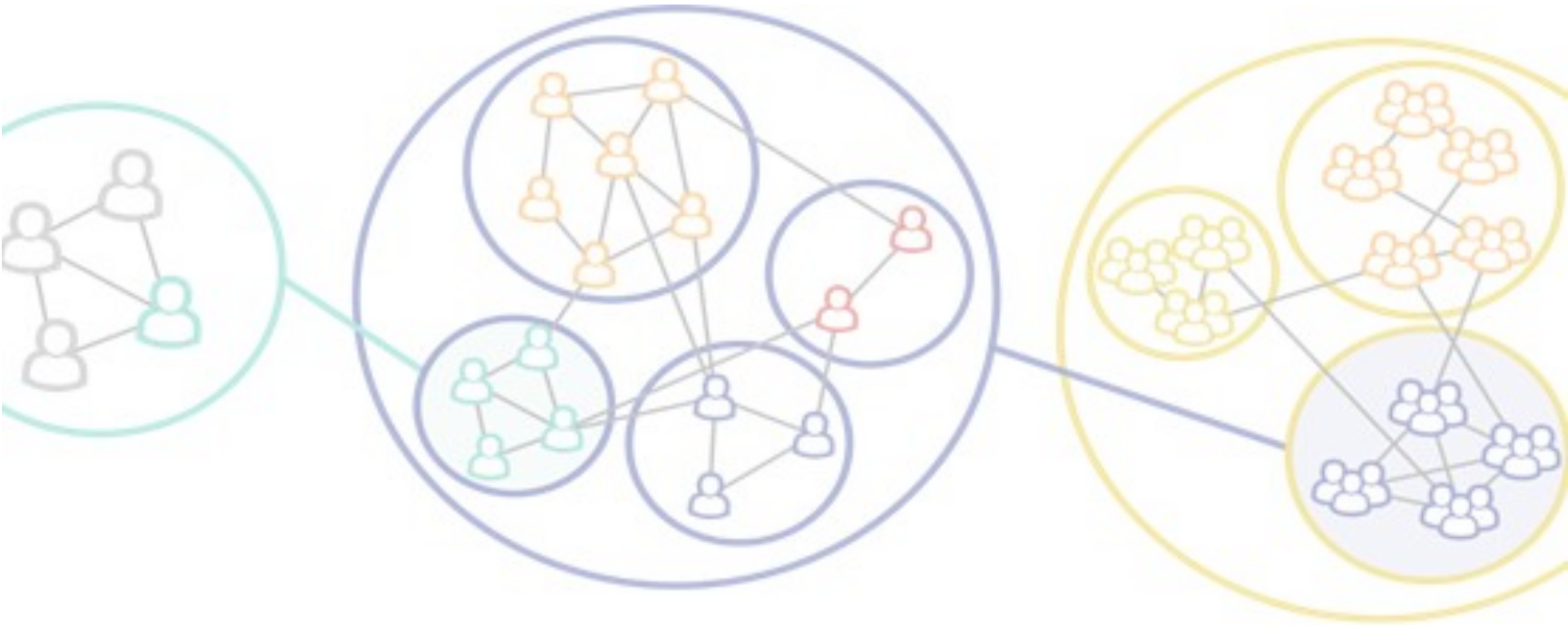

Team Assembly in Modern Workplaces: Network Origins of Emergent Teams

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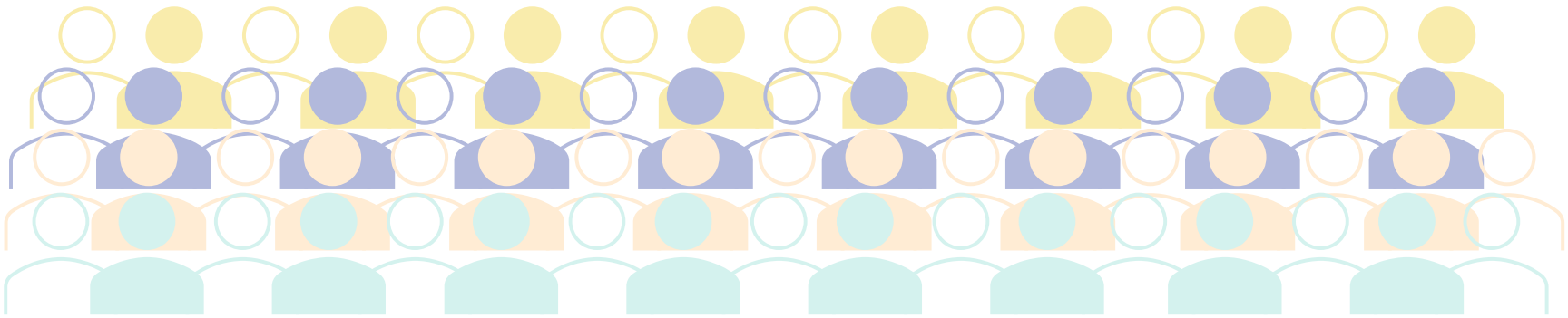

Self-Management Principles Infuse Modern Organizations

Contemporary organizations operate in dynamic and complex environments (Uhl-Bien, 2021), which are testing the utility of traditional business models and ways of operating. Recognizing the need for new ways of thinking about how people work, organizational leaders are adopting alternative approaches for conducting their operations and managing their people. More and more organizations are embracing less-hierarchical organizing practices enabling greater agility and capitalizing on workforce-driven insights to guide the direction of the organization.

With the aim of increasing their organization's effectiveness, these alternative organizational structures include self-management practices which range from giving greater decision-making discretion to certain work teams (Hackman, 1986) to radically decentralizing the whole structure of the organization (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). For instance, many purpose-driven, responsive organizations have adopted systems including Holacracy (e.g., Zappos; Robertson, 2015), which operates under self-management principles (see Lee & Edmondson, 2017 for a review). Holacracy limits the number of formal managers and gives individuals discretion to work under highly formalized but flexible role definitions (Robertson, 2015).

We argue that the adoption of these kinds of self-management practices, not only de-emphasizes the formal structure of the firm, but also amplifies the impact of the 'invisible' structure of the organization - the network of relationships connecting its employees.

The informal organizing process of individuals throughout the firm into effective teams is even more central to organizational success in these modern, less-hierarchical organizations. Formal leaders are no longer in charge of assembling (or staffing) teams or managing the team's work to meet the organization's overarching objectives. Instead, teams emerge from and operate within the informal structure (i.e., network) of the firm either by coalescing around a shared purpose through the recruitment processes of an informal leader. Understanding the effectiveness of emergent, self-managed teams begins with understanding how and why these teams assemble in the first place (see Figure 1).

Our research aims to understand not only how the network structure serves as the basis for the emergent organizing of teams, but also how people utilize their networks to form and work as teams in modern organizations.

Figure 1

Team Assembly → **Team Composition** → **Teamwork Processes** → **Team Effectiveness**

Prescribed and Emergent Team Assembly

Team assembly refers to the formation process that leads to the composition of a team's members and ultimately affects how a team works together and its effectiveness (Twyman & Contractor, 2019). Teams have historically been prescribed by the organization through top-down staffing by a person with formal authority who appoints team members (e.g., a manager at a company staffs a team from their subordinates). However, teams also form through bottom-up processes in which individuals voluntarily self-organize and join efforts as a result of informal interactions (e.g., conversations over coffee). In these situations, there is not a formal or informal leader initiating the team's formation; instead, members themselves initiate the assembly process.

Also falling under the category of emergent team assembly processes, we introduce the concept of network-leveraged team assembly (NLT), which refers to a focal individual (informal leader) utilizing their network to compel others to join the team. This process is distinct from staffed-assembly because the person convening the team is not in a position of formal authority and differs from self-assembly because individuals do not self-organize into a team. Instead, NLTs are formed by an informal leader who recruits network contacts, without formal authority, to accomplish a project or task.

To clarify these distinctions, consider how each assembly process could be used to form a research team. Research teams could be formed by a principal investigator assigning research assistants to work on a project (staffed team), or by researchers self-organizing to form a team with no clear team leader during the initial stage of the project (self-assembled teams), or by a scholar seeking out others to join a project without the authority to compel them to do join the team (NLT). In Figure 2 we clarify the key distinctions between each type of team assembly and in the remaining of this section, we delve deeper into what differences in these processes affect team member commitment and responsibility for the team's output.

Figure 2

	Prescribed Teams	Emergent Teams	
	Staffed	**Network-Leveraged**	**Self-Assembled**
Leader Authority	Formal Leader	Informal Leader	Distributed Leadership
Leader Position	Inside or Outside	Inside	Inside
Member Agency to Join	Low	High	High
Member Agency to Recruit	Low	Moderate to High	High
Member Commitment	Low	High	High
Responsibility for Team Output	Leader Primarily	Shared Responsibility	Members

Prescribed Teams

Staffed teams are convened by individuals who have formal authority to select team members. Team members in staffed teams are limited in their agency to decide if they want to join the team or not. Team members also have low discretion in recruiting others to join the team (Contractor, 2013) and in determining which skills or requirements are necessary for the work, as these decisions are left to the staffer or manager (Aalbers, Dolfsma, & Koppius, 2013). Most of the responsibility for staffed teams' effectiveness solely falls under the person given staffing authority. Staffers or managers are responsible for thinking about different combinations of attributes such as personalities or expertise during the team assembly process, and accounting for the top-down pressures under which the team operates. They are primarily held accountable for the team's performance (Twyman & Contractor, 2019). The low levels of agency team members have during the team assembly process (Contractor, 2013) may reduce their commitment to the project or their trust in others.

Emergent Teams

Self-assembled teams do not have a formal leader making staffing and other decisions for the team. Instead, these teams are formed by the ultimate members of a team in what is considered a bottom-up process. Research indicates that the performance of this type of team is generally high. For instance, self-assembled research collaborations resulted in successful co-authorships (Guimerà et al., 2005). Team members are free to work with whomever they please, engaging in temporary collaborations with others without a binding contract. Given the high levels of agency team members have over their participation in the team (Twyman & Contractor, 2019), they tend to be more intrinsically motivated and committed, better able to gauge the needed skills and task requirements for a team to be successful and make decisions based on their motivations and complementary skills of potential team members. Friendships are also important; self-assembled teams composed of friends and acquaintances tend to perform better than staffed teams and positive experiences with certain members will likely repeat in the future (Hahn, Moon, & Zhang, 2008). Finally, each individual in self-assembled teams is held accountable for the success of the team.

Network-leveraged teams (NLT) are formed by a focal individual who recruits network contacts to join the team. The assembly process of NLTs combines elements of the assembly processes of staffed and self-assembled teams. Members enjoy the discretion to join the team (characteristic of self-assembled teams) but there is an informal leader that serves the function of a manager or staffer guiding the team formation and follow-on work to accomplish a goal, task, or project. Informal leaders who form these teams do not have formal authority over potential team members. Potential members of NLTs are free to accept or reject the invitation to join a team and may leave the group at any point even after being recruited. High levels of team member agency to join the team or recruit potential members results in NLT members being more committed to the team. Finally, the responsibility for the success of the team is shared across the different members of the team. Thus, while there is an informal leader that is guiding the team's efforts, all the team members are equally held accountable for the success of the team.

Network Utilization is Key to Self-Assembled and Network-Leveraged Team Assembly

The formation of network-leveraged and self-assembled teams requires individuals (whether they be the informal leader of an NLT or the members of a self-assembled team) to utilize their network(s) as the driver of team assembly. Emerging research in the area of network cognition (Smith et al., 2012) is useful to understand how such informal, emergent assembly processes occur. There are three distinct stages in the emergent team assembly process, which we describe below for NLTs. In the first stage, the informal leaders call to mind potential candidates to join the NLT from all of the leader's network contacts (i.e., contact activation). The second stage involves the informal leader deciding who of the individuals called to mind will be asked to join the NLT (i.e., contact mobilization). In the third stage, informal leaders attempt to recruit individuals they have asked to join the NLT and potential team members decide whether they will participate (i.e., contact realization). For self-assembled teams one or more team members may engage in this process as they seek to attract other team members to their team.

With increased emphasis on self-management within organizations an important question becomes:

What are the key drivers of emergent team assembly?

Researchers have recently started examining the factors that lead to the formation of teams (Ichhaporia et al., 2019; Twyman & Contractor, 2019). For instance, research supports the notion that qualifications, expertise, and abilities of each team member are often attributes that individuals should consider when forming teams (Nurius & Kemp, 2019). Other attributes that shape who team leaders will attempt to recruit including similarities between the team leader and potential teammates. Furthermore, prior relationships also influence team assembly (Twyman & Contractor, 2019). For instance, based on the familiarity principle, when forming a team, individuals are more likely to consider people with whom they had positive (as opposed to negative) past interactions (Hinds et al., 2000) or consider friendships as they increase the likelihood of positive work experiences (Ren et al., 2015). Less research has examined the last stage of this process – who agrees to join a team when asked. Existing research suggests that behaviors individuals display when interacting with one another (see Doreian & Conti, 2012) are likely to impact an informal leader's success in calling on their network to form a team. Thus, this third stage involves not only the social skills and attributes of informal leaders but also the social relationships between the leader and the potential team member, which are likely to impact the likelihood that a person will agree to join the team (Cao & Smith, 2020).

In our ongoing work, we are examining individual, relational, and system-level drivers (predictors) to understand who is asked and who accepts invitations to join NLTs and self-assembled teams (see Figure 3 for some examples).

Figure 3

System
- Performance Evaluations
- Payment and Reward Structures
- Reputation (third-party accounts)
- Referrals
- Overlapping Team Memberships
- Social Norms

Relational
- Work Exchanges
- Trust
- Friendship
- Similarities

Individual
- Role
- Expertise
- Workload
- System-thinking
- Motivation to Lead
- Personality/Social Skills

Our Research Approach

Our ongoing work explores these more emergent forms of team assembly (Ichhaporia et al., 2019; Twyman & Contractor, 2019) drawing on cutting-edge network cognition research methodologies (Smith et al., 2012; Cullen-Lester, Woehler, Lester, & Solanelles, 2021) to uncover what factors impact an informal leader's ability to effectively recruit people to join their team.

Phase 1: Discovery Interviews

Objective: Learn about the organization's objectives, structure, and work processes to inform survey refinement in Phases 2-4.

Phase 2: Individual Qualities, Capabilities, and Roles Survey

Objective: Clarify individual's roles, expertise, and characteristics as well as existing team memberships that may explain team assembly processes.

Phase 3: Workplace Relationships Survey

Objective: Reveal the network that exists within and between teams in the organization.

Phase 4: Team Assembly, Processes, and Effectiveness Survey

Objective: Capture team assembly decision-making process, measure teamwork processes, and team effectiveness.

Bios

Please contact us to discuss how your organization can participate in this pioneering research.

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Dr. Kristin Cullen-Lester is an Assistant Professor of Management in the School of Business Administration at the University of Mississippi. She holds a Ph.D. and M.S. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Auburn University. Prior to joining the University of Mississippi, she was a Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), a top global provider of executive education, where she led the center's R&D efforts integrating networks into leadership development and on the faculty of the C. T. Bauer College of Business at the University of Houston. Dr. Cullen-Lester serves on the editorial boards of The Leadership Quarterly, Journal of Organizational Behavior, and Journal of Business and Psychology. Her research focuses on relational aspects of leadership, including leaders' social networks and the role of organizational networks in shared leadership, complex collaboration, and strategic, large-scale change. This work is supported by grant funding from the National Science Foundation and was recognized by the Society for Industrial Organizational Psychology for her early career contributions to practice including developing scientifically grounded, practitioner-friendly network assessments, tools, and interventions that have helped more than 50 organizations in various sectors and industries create positive change.

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