

Chapter 3

Collaborating Without (Formal) Organization: How Do Freelancers Question the Definition and the Role of Organizations?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on independent workers and on the organizational specificities of the independent workers' phenomenon. The authors treat independent workers as an emergent and continually shifting organizational phenomenon questioning some of our assumptions about what organizations are and revealing trends that are currently reshaping work. They suggest viewing the independent workers' phenomenon as an open organizational phenomenon in which activities are project-oriented, temporality-oriented, and inclusive. This chapter contributes to an understanding of the independent workers' phenomenon as an organizational one that constantly (re)defines rules, roles, and statuses making the activities possible. It also contributes to a broader reflection on the matter of organization. Considered as an open organizational phenomenon, the independent workers' phenomenon calls the organization-society dualism into question. Finally, revealing the organizational aspects of independent workers' activities allows us to better understand some of the transformations that are nowadays affecting more traditional forms of work.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7426-2.ch003

INTRODUCTION

Makers (Anderson, 2012; Dougherty, 2012; Hatch, 2013), creative freelancers (Debra, 2010), coworkers (Spinuzzi, 2012), and digital nomads (Makimoto & Manners, 1997; Nash, Jarrahi, Sutherland, & Phillips, 2018) have been under the media spotlight for a while as they redefine the way people work, collaborate, and are involved in society. All of them can be called “independent workers” (or “self-employees”), as they are not attached to any company or government, but rather are their own bosses (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Leighton, 2016). “Independent” means there is no subordinate relation between them and their collaborators or clients, but only temporary contracts with the aim of achieving a specific goal (Burke, 2015; Cappelli & Keller, 2013).

This does not mean that independent workers work alone. In addition to examining the specific situation of each of these independent workers, we can also look at them as an ensemble, and see in their collective activities an organizational form that emerges and may persist for a while. In this sense, the independent workers’ phenomenon is an intensive human capital phenomenon (Ployhart, Nyberg, Reilly, & Maltarich, 2014; Schultz, 1961; Wright & McMahan, 2011), as each worker is involved in numerous projects, with various clients, companies, and other independent workers. Seeing this as an organizational phenomenon can seem a bit unusual, but it is also an interesting way to understand how people collaborate in an expanding world of self-employed work.

Although an exact appreciation of the size of this movement is difficult to establish, some studies indicate that the independent workers’ movement already represents about 35% of the US workforce and that the majority of workers could be freelancers by 2027.¹ In Europe, the rate is not as high, but independent workers represent 16% of the workforce, with an important increase shown since 2004.² While it was the common way to work and collaborate during the 19th century – at least in countries such as France - (Marchand, 1998), independent working has reappeared as a key trend after a century of decline. Of course, the jobs, skills, and tools have evolved since, but the core principles of independent work remain the same: the workers are free (they are not attached to an organization in a stable way), but their work entails the need to collaborate intensively with each other and with various organizations.

As wage employment has been the dominant model in Western society during the 20th century, organization scholars have mainly conceptualized the organization as a social structure based on working contracts. In this, organization has been defined as a rational-action system (Selznick, 1948), with a specific behavior (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958), and evolving in a given environment (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Mainly inspired by the sociology of bureaucracy (Merton, 1968; Weber, 1922) and the economic view of organizations

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