

HOLACRACY: THE DISRUPTIVE PROPOSAL IN THE CONFIGURATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN IN TIMES OF LIQUID MODERNITY.

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the current world of work, the evolution of the evolution of organizational designs, and to propose the organizational design that best suits the needs of the liquid company. It is a descriptive proposal, product of a thematic analysis, based on secondary sources, of information available in catalogs of scientific journals selected on the basis of key words. Companies seek to adapt to the changes and demands of the environment by means of an organizational design that promotes autonomy and cooperation. Liquid modernity and digitalization challenge the traditional model, promoting the emergence of less hierarchical work structures. Holacracy emerges as an alternative that distributes authority horizontally, promoting autonomy and innovation. Its theoretical framework focuses on work groups, roles, autonomy and flexibility, highlighting the importance of transparent communication and role delimitation.

Keywords: Holacracy, Organization, Organizational Design, Liquid Modernity.

Introduction

The current global scenario of high uncertainty, turbulence and instability has generated greater competitiveness and higher consumer demands. This, together with the digitalization of the economy, has led companies and their employees to adapt to the new reality such as virtual environments, work networks, new management techniques, and greater emphasis on knowledge as a key economic resource; this new scenario had as an important factor the recent pandemic -Covid-19- as a driver of business changes (Weck, 2020; Horta, 2022).

Changes in lifestyles arising from the conjunction of delocalized work, digital media that make it possible to value skilled work, and the collaborative economy that allows self-management (Alonso and Cano, 2019). They have resulted in the emergence of freelancers, telework, and digital nomads, all work modalities resulting from the adaptation to digitization and current information and communication technologies as an integral part of organizational systems to achieve their objectives and competitive advantages (Núñez, 2021).

In view of the above, the dependence of organizations on pyramidal hierarchies requires taking into account other approaches and governance models, seeking better solutions to the fundamental problem of distributing formal authority among the members of an organization. This presents the challenge of configuring an organization that constitutes a learning ecosystem that operates in a flexible, agile, and adaptive manner, like a ship sailing in a storm (Van Der Sluis, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020).

This article aims first to review the current reality of the world of work and the evolution of organizational life in the light of economic, social and technological changes. In the same direction, it attempts to review the evolution of organizational designs, starting from the bureaucratic organization, reviewing the different adhocratic proposals, and at the end of all this analysis to propose the organizational configuration that best fits the circumstances of the postmodern world, seeking that business organizations can be more effective in achieving their objectives, and more competitive in the global context.

Methodology

This article is the product of a descriptive research, with a qualitative documentary approach, which conducted a thematic analysis, based on secondary sources, of information available in catalogs of scientific journals Scopus, Scielo and Web of Science, for which the database of these catalogs was searched using the keywords: holocracy, organization, organizational design, liquid modernity, with the purpose of obtaining relevant information that made it possible to carry out through an analysis matrix, a reflection on the subject under study, and thus be able to order and group in categories and thematic subcategories, with which, qualitative inferences were made, and a theoretical proposal.

From liquid modernity to the liquid company

Today the company as an organization is torn between the end of the strictly bureaucratic vision that emphasizes mechanization, division of labor, and hierarchies, and the postmodern organization, which understands the company as an imperfect human system, where plurality and ambiguity are constant. This is why the administration of the latter does not rely only on formal organization but combines the personalization of treatment to the internal customer, seeking to ensure the quality of service to the external customer, which is based on people and horizontal organization (Hernández, 2024; Olvera, 2021).

In these organizations, the challenge is instantaneity, time management and speed of response to structural and circumstantial problems that arise, as organizations try to adapt to changes in the environment and social demands. Today, more than ever before, the struggle between individual free action and collectivist coercion is clearly evident. Therefore, the challenge is to be able to achieve an organizational design where cooperation and human association overcome the ineradicable individual limitations, and enabling the creative-coordinating combination of agents, allowing a greater use of dispersed knowledge (Gonzalez and Cardona, 2019; Ravier, 2015).

This is the result of the disappearance of the boundaries between the organization and the outside world, and other organizations, as well as between work and the private sphere, which invites reflection on the fleeting and liquid nature of social reality today. In the liquid modernity in which we live, the new norm is the constant uprooting of social actors, crossing pre-established borders in the institutional sphere (Paulsen and Hernes, 2003; Hochschild, 1997; Tempest and Starkey, 2004; Bauman, 2000, 2001). On the liquid society (Bauman, 2007) cited by Bounfour (2016) develops arguments on how organizations are configured and governed, where society is no longer considered a structure, but a matrix of connections and reconnections centered on individuals, who are expected to be more flexible, instead of respecting predefined rules.

The management of the company liquidates.

The liquid company is a consequence of postmodern behaviors, when the company moves away from the strategic and organizational discourse, giving way to outsourcing, and the emergence of the networked company linked to digitalization, which allows the flexibility of the social contract (Bounfour, 2016). The liquid enterprise refers to plasticity in its modes of governance, in this sense digitalization is a great enabler of such plasticity: it contracts the space-time of the enterprise and facilitates the accumulation of resources without borders without even significant investments. Consequently, it is a major challenge to the social contract found in modern organizations, particularly in the so-called traditional salaried contract (Freeman and Louça, 2001; Bounfour, 2016). Consequently, a liquid company requires liquid management, i.e., aligning management practices with flexibility requirements. It must be thought of as a succession of decisions that adjust to conditions and resources permanently under external and internal pressures. With respect to collaboration and coordination, these are based on incentive systems that consider a new social contract. Consequently, organizational design needs a configuration that moves between liquidity and a form of robustness. However, digitalization leads to speed and acceleration as performance drivers. In this case, especially in organizational contexts dominated by intangibility, liquidity can represent an important advantage for socio-economic organization.

Organizational design in the liquid company

It should be noted that the modern enterprise is the result of applying rationality to human social activity, an important detail is that they are systems that emerged in recent times in the modern

history of mankind, and their emergence was possible when it was possible to unite a motivation with a large number of specific required behaviors. Three historical milestones catalyzed the birth of the enterprise: the industrial revolution, the birth of the modern city, and the monetization of the economy. This made it possible for the entrepreneur to offer a salary for specific jobs, thanks to which organizations can be created, designed, and redesigned (Luhmann, 1996; Rodriguez, 2002). With the birth of the modern company, management emerged, which in its classical stage adopted bureaucratic theory as the basis for the design of the business organization (Weber and Abellán, 2006). This structuralist vision dominated the business world for at least the first half of the twentieth century (Ropa and Alama, 2022; Abdala and Puello, 2019). And it resulted in companies with an organizational design characterized by the division of labor, a concrete hierarchy and detailed rules (Garcés and Landaeta, 2023).

Later, in the second half of the 20th century, the information age brought the notion of the virtual office with a new spatial dimension to the company, and communication became instantaneous, aided by mobile devices. Likewise, the new organization of work favored a shortening of distances between those who think and those who do, transferring various roles from the managerial to the operational levels. All of the above allowed pyramidal hierarchies to flatten, supported by self-directed teams, with more autonomy and less middle management intermediation.

The above described made it possible for organizational structures to mutate to less complex, less formal, and less centralized designs, such as matrix or team-based structures, in fact, today some business organizations seek to achieve self-organization and self-management, which is how the first major change in organizational designs occurred, moving from bureaucracy to adhocracy (Tofler, 1980; Henriquez, 2020). However, adhocarcy has been a transition as liquid modernity aided by the digitalization of the economy has forced the search for designs that are increasingly adaptable to an increasingly uncertain and changing context (Barrero et al., 2018). In the following, some of the proposals for new organizational designs will be analyzed.

The networked enterprise. The concept of the networked enterprise originates from research on social networks and looks at the organization as a social structure composed of a series of connections, emphasizing that among the members of the networked structure are not only the members of the company, but may be other organizations. The network structure is based on collaboration and cooperation between work teams and external organizations, with which it builds strategic relationships. In these structures, management grants greater independence for decision-making, making them more adaptable to the business environment (Yang et al, 2022; Vargas et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2023).

Agile organization. They are organizational designs characterized by interpersonal connections, which optimize human relations, ordering the organization as an ecosystem, which emphasizes the horizontal dimension, collaboration and cooperation, continuous learning, and innovation. They are organized in networks of teams, where authority is the result of knowledge, and not of hierarchy (Van Der Sluis, 2021; Valderrama, 2019).

Bionic manufacturing system. Inspired by the behavior of natural life, which exhibits an autonomous and spontaneous behavior; in the same way, in the social aspect they evidence a harmony in hierarchically ordered relationships. Under this design, the work starts from information about the fabrication protocol, and based on this information the members organize themselves cooperatively and autonomously, with a minimum of coordination to maintain harmonious integration between self-directed units (Srivastava and Yadav, 2018; Tang et al., 2020; Lange and Poeche, 2023).

Fractal manufacturing system. The word comes from fractal geometry to define multidimensional objects, characterized by self-similarity, pattern-within-pattern subdivision. In these designs the structures are usually similar, however, each unit has its own structure to operate independently. These structures are characterized by being more autonomous and therefore able to develop capabilities to respond to the demands of a dynamic and changing environment (Rüttimann, 2023; Ali, 2023).

Holonic manufacturing system. The underlying concept in holonic manufacturing is the holon, which means an autonomous and cooperative organism, which can be included in another holon. The holonic

organization adopts characteristics of bionic and fractal organizations. Based on its flexibility a holon is self-regulating and regularizes its actions according to changes in the business context (Pascal and Panescu, 2019; Leuvennink et al., 2019).

Organizational vision	Organizational design	Features
Bureaucracy Weber and Abellán (2006)	Bureaucratic organization chart Weber and Abellán (2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Division of labor • Hierarchy • Regulations
Adhocracy Tofler (1980) Henriquez (2020)	The networked company Yang et al. (2022) Vargas et al. (2019) Zhao et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Series of connections • Network structure. • Collaboration and cooperation • Autonomy in decision making. • Adaptability
	Agile organization Van Der Sluis (2021) Valderrama (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal connections • Ecosystem • Horizontality • Collaboration and cooperation • Continuous learning • Innovation • Organized in team networks
	Bionic manufacturing system Srivastava and Yadav (2018) Tang et al. (2020). Lange and Poeche (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Orderly hierarchy • Cooperative and autonomous • Minimum coordination
	Fractal manufacturing system Rüttimann (2023) Ali (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-similarity • Subdivision • Own internal structure • High autonomy
	Holonic manufacturing system Pascal and Panescu (2019) Leuvennink et al. (2019).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomous and cooperative • Bionics and fractal • Flexibility • Self-regulation
Holacracy Robertson (2015)	Holocratic system Robertson (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work teams. • Circular structure • Autonomy and flexibility • Self-regulation

Table 1. From bureaucracy to holocracy

Source. Own elaboration

At this point, it is clear to say that bureaucracy was the organizational design that dominated the administrative language and the business world during the first half of the twentieth century, then postmodernity forced to think of more flexible organizational designs and adaptable to a business world, influenced by globalization and information technology and communications, thus; as more adhocratic designs emerged as the networked enterprise, agile organization, and bionic manufacturing, fractal, and holonic.

It is important to note that the latter, except for some variations, have in common autonomy, self-

regulation, and cooperation, characteristics that a company is expected to have in today's changing socioeconomic world, it is clear that this is not the vocation of a bureaucracy. However, the designs described above have been proposed from an engineering perspective, however, there is a proposal close to the liquid company, but more thought from the human organizational perspective, and that is the holocracy.

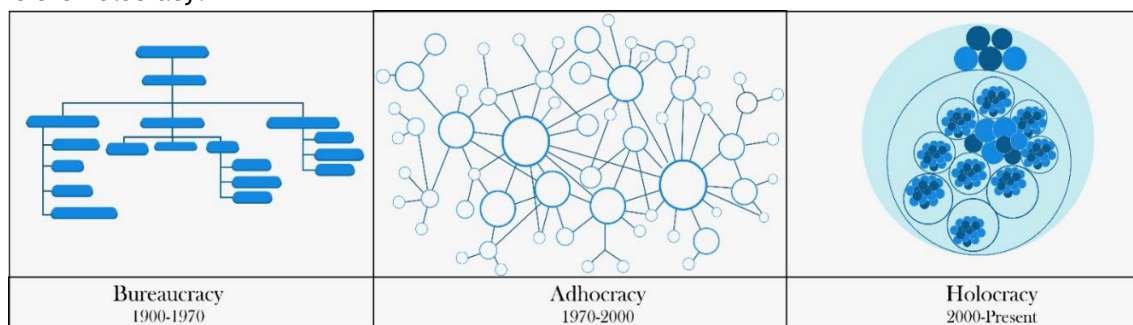


Figure 1. Evolution of organizational design

Source. Own elaboration based on Argente et al. (2011).

Holacracy as an alternative to the liquid company

One of the greatest exponents on holacracy is Robertson (2015), who published the book and created a company called "holacracyOne" based on the principles of holacracy and who took on this management system, and developed the "Glass-Frog" software, which makes it possible to implement this model in all types of organizations. Holacracy, according to Robertson's proposal, is distinguished by its structure based on circles, the presence of double connections or links, the holding of circle meetings, decision making through integrative emergent processes, dynamic leadership and integrative choices.

Robertson, (2007) Defines the concept of Holacracy as a modern and innovative approach to organizational management, which challenges the traditional pyramid-shaped structure, distributing authority horizontally in self-regulating groups. Huilcapi Masacón et al., (2018) specifies that holacracy as a concept highlights autonomy, agility and transparency, with the sole objective of enlivening innovation and adaptability within organizations.

Brian Robertson, an entrepreneur and consultant, developed and coined this concept while searching for a more effective way to structure and operate his company. This occurred after a process of experimentation and refinement, resulting in a framework based on principles such as power sharing, transparency and self-management. (Gedik et al., 2023; Robertson, 2015)

While it is not yet widely adopted like other models, Brugh et al., (2015) and Koontz et al., (2012) in their narrative expose how holacracy has gained popularity in business as an alternative to triangular hierarchies, especially in technology companies and startups, where adaptability and rapid development are highly valued. Even so, holacracy continues to generate interest and debate in business and academia because of its disruptive argument.

Based on sociocracy, a model of governance that emphasizes approval-based decision making and distributed authority. However, holacracy introduces several distinct elements, including the concept of "roles" as the primary unit of work and governance, and a formalized governance process known as the "integrative decision making" process. (Gutiérrez et al., 2022; Janáková & Zatrochová, 2015; Krasulja et al., 2018)

Based on the referenced theorists, the following theoretical proposal on the elements that make up the holacracy is proposed, which is GRAF, whose acronym stands for Groups of work or circular structure, Role, Autonomy and Flexibility, and which are explained below:

Work groups or circular structure: The organization is divided into work teams, which is not common in the traditional hierarchical structure, as these units assume specific objectives and internally self-manage to achieve them. (Ovsyanyuk-Berdadina & Ostroverkhov, 2020)

Role: Here the typical descriptions are not detailed (personnel manager, collaborator, among others) but each employee takes on a specific role that has clear responsibilities and can be modified depending on the team to which he/she belongs. In other words, the best qualities and aptitudes of

the employee are analyzed and, depending on this, the role that best suits his or her capabilities is assigned. (Kumar S. & Mukherjee, 2018)

Autonomy: In this type of organization, workers or work teams are empowered to solve problems autonomously. This favors the efficient and effective resolution of the problem in the shortest possible time. (Cojocari, 2020)

Flexibility: Although it is a dynamic business structure, it does not mean that everyone does everything (everyone doing the same job). On the contrary, it is about each individual being able to develop several projects with different roles or being able to help other groups. (Berend & Brohm-Badry, 2022)..

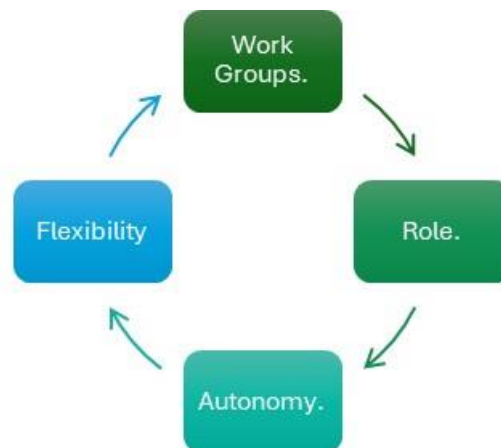


Figure 2. Characteristics of Holacracy.

Source: Own elaboration

For a successful implementation, the important thing is to have transparent communication and to objectively delimit roles, allowing workers or groups to operate autonomously within their defined domains. Thus fostering a culture of accountability, where everyone is empowered to take ownership of their roles and contribute to the broader objectives of the organization. (Hindarwati et al., 2023; Vasquez, 2016).

Although the basic concept of holocracy involves the distribution of decision-making power and self-management of teams, there are different approaches and variants in its implementation. (Ovsyanyuk-Berdadina & Ostroverkhov, 2020) Some of the types of holocracy that can be found in companies include:

Pure Holocracy: In this approach, the company fully adopts the holocracy model as proposed by Brian Robertson, with all its principles and practices. Clear roles are established and specific governance processes are implemented, such as integrative decision making and circle gathering. (Olsson & Bosch, 2016).

Adapted Holacracy: Some companies may adapt the principles of holacracy to better fit their existing culture and structure. This may involve selectively adopting holocratic practices, such as implementing governance circles or decentralizing decision-making power in certain areas, while maintaining elements of the traditional hierarchical structure in others. (Cronin et al., 2021).

Hybrid Holacracy: In this approach, the company combines elements of holacracy with other organizational models, such as the agile approach or the management by objectives model. This combination can enable the firm to leverage the benefits of different approaches while adapting to its specific context. (Gupta & Jena, 2023; Radhakrishnan, 2016)

Sectorized holacracy: Some companies may choose to implement holacracy only in certain sectors or teams within the organization, while maintaining a traditional hierarchical structure in others. This may be useful to test the model in specific areas prior to a broader implementation, or to adapt to the unique needs and dynamics of different parts of the organization. (Banner, 2016; Rąb- Kettler, 2019)

Virtual Holacracy: With the rise of remote work and online collaboration, some companies are exploring how to implement holacracy in virtual environments. This may involve the use of digital tools to facilitate self-management and distributed decision making across geographically dispersed teams. (Costanzo, 2019; Nichols & Weintraub, 2016)

Each type of holacracy may have unique advantages and challenges, and the choice of the appropriate approach will depend on the objectives, culture and organizational structure of each company. (Markopoulos et al., 2023).. In that vein, holacracy is considered the organizational design that most closely aligns with the ideals of the liquid enterprise.

Conclusions

The findings of the theoretical review on the concept of holacracy lead to the conclusion that companies face the challenge of adapting nimbly to environmental changes and meeting customer demands, while managing time pressures and solving emerging problems. This drives the need for an organizational design that promotes autonomy, cooperation and self-management. The growing interconnectedness between different actors in the business ecosystem is a reflection of liquid modernity, where society seeks flexibility and adaptability.


Another valuable result of the research was to identify that liquid modernity is a product of postmodernity, and as a result of it, the liquid company emerges, which departs from the traditional organizational model. The management of these companies requires adaptability to internal and external changes and pressures, based on the collaboration and coordination of the different agents involved, and based on a new social contract. The digitalization of the economy and society is the great catalyst for all this, challenging the traditional order, requiring governance that balances the tension between the liquid and the organic.

In the analysis and results obtained it was also possible to identify that the theorists propose a framework for holacracy that includes work groups or circular structure, roles, autonomy and flexibility. This structure divides the organization into self-managed teams with roles defined according to individual capabilities. Autonomy is emphasized to solve problems efficiently, and flexibility to allow for role diversification. Transparent communication and clear delineation of roles are crucial to its implementation, fostering a culture of accountability. In addition, there are several approaches to holacracy implementation, such as pure, adaptive, hybrid, sectorized and virtual holacracy, each with its advantages and challenges. The choice of the appropriate approach depends on the objectives and organizational structure of each company.

The paper concludes that holacracy, a management model that challenges the traditional hierarchy by distributing authority horizontally in self-regulating circles, stands in front of all the alternative proposals. Based on principles such as transparency and self-management, it promotes autonomy and innovation in organizations. Although not yet widely adopted, holacracy has gained popularity in technology companies and startups generating interest and debate. Inspired by sociocracy, it introduces elements such as integrative roles and decision-making process to foster decentralized governance and collaborative decision-making.

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