in recurrently by Adweb's members, constitute particular structural, cultural, and technical features of the firm and enable the generation of creative friction, the application of differential expertise, the integration of multiple perspectives over time, and the involvement of clients during product development. However, engagement in these practices, while enabled by occupational diversity is also constrained by it, and these same diverse values and interests may also lead to unintended consequences such as information overload, political maneuvering, and overemphasis on process over content. These unintended consequences are integral to the constitution of Adweb's non-bureaucratic logic of organizing, and as such, they are inseparable from the practices, and thus cannot be eliminated, only managed.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our findings of the non-bureaucratic ways of organizing work in one organization have implications for the understanding of new organizational forms. Much of the work examining the internal workings of new organizational forms has emphasized their structural, cultural, and technical characteristics (DiMaggio, 2001; Volberda, 1996) and the positive organizational benefits apparently associated with them (Barley, 1996; Girard & Stark, forthcoming). Our study depicts a more dynamic and nuanced view of new ways of organizing in highly competitive and rapidly changing environments. Using an occupational perspective, our study highlights that new modes of organizing are not created by a compilation of static characteristics, but are constituted through the everyday micro-level work activities of people in these organizations, and their ongoing interactions across a multiplicity of occupational boundaries. In summary, we show that as organizational actors draw on diverse perspectives, experiences, values, and interests to accomplish complex, dynamic, and technologically-mediated project-based work, they develop products across differences in occupational orientations. In this process, new ways of working are both enabled and constrained, resulting in intended and unintended consequences for individuals and organizations in our emerging post-industrial world.

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