AUTONOMY IN TEAL ORGANIZATIONS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Introduction/background: One of the features of teal organizations is employee autonomy, which is realized, among other things, through delegation of authority, and decision-making carried out through employee participation in the consultative process.

Aim of the paper: The aim of this paper is to try to answer the question of what are the key areas of autonomy in teal organizations.

Materials and methods: The reflections in the publication are based on an analysis of the literature and qualitative research conducted with management of thirteen teal organizations. In-depth interviews were conducted and the collected data was further analyzed.

Results and conclusions: Practices implemented in the interviewed organizations include a wide range of autonomy, incorporating both elements of organizational autonomy and job autonomy.

Keywords: teal organizations, autonomy, job autonomy, self-management, self-organization.

1. Introduction

Scientific literature promotes concepts that are based on the idea of self-management, which increase the range of employees' autonomy. (Ziębicki, 2017). Within those approaches, we can mention the teal organization (Laloux, 2015). On the other hand, the research on Polish companies allows us to draw a not very optimistic conclusion. Only 2% of employers allow their employees to make decisions independently, and 52% mobilize them in the process. In contrast, empirical research shows a positive impact of autonomy on the commitment of employees (Christian Slaughter, 2007; Sung, Yoon, Han, 2022).

This publication will attempt to identify the elements of autonomy in 13 teal organizations using qualitative research. The main method used to obtain data was an in-depth interview with management.

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[1] The publication/article presents the results of the Project financed from the subsidy granted to the Krakow University of Economics.

2. The concept of teal organizations

The first person to present the definition of a teal organization was F. Laloux (2015). The author defined it as a new organizational model, with the company's implementation of the self-management idea as its foundation. Laloux distinguishes a set of essential features of teal organizations, indicating, inter alia: autonomous decision-making (also called consultative processes) trust, partnership, and responsibility, transparency (Laloux, 2015); and empowerment of employees (Laloux, 2015; Jędrych, 2020). The list of companies analysed included: Patagonia, a well-known American clothing manufacturer; Buurtzorg, a Dutch non-profit organization representing healthcare; and Morning Star, belonging to the food industry. According to the author, studied companies reveal three main features to a varying extent. Those features are called breakthroughs and are as follows: self-management, wholeness, and evolutionary purpose. Their functioning is a result of changes over the years in the model of work (Laloux, 2015).

The issue of teal organizations understood according to the mainstream presented by F. Laloux is mostly interpreted by: A. Kozina and A. Pieczonka (2017); B. Ziębicki (2017); B. Powichrowska (2018); A. Akberdiyeva (2018); P. Wiench (2020); Z. Olesiński (2020); A. Rzepka (2020); A. Faron, W. Maciejewski, K. Formadi (2020); C.F. Gómez Muñoz et al. (2020). Table 1 shows an analysis of key features, describing the concept of teal organizations. This approach is referred to as philosophy (Akberdiyeva, 2018), a new paradigm, or the way for organizing teamwork (Blikle, 2016). In Poland, the concept of teal organization was popularised by A.J. Blikle (2016, p. 41), defining it as the teal civilization of work.

Table 1.
Overview of selected terms characterising the concept of teal organization as presented in the literature

Publication	Key terms describing the concept of teal organization
A.J. Blikle (2016, p. 37)	"philosophy of work"
	"a new paradigm of how teamwork is organized"
B. Ziębicki (2017, p. 86)	"the result of the evolution of organizational models"
A. Akberdiyeva (2018, p. 11)	"the philosophy of teal organization"
B. Powichrowska, (2018, p. 101)	"continuation of the knowledge management concept"
J. Holwek (2018, p. 12)	"a utopian approach to business"
E. Bojar, M. Bojar (2020, p. 30)	"a team lacking not only a hierarchy but even once and for all defined roles"
P. Wiench (2020, p. 209)	"at their core are self-organized teams implementing self-management"
Z. Olesiński (2020, p. 265)	"the most advanced form of organization"
A. Rzepka (2020, p. 314)	"innovative type of organization"
A. Sabat (2020, p. 328)	"approach to teamwork"
R. Borowiecki, et al. (2021, p. 118)	"innovative type of self-managed organization"
A. Rzepka, R. Borowiecki, Z. Olesiński (2022, p. 265)	"evolutionary model of organizational culture"

Source: own study.

It is important to note that J. Holwek (2018) presented a critical assessment of the teal organization, highlighting its ideological component. A sceptical attitude towards this concept is also shared by B. Kożusznik, M. Paliga and A. Pollak (2020), who accuse it of lacking a precise definition and confirmation of the assumptions.

According to E. Jędrych (2020, p. 81) the core of teal organizations is "an organizational culture based on trust". Many researchers (Laloux, 2015; Blikle, 2016; Ziębicki, 2017; Borowiecki, Olesiński, 2020), however, including the propagator of the mentioned idea, view its development in the context of organizational evolution.

The teal organization model is one of several approaches underpinned by the idea of self-management involving the expansion of employee autonomy. As an example of such solutions, we can also mention Agile and Holacracy (Ziębicki, 2017). Some features of teal organization, though, have been practiced in management for a long time by implementing elements of autonomy in organizations. A prime example of this is Thomas Baty's company, described by Z. Martyniak (2002).

3. Definition of autonomy in management

An analysis of English-language scientific literature allows us to state that the issue of autonomy is a multifaceted construct. There are various types of autonomy that we can encounter:

- organizational autonomy (Wynen, Verhoest, Rübeck, 2014; Arregle, et al., 2022),
- professional autonomy (RaVerty, Ball, Aiken, 2001; Nygren, Dobek-Ostrowska, Anikina, 2015),
- work autonomy (Breaugh, 1989),
- job autonomy (De Jonge, 1995; Saragih, 2011), should be defined and measured in a differentiated manner.

Table 2.
Types of autonomy and ways of defining them

Type of autonomy	Author	Characteristics
Organizational autonomy	Wynen, Verhoest, Rübecksen (2014)	The level of decision-making authority the organization has Delegation or decentralization of decision-making authority
	Arregle et al. (2022)	Multi-level structure: the ability to form various configurations (e.g., department as a parent unit, the team as a sub-unit)
	Arregle et al. (2022)	It directly influences decision-making - adequate or inadequate scope of organizational autonomy may lead to successful or unsuccessful strategic decisions or actions for the organization

Cont. table 2.

Professional autonomy	Pursio et al. (2021, p. 1573)	Independence in decision-making and the ability to utilize one's own competence
	Frostenson (2015)	3 dimensions of professional autonomy: general autonomy, collegial autonomy, and individual autonomy
Job autonomy	Oldham, Hackman (2010); Hackman, Lawler (1971)	Autonomy as one of the work dimensions (variety, autonomy, required interaction, optional interaction, knowledge and skill required, responsibility)
	Oldham, Hackman (2010)	Determines the degree of freedom at work, independence, and influence on establishment of procedures used in the organization
	Sung, Yoon, Han (2022)	Variable measurement scales: Hackman and Oldham's Job Diagnostic Survey
	Muecke, Greenwald (2020)	3 dimensions of job autonomy: decision-making, scheduling, and method autonomy
Work autonomy	Breaugh (1999)	3 dimensions of work autonomy: work method autonomy, work scheduling autonomy, and criteria autonomy Work autonomy is evaluated by Work Autonomy Scales
Autonomy in psychology	Ryan, Deci (2006)	A key need of every human being, affecting their well-being

Source: own study.

J-L. Arregle et al. (2022) have reviewed 87 articles covering the topic of organizational autonomy, which scope granted to the individual is significantly different from individual autonomy. The definition of the first term covers a wider range. Table 2 analyses the concept of autonomy. J.T. Hackman and E.E. Lawler's definition (1971) emphasizes employees having influence on planning their work and co-deciding company procedures. It is worth highlighting that this issue was perceived as one of the dimensions of work (Hackman, Oldham, 1974; Hackman, Lawler, 1971; Oldham, Hackman, 2010). In contrast, Muecke and J.M. Greenwald (2020) prove that job autonomy has 3 dimensions: method autonomy, scheduling autonomy, and decision-making autonomy.

Research on this issue is being carried out both from a management perspective (Hackman, Lawler, 1971; Hackman, Oldham, 1974; de Jonge, 1995) and from a psychological perspective (Ryan, Deci, 2006).

Organizational autonomy is a broad concept, referring to the whole organization or its individual components within a formal structure (teams, departments, or companies). Job autonomy and work autonomy relate directly to the functioning of the individual at work and their individual's freedom to carry out tasks. Although job autonomy is described as one of the dimensions of work, it appears that both constructs are semantically similar.

4. The importance of autonomy for the organization

The beneficial outcome of reinforcing individual autonomy among employees was noticed by M.P. Follett. The researcher claimed that including workers in the decision-making process positively influences their commitment and welfare (Korombel, Grabiec, 2016).

This relationship is confirmed by empirical research. In one of them, M.S. Christian and J.E. Slaughter (Christian, Slaughter, 2007) have demonstrated that autonomy positively impacts the commitment of employees (Mρ =.42). A similar relationship was tested by the team consisting of M. Sung, D.-Y. Yoon, C.S.-H. Han (2022), additionally including the mediation role of psychological meaningfulness, which, together with job engagement, positively correlates with autonomy. Moreover, the learning culture moderated the relationship between job autonomy and commitment.

K. Pursio, et al. (2021) conducted another review of research on professional autonomy among a group of nurses. The findings of analysis proved that people demonstrating a wide range of autonomy took an active part in problem-solving. The formation of autonomy was fostered by a good nurse-doctor relationship and supportive management.

5. Autonomy as a feature of teal organizations

Autonomy in teal organizations manifests itself through the ability of employees to make decisions. As per A. J. Blikle (2016, p. 36), this is done according to the principle of partnership democracy; "those who know decide, and the rest trust them".

Table 3.
Areas of autonomy in chosen teal organizations

Organization	Type of autonomy	
	Organizational autonomy	**Job/ work autonomy**
ESBZ	Despite formal hierarchal structure, so-called mini-schools are being set up (flexible teams of teachers who have broad decision-making powers, comprising three classes) Two tutors per class	A sense of responsibility for their own education is fostered among pupils (Laloux, 2015) Pupils learn independently (personal liability) and in teams (forming small teams), with a free pace of learning (the student decides what subjects they want to focus on)
FAVI	The organization is made up of autonomous teams (so-called mini-factories) of 15 to 35 employees Flattening of organizational structures: closure of departments: human resources, planning, scheduling, engineering, production, and purchasing (appointment of operators in the teams) (Laloux, 2015)	The teams independently organize their work, create and implement procedures, recruit, plan, schedule, and decide about weekly and monthly meetings A manufacturing worker may become the operator of various machines, coordinate purchases, and get involved in the recruitment process
Morning Star	"Individual contracting network" as a structural model implemented in organization (Laloux, 2015, p. 378) Teams are called "business units"	Determination of the investment budget by the teams Roles and liabilities are discussed during individual conversations between co-workers, closely cooperating with each other

Cont. table 3.

RHD	The structure of parallel units, lack of middle management	Each programme is the responsibility of a self-management team of up to 50 people (responsible for strategy, recruitment, budgeting, and performance monitoring) Specialists make the final decision, e.g., regarding the patient (possible consultation) (Laloux, 2015)
Sun Hydraulics	Lack of a planning and supply department Lack of management to control complex projects Flexible formation and dissolution of so-called implementation teams	Employees self-organize The working time of employees on the production floor is not monitored (elimination of time cards)

Source: own study.

On the other hand, F. Laloux (2015, pp. 123-124) defines the decision-making process in teal organization as an "consultative process"; its aim is to consult specific choices with other members of the team and seek expert's advice. The decision-maker has a wide range of powers, but the more complex the problem, the more people are involved in the process.

Another manifestation of organizational autonomy can be seen as the flattening of structures through the use of varied structural arrangements: "parallel units", "individualised contracting networks", "nested units" (Laloux, 2015, pp. 376-378; Hopej-Tomaszycka, Hopej, 2018, p. 219). Table 3 characterises areas of autonomy based on the analysis of five teal organizations. As stated by Laloux the most commonly used solutions are parallel units. As an example, the author uses Buurtzorg, FAVI and RHD (Laloux, 2015).

Referring to the representatives of teal organizations outlined below, autonomy should be understood broadly. It relates to organizational autonomy (characterised by flattening structures and reducing middle management), as well as employee's autonomy (in particular, reinforcing it by influencing the organization, execution of work, and including employees in decisions affecting both the team and the organization as a whole).

6. Research methods

In order to identify areas of autonomy in teal organizations through qualitative research, 13 companies, representing various industries (medical, welfare, consulting, IT, marketing, education, and financial) were analyzed. To obtain data, in-depth interviews were conducted with the management. Interviews with representatives were carried out online, using a Dictaphone in order to be transcribed later. The collected data was then subjected to qualitative content analysis, using the MAXQDA tool. Based on the literature review, a mixed coding of the collected data was applied.

An important criterion for the selection of institutions for this study was the features of the formal structure (flexibility, expanding the scope of employee autonomy) and implementing one of the concepts based on the idea of self-management: teal, holacratic, or agile organization. The following research question was formulated: What are the key areas of autonomy in teal organizations?

7. Autonomy in teal organizations – presentation of findings

Table 4 compares the extent of employee autonomy across institutions. Employee autonomy is mainly manifested through participation (employees are included in company affairs, encouraged to actively submit their ideas, and share their opinions) and in the area of their role in the organization (the ability to change their position).

Table 4.
Analysis of areas of autonomy in selected organizations

Organizations	Organizational autonomy		Job autonomy
	Structure	Decision-making	
Anna Jurewicz: Coaching Courses Management	Lack of permanent teams, agile appointment of "working teams" in line with the current goal of the organization (e.g., organization of conferences)	Participatory decision-making (asking for coaches' opinions), consulting	Engaging and motivating coaches in the process of co-creating the organization The ability to submit their own ideas for the development of the organization
Brass Willow	Formation of so-called task forces inspired by holacratic circles, which are flexible and created for the purpose of working with clients (holacratic approach not formally introduced, constitution not adopted) Additional creation of second and third circles (teams created by part-time workers)	Decisions are made by an expert in the field Establishment of a consultative process (stakeholder consultation)	Influence on employee involvement in company-wide initiatives Opportunity to object to or question team's choices Acting as a facilitator in the decision-making process Decision-making autonomy over individual employee competencies (within their role in the organization) Ability to choose form of work (remote, onsite, hybrid)

Cont. table 4.

Buurtzorg	Small autonomous teams of health visitors, self-organizing their work (10,000 in total, working with a group of 21 independent supporting coaches)	Collective decision-making in terms of planning their own work: meetings, scheduling, laying out the access routes, recruitment of a new person to the team (responsibility of delegating teams) Consultation of the patient's situation in more difficult cases with a more specialized worker	Autonomy in terms of professional role (deciding on one's own development, length of visits to the patient, strengthening one's independence, working style, personal development) (Chyla, 2022)
Fundacja Transgresja [*Foundation Transgression*]	Lack of permanent teams, establishment of flexible project teams Operation of the Deafblind Club (permanent activities)	Decision-making through consultation (in the case of significant financial decisions)	Decision-making autonomy of each employee with regards to their role and personal development within the organization (ability to propose and realize projects according to one's own aspirations and interests)
HighSolution	Permanent teams and flexible circles within the organization	Delegating decisions down to teams Decisions regarding the circles are made democratically (or meritocratically by the leader, if necessary) Complex decisions that go beyond the circle are taken by the circle leaders through consultation	The employee decides on a range of goals to achieve by the next meeting Opportunity to participate in development processes (access to seminars, conferences, and coaching processes)
Bees&Honey	Structure of self-managing circles (the existence of a main "mother circle") Holacratic inspiration without a formally adopted holacracy constitution Using the beehive metaphor in organizational reality (bees have different roles) Using the Holaspirit tool	Striving for consensus (unanimity) through dialogue, and consultation Decision-making autonomy of the circles	Most often, the decision is made by people who have expertise in the field (leaders with professional experience); sometimes, a team approach is required

Cont. table 4.

Henryk Sienkiewicz's High School nr 1 in Kędzierzyn-Koźle, Poland	Transformation of the school into an agile organization Creating flexible SCRUM Teams Setting up interdisciplinary teams of teachers	Style integrating different forms: participative within SCRUM Teams, directive (breaking down resistance) The form of decision-making is partly due to the peculiarities of the functioning of an educational institution (legal regulations)	The impact of teachers on teaching (use of educational methods), fostering a sense of empowerment among pupils Decisions made by teams to engage in given activities
Lunar Logic	Lack of formal structure (flexible teams created during realization of projects) Taking up roles instead of positions	Consultative process (consulting decisions with other people involved in the matter and with expertise) Transparency of decisions in the organization	"Every individual can make any decision in a structured manner."[2]
Mentax	Functioning on the basis of circles (the core element of the organization is a role – smallest part of the structure – and the circle) Competence structure (competence in the organization, not formal authority, becomes important) Using the Holaspirit tool, supporting the management process	Various decision-making modes in the organization, depending on the rank of the decision Principle of seeking consensus through advice, consultation, and the integration of objections	Any person may decide to resign from a role (by informing the competence or circle monitor)
PerfectCircle	4-person core team, holacratic circle structure (core general circle, without formally adopted holacracy constitution) Ability to change roles flexibly Using the Holaspirit in the organization	Dynamic self-management Participation (in the core circle and sub-circles) Team decision-making on hiring a new person	Decision-making autonomy within the role (possibility of support, consultation) Participation in finances (profit distribution at the end of each year)

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[2] Statement by Paweł Brodziński during in-depth interview in the Lunar Logic company.

Cont. table 4.

Sanofi Pasteur[3]	Departments: marketing, sales, medical (including department of registration), logistics, public affairs, financial Establishment of a 7-person working group for the purpose of transformation towards teal organization	Decision-making style evolved from hierarchal towards an expansion of autonomy (shifting decision-making downwards)	Extension of employees' decision-making autonomy related to their role (e.g., sales representatives co-determining the size of a target)
SoftwareMill	Structure of guilds (technical and non-technical) and smaller elements in the structure – sub-guilds Guilds were defined as company associations implementing a certain range of activities	Seeking optimal solutions by involving in the consultation process those involved in the problem under consideration Transparency of decisions in the organization	Involving co-workers in organizational matters (creating space for action, possibility to propose one's own ideas with justification), encouraging them to express their opinion on a given topic, strengthening the sense of influence (e.g., influence in the development of a new promotion system, possibility to propose a change during a company meeting)
Turkusowe Śniadania [*Teal Breakfasts*]	Structure of holacratic circles (each city in which the foundation is active has set up a separate team with a local mentor) Lack of a formal holacracy constitution	Autonomous decision-making in support of the ideas of the Foundation	Every person may take the initiative to carry out a project and has to take responsibility for it Ability to join an initiative in a project carried out by the Foundation (creating flexible teams)

Source: own study.

Four of the interviewed organizations refer to holacratic conception in the area of structural solutions, where circles are the equivalent of teams (none of the above had formally adopted the constitution). Those teams (variously referred to as circles, guilds, working groups, task forces, or SCRUM teams) are characterized by their flexibility. The dominant form of decision-making in most organizations is consultative process (realized through consultation with a wider group, including employees, the ability to object, and the obligation to consult an expert group).

8. Results discussion

Having analyzed the issue of autonomy in depth, the question arises as to what the appropriate extent of autonomy is and whether it translates into highly effective teams and

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[3] The descirbed change in the organization towards teal relates to the period 2013-2018 in the Polish division of Sanofi Pasteur, during the presidency of Mr Maciej Trybulec.

individual involvement. It is therefore a question of the limits of autonomy in an organization. Will its overly broad implementation among employees cause role overload or contribute to individual burnout?

In one experiment, a group of researchers comprising: V. Boss et al. (2021) proved that the best results were obtained by a team with partial rather than full autonomy. This issue should be the subject of further scientific investigation. Especially as there are publications showing the negative effects of employee autonomy in the context of flexible forms of work (Kubicek, Paškvan, Bunner, 2017). It is also worth examining the factors that support the development of autonomy in an organization. According to the author of this article, one of these is a high level of employee competence and leadership.

9. Conclusions

An exploration of the areas of autonomy showed that the solutions adopted by the interviewed organizations cover a wide range of organizational autonomy and job autonomy. Examples, related to job autonomy are varied – depending on the organization and the industry – and include practices in different areas (recruitment, personal development, role, scheduling, participation in selected projects). Organizational autonomy should be equated with the delegation of responsibility to employees, the use of flexible structural solutions (functioning of autonomous teams), and decision-making autonomy (consultative process, consultation of the adopted solutions).

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