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AUTONOMOUS TEAMS' CONTRIBUTION TO GAINING BENEFITS FROM NETWORK COLLABORATION

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Purpose: The main scientific purpose of this article is to identify benefits of autonomous teams in collaboration within inter-organizational network. The study focuses on diagnosing in what way autonomous teams contribute to the increase in efficiency of operating, from the perspective of both individual network participant and network as a whole.
Design/methodology/approach: Conceptual positioning of the research aim at providing a generalizable contribution to management science, at the same time being accessible to practitioners. The research was carried out using the interpretative method of a case study, following its methodological rigor. The study provided data corresponding with set research questions. Additionally, the results were confronted and confirmed within internal documents analysis.
Findings: The specificity of autonomous teams corresponds well with the nature of inter-organizational network. Consequently, the teams have a noticeable contribution to gaining benefits from this type of collaboration. In most cases the impact is strong or moderate, and it refers to both types of rent: from the perspective of an individual participant and of the whole network.
Research imitations/implications: Although implemented research methods allowed achieving research objectives, natural character of case studies requires cautiousness in generalizing results.
Practical implications: The results serve as a guideline for managers who can take advantage of autonomous teams and increase the efficiency of inter-organizational network collaboration.
Originality/value: The author adopts a new perspective to the issue of taking advantage of autonomous teams in managing organizations, concentrating on the specific conditions of inter-organizational networks. The study expands our understanding of how the nature of network collaboration corresponds with the features of autonomous work groups. It presents a concise theoretical construct which explains how network participants can exploit such teams and contribute to gaining unique rents dedicated to network collaboration.
Keywords: autonomous teams, inter-organizational networks, network collaboration benefits.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Today organizations operate in the environment characterised by multi-directional co-dependence of business partners (Renteria, 2025; Peterman, Kourula, Levitt, 2020), which constitutes inter-organizational network of interactions (Pereira Morais, Ferreira, Jayantilal, 2024; Bugan, Ionescu, 2024; Kim, Howard, 2016; Gebo, Bond, 2019; Sakai, Kang, 2000). Network itself constitutes a collection of long-term, formal and informal, direct or indirect relations, based on free will of joining or leaving network, trust, partnership and equality (Edelenbos, Klijn, 2007). As a consequence, network's structure becomes flat and flexible; network itself can reconfigure fast, in order to adjust to changing conditions (Liu et al., 2023). These features make network collaboration especially valuable, as it corresponds well with global economic conditions of doing business, which are rather unfavourable and demanding (He, Ma, Zhang, 2020; Pedersen, Clausen, Jørgensen, 2022; Barbier, Robertson, 2022). Taking all these aspects into consideration, a natural question arises how to optimize efficiency of networks and support exploitation of key network advantages such as flexibility and fast reaction to changes. The answer may be the increase in autonomy of workers by delegating tasks and responsibilities down the hierarchy, and at the same time organizing work within teams (Li, Li, 2025). In this context, the most advanced way of organizing team work, which allows most efficient and complex exploitation of team's members' skills and competences, is reflected in so-called autonomous teams.

This leads to a general problem in what way autonomous teams can support achieving benefits from network collaboration. In the paper the focus was put on answering the following research questions:

1. How do the crucial features of autonomous teams correspond with the nature of collaboration within inter-organizational networks?
2. In what way do autonomous teams contribute to gaining relational rent and network rent by organizations collaborating within network?

The main objective of the paper is to identify benefits of exploiting autonomous teams by participants of inter-organizational networks. Understanding the possibilities of autonomous teams contributes to the increase in efficiency of the process of creating value by each member of network and network as a whole (Bugan, Ionescu, 2024; Sharkey et al., 2021).

These considerations intend to provide both theoretical and practical contribution. A concise theoretical construct that explains different kinds of network collaboration benefits and how autonomous teams can support gaining these rents was presented. Consequently, this conceptualization serves as a template for practical use by managers; it explains how to exploit autonomous teams in order to maximize expected benefit within inter-organizational network.

2. Literature review

2.1. Specificity of autonomous teams

An autonomous team (also called an autonomous work group) is a kind of teamwork which is managed independently without any direct supervision of upper management. Such a team is given some goals (they have assigned projects), but the way they are achieved depends only on the team itself; it is free to define its schedule, govern daily work and delegate responsibilities among team members (Coronado-Maldonado, Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Magpili, Pazos, 2018; Powell, Pazos, 2017; Patanakul, Chen, Lynn, 2012).

Autonomy of the team is reflected in the following features:

- team selects new members and chooses their leader,
- team selects projects that are interesting or match members' skill set, and decides which teammates to collaborate with,
- all members participate in setting their workloads and deadlines, and in the process of coordinating tasks (collaborative decisions that concern gathering data, evaluating options and choosing a course of action),
- team may create its own management systems or choose to use software to streamline its workflow,
- team decides what resources (materials, tools etc.) they will need to accomplish tasks (a project), and how to use them,
- team itself monitors and controls the results of its work,
- team members decide about the division of payment among them (according to the individual contribution).

Thus, in case of an autonomous team there is no central authority figure enforcing schedules and deadlines, the team is free to plan, organize and control its work. Such an organization of work brings various benefits. First of all, employees are more engaged and innovative in work; since they feel more control and ownership over projects that they are part of, they are more willing to put in the effort and contribute new ideas, which lead to innovative solutions (van Zijl, 2022; Van der Voet, Steijn, 2021; Dackert, 2016). What is vital, finally it leads to higher productivity (Kaur, Kaur, 2022; Ryan, Deci, 2017; Anitha, 2014) Moreover, work in the environment where you have more freedom, feel more valued and can expect assistance from teammates causes less stress and burnout. Empowering employees to make their own decisions and being independent may result in a more confident and satisfied team.

The specificity of autonomous teams seem to correspond quite well with the nature of collaboration within inter-organizational networks. Such teams can be established for a particular project or work permanently. Some organizations use such work groups as a way

to align team members who work on different continents or in different time zones, which is especially useful for collaboration within networks that may consist of participants scattered across the globe. Also, autonomy enhances agility and flexibility (Stray, Moe, Hoda, 2018) that support fulfilling customers' needs with a unique product; these features constitute key advantages of network collaboration.

2.2. Benefits from inter-organizational network collaboration – two perspectives

Regarding collaborative advantage generated by network, the synergy effect leads to creating unique value for both individual participants (network rent) and the whole network (relational rent). Thus, **network rent** reflects an egocentric perspective, since it constitutes an advantage that can be achieved by an *individual* participant of network. These are the following types of benefit:

- rent from participating in network of value - value within network is generated through the synergy of key resources and the way they are used by collaborating partners;
- rent from creating and diffusing knowledge - it refers to the ability to create hidden knowledge and to diffuse it to other network members. The knowledge sharing is supported mostly by a relational approach to collaborative work (Whetsell, Kroll, DeHart Davis, 2020);
- rent from creating dynamic abilities – they refer to the skill of integrating, building and reconfiguring competencies, which allows adjusting to fast changes in organizational surrounding (Teece, Pisano, Shuen, 1997). The benefit derives from networks' unique features, such as: network structure's flexibility, skills for fast reconfiguration, lack of hierarchical dependencies;
- rent from convergence processes – the convergence effect within network is understood as a situation in which some network member with a weaker position on a market develops faster than other network participants with a better position, and ultimately it achieves similar market position;
- rent from lower transactional and hierarchical costs - lower transactional costs are possible because of network contracting (formal or informal), which replaces traditional contracts. As for hierarchical costs, they reflect benefits from replacing hierarchical structures by network coordination;
- network effect – it bases on the idea that the gain for all network members grows as the number of its participants increases, since each new member creates additional value for the whole network (Church, Gandal, Krause, 2008);
- rent from appropriating value created by other participants of network – appropriation can be understood in two ways: 1) taking over some value generated by other members of network; 2) keeping for an organization (not sharing) the value which was created by the unit itself (Najda-Janoszka, 2016). It may be done in both legal and illegal ways.

Another type of benefit relates to an advantage from *the whole network's* perspective (gained by network as a whole). This **relational rent** consists of the following kinds of benefit:

- resource oriented (Ricardian) –advantage from having an access to and exploiting valuable, rare resources (Ricardo, 1817) which in this case are delivered by all network members;
- monopolistic – benefit from having privileged position on a market (in a sector), which leads to limiting competition, e.g. by creating barriers for entering a market by other organizations. Network takes advantage of having better competitive position on a market and from creating rarity;
- innovative (Schumpeterian) – gain generated by innovations (Schumpeter, 2003), which ought to be perceived in a very wide meaning; they may be related to a product itself, but also development of technology, structures, processes etc.;
- entrepreneurial, managerial – it concerns generating synergy from exploitation of entrepreneurial and managerial knowledge, skills and competences of all network participants;
- organizational – synergy of different management systems which are implemented by network members;
- E. Penrose's rent – it refers to the possibility of more effective exploitation of the resources which are disposable by network participants (than if they were used individually).

3. Research methodology

In the research, the interpretative paradigm perspective was adopted, which allows understanding fully the phenomenon in some particular context (Eisenhardt, Graebner, 2007). Following this reasoning, the research was based on the methodological rigor of a qualitative research method, represented by a case study (Yin, 2014; Eisenhardt, 1991). This choice corresponds with the above-stated research objectives and what is currently known about scrutinized problems (Graebner, Martin, Roundy, 2012). Inter-organizational networks are still a relatively new phenomenon, conditioned by many variables. Their nature requires a thorough examination, including conditions of gaining benefits by organizations collaborating within network.

The case research provided data corresponding with set research questions. The results were referred to internal documents analysis. As a result, it was possible to make some theoretical generalizations concerning the autonomous teams' contribution to gaining relational rent and network rent by network participants. Within the procedure, the statistical method of clustering

was used: benefits were clustered according to two perspectives, of the individual participant of network and of the whole network.

Basing on the procedure presented by Flyvbjerg (2012), the main criteria of selecting the case were implemented:

- clarity of case – this criterion refers to two conditions: 1) researched organization is an active member of inter-organizational network; 2) organization has exploited autonomous teams to realize some tasks or projects. Hence, collected data bases on real experience, which ensures its reliability;
- access to crucial data –possibility of carrying out an interview and analysing internal documents.

The studied case was a production and trade organization located in Poland, but operating internationally. What is important, it collaborates not only with business units, but also with public organizations and NGOs. Such a diversity served as a base for a complex and consistent analysis of the researched phenomena. Although the situational context of the interpretative paradigm determined the research results in the analysed organization, at the same time it constituted a base for presenting characteristics of the whole class of researched objects.

The strategy of triangulation of gathering data methods was implemented (Yin, 2014):

- expert interview - carried out with the managing director; semi-structured forms were used, which allowed identifying autonomous teams' contribution to gaining different kinds of benefit,
- documents analysis - included operational and statistical reports. It allowed confronting the gathered data with the information provided by the interviewee.

The interview was transcribed and analysed. According to the methodological rigor, the qualitative data was: 1) reduced – material was coded according to adopted conceptual frames (*a priori* codes); 2) displayed – the codes were particularized and ordered; 3) verified – interpreted with reference to literature concepts and theories.

Correctness and trustworthiness of the research was ensured by fulfilling three evaluation criteria for qualitative research: credibility (presenting a real picture of the investigated phenomena), transferability (presenting the contextual aspect and formulating recommendations for other units which were not subject to the research) and confirmability (using triangulation of methods and a thorough description of the methodological perspective in relation to the empirical findings).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Autonomous team's contribution

The above classification of rents constitutes a fundament for assessing how autonomous work groups contribute to gaining different types of benefit within network collaboration. Results of the analysis were presented synthetically in Table 1.

Table 1.
Autonomous teams' contribution to gaining benefits from network collaboration

Type of rent	Degree of impact*	Autonomous team's contribution
Network rent: Rent from participating in network of value	**	Supports optimal exploitation of unique value created within network, mostly by: - being flexible and agile (which enhances fast reaction to unique and permanently changing customers' needs); - being free to decide what resources they need to accomplish tasks (which contributes to further optimization of the network value chain); - being more motivated which results in higher productivity;
Rent from creating and diffusing knowledge	***	Autonomous teams create environment that strongly supports effective analysis of data and decision-making processes, mainly by: - independent, collaborative decisions (that sparks off synergy of expert knowledge, skills and competences); - being free to select projects which match team members' competences;
Rent from creating dynamic abilities	***	Supports fastening data analysis and decision-making processes thanks to: - flexibility and agility (reconfiguration competences), which enhance fast reaction to permanently changing environment; - being free to make decisions without middle management supervision; - being able to create its own, internal management system which optimizes (speeds-up) decision-making processes and exploitation of available resources;
Rent from convergence processes	**	Supports mastering competences, which leads to catching-up with other network members: - some network participants may learn how to exploit autonomous teams (from other network members); being part of such group work allows taking advantage of its main features and, as a result, increasing general efficiency of operating;
Rent from lower transactional and hierarchical costs	* (indirect impact)	Within the process of lowering hierarchical costs, autonomous teams contribute to optimizing network structures which are based on horizontal coordination, mostly by: - strengthening *trust* between organizations and individual workers (team members), since delegating responsibilities (which is a key element of building autonomy) requires relations that base on trust; such relations constitute a fundament of network collaboration;
Network effect	-	No contribution in researched organization;
Rent from appropriating value created by other participants of network	-	No contribution in researched organization;

Cont. table 1.

Relational rent: Resource oriented (Ricardian)	* (indirect impact)	Supports coordinating exploitation of resources by all network participants, since the team's autonomy allows more precise matching available resources with realized tasks;
Monopolistic	* (indirect impact)	Supports strengthening competitive position on a market and creating rarity, mainly by: - being flexible and agile; - independent, collaborative decisions (that sparks off synergy of expert knowledge, skills and competences); - being able to create its own, internal management system which optimizes decision-making processes and exploitation of available resources; - being more motivated which results in higher productivity;
Innovative (Schumpeterian)	***	Supports innovative potential of network and implementation of creative solutions, thanks to: - independent, collaborative decisions (that leads to synergy of expert knowledge, skills and competences); - being flexible and agile (which enables fast reaction to changes in environment, including taking advantage of *chances* to strengthen competitive position); - being able to create its own, internal management system which optimizes decision-making processes and exploitation of available resources; - being free to select projects which match team members' competences;
Entrepreneurial, managerial	***	Supports synergy of managerial knowledge, skills and competences provided by all team members, thanks to: - independent, collaborative decisions; - being able to create its own, internal management system which optimizes decision-making processes and exploitation of available resources;
Organizational	**	Supports effective combining and taking advantage of different management systems exploited by network participants, mostly thanks to: - being able to create its own, internal management system which optimizes decision-making processes and exploitation of available resources;
E. Penrose's rent	***	Supports more effective exploitation of the resources disposable by network participants (inner synergy effect) thanks to: - autonomy in deciding what resources (materials, tools etc.) the team will need to accomplish tasks or projects, and how to use them; - being free to make decisions without middle management supervision (collaborative decisions that concern gathering data, evaluating options and choosing a course of action); - being able to create its own, internal management system which further optimizes decision-making processes; - flexibility and agility (reconfiguration competences);

*Degree of impact: (-) no impact; (*) weak; (**) moderate; (***) strong. The interviewee classified the degree of impact basing on his assessment of how much autonomous teams' work is reflected in organizational advantages in question. Since the scope and character of all rents vary considerably, the assessment included both direct and indirect contribution.

Source: Own study.

5. Conclusions

Basing on the research results, it was possible to identify conditions and benefits of autonomous teams within network collaboration. The general conclusion is that the specificity of such teams corresponds well with the nature of network. Consequently, the teams have a noticeable contribution to gaining benefits from this type of collaboration. In most cases the impact is strong or moderate, and it refers to both types of rent (from the perspective of an individual participant and of the whole network). Detailed analysis of the research results led to the following remarks and conclusions:

1. The features and general idea of autonomous teams correspond especially well with the rent from creating and diffusing knowledge. This benefit constitutes the key reason for building such teams; autonomy most of all is supposed to lead to more effective exploitation of team members' knowledge by creating synergy effect. Thus, autonomous work groups constitute a substantial support for the rent in question.
2. Although autonomous teams strongly support building network's dynamic abilities, it ought to be underlined that network itself constitutes a structure which is highly dynamic, so autonomous teams should not be perceived as a key factor which conditions such abilities. In this case the teams do not *create* these abilities (which are immanent for networks), but *enhance* them.
3. Lack of contribution in case of network effect results from the character of analysed network, in which the value creating process is not conditioned by the number of network participants. However, autonomous teams' contribution to this type of rent theoretically is possible, but still rather indirectly, since the specificity of network rent does not correspond strictly with the idea and benefits of autonomous group work. In this case it can only be assumed that as the number of network participants increases, it will be easier to select team members with appropriate competences, which will result in higher efficiency of the team as a whole.

   Similarly, contribution to the rent from appropriating value could be only indirect; team's autonomy makes it possible to act without supervision in the field of setting objectives and using resources in order to initiate intercepting-value processes at the team level.
4. Concerning relational rent, it is especially interesting to compare the result for Ricardian and E. Penrose's rent – surprisingly, although the idea of these two benefits is quite similar and they are connected with each other, the degree of impact is very different. E. Penrose assumes that the real benefit stems from not a mere access to rare resources (controlled by network participants), but their more effective exploitation (synergy effect). That makes a substantial difference regarding the autonomous teams contribution to these two rents. In case of Ricardian rent, it is only indirect, since the

very fact of having an access to resources does not correspond with the key features and advantages of autonomous teams. It is the team's competence to exploit resources more effectively that constitutes its real value, and this is exactly what E. Penrose postulates.

As for the theoretical contribution of the study, it expands our understanding of potential benefits from autonomous work groups in the context of inter-organizational networks collaboration. A concise theoretical construct which explains scale and form of the contribution was presented, referring it to the specificity of two types of rent from network collaboration. From the practical perspective, the study may serve as a guideline for managers; it suggests how to optimize taking advantage of autonomous teams and, consequently, increase efficiency of network.

Concerning the limitations of the study, although implemented research methods allowed achieving research objectives, natural character of case studies requires cautiousness in generalizing results. The context-specific nature of the case has an impact on exact replication of the study. Also, it can be influenced by the researcher's personal interpretations, and the interviewees may not be able or willing to reveal their opinions in an objective way.

However, case studies are highly valued for providing in-depth and holistic insights into complex, real-life phenomena. The study was intended to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon which was not fully identified and explored yet. It should be treated as a starting point for further scientific explorations (Yin, 2014); The research area could be expanded into the conditions and efficiency factors of the process of identifying key competences of the teams. Such further studies would expand our knowledge about the role of work groups in optimizing efficiency of networks.

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