

# Becoming a Swarm Catalyst

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## ABSTRACT

*This article analyzes the problems of bringing in social media in a traditional, hierarchical organization. Difficulties rise from the contradiction between the bureaucratic approach of an organization and the collaborative community approach connected to social media. A change in the role of a developer is analyzed through a case study. The data was collected in a co-development process of a work unit at a Finnish University of Applied Sciences. The method of this study is analytic autoethnography, which proved to be a valuable tool for capturing a long-term development process and the changing role of the developer inside the organization. A new change agent, a swarm catalyst, is introduced at the end of the article. The initial characteristics of a swarm catalyst are based on the experiences of various, iterative developmental experiments. A swarm catalyst operates within an organization as an autonomous developer, and as a negotiator between the traditional organization and decentralized developmental swarms.*

*Keywords:* Activity Experiment, Agency, Autoethnography, Bureaucracy, Collaborative Community, Organizational Change, Organizational Development, Social Media, Swarm Catalyst, Transparency

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## INTRODUCTION

The use of social media and different decentralized collaboration platforms has grown exponentially in recent years. This has produced a notable rise in literature dealing with social media. A central theme in aforementioned literature has been the utilization of social media in companies and organizations. Much has been written about marketing and crowdsourcing (Surowiecki, 2004; Tapscott & Williams, 2006), massive-scale distributed collaboration

(Bruns, 2008) and potential financial and legal implications of user-generated creation of content (Benkler, 2006; Bollier, 2008). The focus is usually on the activities of massive-scale user platforms or networks. Social media is regularly seen as a new type of outsourcing resource, which can be introduced without a major impact on the organizations' internal working logic. However, less attention has been paid to the question on how social media and transparent and distributed approaches affect

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the core activities of a traditional, historically developed organization.

Since most organizations cannot utilize the logic of massive-scale user groups, it is necessary to examine how transparent, distributed collaboration and a traditional, hierarchical organization encounter each other. Paul Adler's and Charles Heckscher's (2006) analysis of the differences between a *collaborative community* and a *bureaucracy* explores this contradiction. They argue that in an era of knowledge-intensiveness, work can be more efficiently organized by a method of collaborative community, as opposed to bureaucratic methods. Adler and Heckscher (ibid.) pay, however, less attention to the fact that the change of a historically formed organization from a bureaucracy to a collaborative community is by no means easy.

One prominent approach to study collaborative communities is to investigate network structures of collaboration. It has been, for example, noted that the history of organizations generates *structural holes* inside and between them (Burt, 1992). These gaps play a critical role when the organization is trying to widen its information sharing and collaboration. Such changes can be burdensome because the interests of the gatekeepers of the structural holes may not be parallel to these kinds of communication and collaboration improvement efforts. While useful as a general framework, analyses of networked activities and structural holes concentrate on structures of collaboration and have problems in capturing the role of active agents and developers.

The social media literature has mostly been preoccupied with technology and new organizational forms. Less attention has been paid to agency and, when it has been studied, the focus has been on an individual agency inside massive user communities or networks (e.g. Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008). In this paper, the focus is on the developmental transition from bureaucratic methods towards collaborative community. A temporal and contextual notion of agency is needed if we want to understand this kind of organizational change and its challenges as the work of real acting subjects (cf.

Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Engeström, 2008; Virkkunen, 2006).

This article analyzes these problems by means of a case study. The aim is to create an understanding about the symbiotic coexistence of hierarchical structures and decentralized collaboration in an organization and how these coexisting organizational logics are dealt with by the participants, especially by the developer. The case illuminates these issues by following the changing role of a developer. At the end of the paper a new kind of agency is defined, namely that of a swarm catalyst, which operates between loose activity swarms and a traditional organization. Because a swarm catalyst operates proactively within a historically evolving context, complex problems and contradictions arise.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### The Consequences of Knowledge-Intensiveness

Knowledge-intensive society is a society of perpetual beta. Nothing is ever definitively finished, and layers of society are influenced by parallel changes. The role of knowledge work has become increasingly prominent, and the work must be organized in a more flexible manner (Castells, 1996, 69-72). Adler and Heckscher (2006) maintain that a collaborative community demanded by knowledge-intensive work is based on the pursuit of collaboratively negotiated goals, mutual interdependence, trustful relations, and value-rationality. This creates a need for new types of ethics, based on an open sharing of information and mutual aid. To ensure that a traditional organization absorbs at least some of the features of collaborative community, it should be based on a so-called *enabling bureaucracy* (Adler & Borys, 1996). Personnel should be able to transfer, if necessary, from rule-based routines to creative building of knowledge, or to developmental activities without *coercive bureaucracy*. A coercive bureaucracy demands a worker to

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