SELF ORGANISING AGILE TEAM FRAMEWORK (SOATf) CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS IN TURKEY

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Abstract

Self-organising agile teams are considered to be the driving factor in improving organizational performance in the IT and service-related industries. Recent academic research has shown a dramatic increase in interest and understanding of how teamwork principles, internal communication, and the confidence in project outcomes could be supportive in developing strategies for self-organization as an alternative to a hierarchical management approach. However, little attention has been paid to understanding the impact of cultural issues and related behavioural aspects on the ways international self-organised teams are performing. In reflecting on this problem, this paper provides a foundational framework for self-organising team work classification and the cultural implications of this to organisations in Turkey.

Keywords: self-organizing, agile, teamwork, culture, collaboration framework.

1. Introduction

Self-organizing teams have conceptually changed the perspective of organizational philosophies aimed at managing, developing, and organizing people to accomplish critical tasks relevant to the business objectives. If compared to the previous approaches of people management adopted by the enterprises, which partially stems from the Big Man theory and the trait theory, self-organizing teams should be considered as a fresh perspective related to organizational changes, since their stance should be further referred to as a flat structure, unlike the common hierarchical views of developing productive organizations (Korhonen 2013). However, self-organization itself is not unique and certainly is difficult to conceptualize, depending on the cultural context. Specifically, such conceptualization is complicated to be mapped when it comes to the agile development teams that comprise young individuals with diverse and eventually unique skills that could not be replicated (Highsmith 2009). Several studies attempted to research this phenomenon; although, a specific roadmap for skills development was

rarely provided. Therefore, to address this research gap, this research is aimed at refuting the thinking about agility and self-organization in the cultural context. Furthermore, the following paper provides conceptual findings related to the initial framework design. It is argued that it is important to refer to agile teams as an innovative organizational cluster, which would eventually transform the approach towards managing teams and choosing leaders and followers in a cross-cultural context to ensure business productivity not solely in the IT sector, but also in other important economic segments.

2. Literature Review

Studies in project management and behavioural theories provide a rich background to understand how self-organizing teams form and perform, while the discussions on the impact of cultural heritage were frequently omitted. Several studies addressed this gap by exploring and explicating aspects, such as propensity to agree, an approach to documenting a project flow, bureaucracy perception, and the consolidation of group values and norms as they can cause a specific project either to succeed or to fail (Balasubramaniam et al. 2017; Schwaber and Sutherland 2012; Turner et al. 2012). According to the studies conducted by other researchers, cultural heritage and associated values and norms most often relate to the self-organizing teams involved in the global projects where project participants are assembled from the different countries of origin, which suggests the need of using longitudinal studies typically complex to conduct (Srivastava and Jain 2017; Tripp, Riemenschneider, and Thatcher 2016). However, the proceedings of these studies are primarily descriptive and lack concrete examples and cases to differentiate how specific roles within the self-organizing agile team framework could be described depending on various cultural aspects.

To explain the importance of cultural implications for self-organizing teams, it is worth exploring and explicating how culture is best defined by contemporary researchers. Most commonly, culture could be described as a combination of norms, values, principles, as well as individual capabilities and habits that are grasped by a person who belongs to a specific society (Cockburn and Highsmith 2001). Hence, various societies could be conceptually different in their cultural preferences despite possessing common or similar characteristics. To define the peaceful form of coexistence and related implications on interpersonal relationships typical of the team work, researchers

suggest using the ‘multiculturalism’ term, which denotes productive interaction between particular societies and respect for their norms and values (Parker Holesgrove, and Pathak 2015). Multiculturalism also asserts that people usually operate in a single network, where the exchange of skills, talents, and knowledge is paramount to achieve the project success or general business objectives (Lipowsky and Scmidt 2016). However, in some cases, cultural differences could lead to the clash of cultures, where the adopted societal norms are not perceived as those dictated by the business norms or hierarchical regulations. Eventually, it could result in persistent interpersonal conflicts, when individuals are not ready to accept confrontational points of view and require a certain direction in adopting the role that would be the most appropriate to cope with the required tasks on time.

While the concepts of self-organization and self-management were not actively researched within the context of cultural equity, recent studies in business management and education were still devoted to exploring the aspect of cross-cultural thinking and its importance for the execution of the global projects when the process of self-organization is involved. For instance, in their study, Manalo et al. (2013) investigated the impact of cultural differences on critical thinking among the students in Japan and New Zealand. The researchers concluded that factors, including self-construal, self-efficacy, and regulatory construal, are critical to perform collaborative tasks and are essential regardless of the geographical location and cultural attitudes. Levine and Garland (2015) refuted the above idea by suggesting that emerging business internationalization would inevitably change the common approach towards global business project execution, where self-organizing agile teams should demonstrate critical thinking through individual skills demonstration, capitalizing on the importance of the team member’s role classification. Furthermore, Schunk (2012) emphasized the importance of considering the principles of the experiential learning and situated cognition for defining a cultural impact on the assumed team roles, where the former stands for the role that emerges through the acquisition of skills and knowledge in the working process, while the latter is self-initiated and emerges from the behavioural attitudes to the assigned tasks. Levine and Garland (2015) supported this view by stating that “learning should be authentic to the context of the study and situated in a community of practice” (p. 176). The researchers indicated that cultural differences should be adopted in the specific community and that the social standards typical of a

particular nation or race should not be replicated. Hence, cultural equity in the context of self-organizing teams assumes the importance of learning and critical thinking, where the commitment to perceive social norms dictated by own culture could become either the benefit or the challenge to demonstrate productive team relationships.

Cultural implications for self-organizing teams should also be explored through the lenses of the Hofstede's theory, particularly referring to individualism and collectivism constructs, as well as their influence on the universal and culture-specific modes of work. Traditionally, it is considered that individualist and collectivist societies are difficult to coexist, while a self-organization approach has transcended this thinking and crystallized the meaning of societal transformation depending on the tasks, needs, and undertaken projects in a team structure. For instance, Triandis and Gelfand (2012) compared the cultural trends relevant to the United States and Australia. The researchers suggested that the former pursues the vertical individualistic culture, where the strength to insist on a personal opinion is actively pursued, while the latter is a horizontally individualistic one, where the focus on individual achievements is still present, but it does not imply the need of 'standing out of the mass'. Sivadas (2008) referred to the similar comparison of Indian and Korean cultures, where the former was defined as vertically collectivistic and highly dependent on the group opinion when making strategic decisions, while the latter was conceptualized as horizontally collectivistic based on the fact that a social status and hierarchy coexist in the decision- making efforts. Hence, in the attempt to define roles for self-organizing agile teams from the cultural perspective, it is important to reconsider the general constructs provided by the Hofstede's theory, depending on the vertical and horizontal structures versus individual and collectivist structures that could emerge in the opinion or thinking of the team members based on the cultural attitudes and working approaches.

Specific attention to the cultural implications in terms of self-organizing teams should also be considered when it relates to specific countries, especially those states that are fostering the changes in modern economy and advancing the importance of agility in team structures. For example, in their study, Balasubramaniam et al. (2017) compared the cases of China and India, where the former frequently applies the principle of Mianzi, which implies seeing the business problem positively and triggering the relative attitudes, while the latter exploits the principle of Jugaad, which is primarily related to

the importance of using a trial-and-error approach to grasp the problem essence and come with a workable solution. Palokangas (2013) also refined the provision of the Hofstede's cultural theory with respect to the eastern and western worlds in terms of low and high power distances. It is worth noting that an eastern approach in self-organization refers to the need of seeking experiential advice from the superiors, whereas a western approach is concentrated on assertiveness in performing the assigned tasks and asking for recommendations by colleagues in the process of task execution. Engwall (2012) suggested that related cultural differences are primarily informed by the aspect of the Industrial Revolution, when the western societies become more concerned with the heavyweight, continuous projects, whereas the eastern societies are more flexible and use a trial-and-error approach in defining how an initially complex task could be completed with the limited resources. However, these studies do not provide the focus on team agility and do not explore specific application cases, which could be used for the benchmarking in terms of team composure and self-management skills.

Finally, there is an aspect of the generational gap present when a self-organizing team is composed of the people with various skills and experiences. Pendergast (2009) suggested that the importance of addressing the generation gap emerges from the need of developing different value systems and their impact on the individual attitude towards the work done. Specifically, in the western societies, a collectivist approach could be a barrier towards a competent and skilled individual who attempts to share his / her opinion rather than to dictate the 'rules of the game,' while otherwise such an approach could be productive for the eastern societies. Papenhausen (2011) also admitted that western society leaders are obscured with the great sense of morality and the importance of social standards, which leads to the development of an inner-directional approach and formation of the individual leadership style, which could not be tolerated by the representatives of alternative cultures. In a self-organizing environment, the aforementioned condition is highly criticized due to the lack of opportunities and mental capacity to positively react towards the optimistic view of the future and the need for personal gratification (Bailey and Skvoretz 2017). Therefore, it is imperative to consider age stereotypes, as well as cultural perceptions when self-organizing teams are formed to reduce the tenure among the members pursuing polar ideas related to the individual views.

Therefore, the self-organization process among agile teams requires that the multitude of cultural aspects should be taken into account. The classification of the roles in this context requires the consideration of not only individual attributes and skills but also the context of the undertaken project, the team composure, the cross-team behavioural attitudes, and the agility as the source of finding the common language withcustomers and team members. A cultural aspect also suggests that a common approach to leadership is not relevant to the self-organizing teams, since their approach towards project performance is primarily based on the concepts of self-management and holacracy. However, the roles classification framework is required to ensure that such teams are efficient, referring to the cultural norms, compared to the professional ethical standards.

3. Research and Model

Current research is in progress and to the date is primarily related to the theoretical findings informed by the previous studies on self-organizing agile teams aimed to develop the alternative model of thinking about the role classification in agile teams based on the responsibilities and competencies. The foundational study used for the development of cultural framework is the one proposed by Hoda (2011), where the six informal spontaneous roles related to the formation of the self-organizing agile teams were suggested and explicated. Hoda (2011) defined these roles as mentor, coordinator, translator, champion, promoter, and terminator, referring to the different responsibilities and requirements existing among agile teams engaged in the software development projects. The core idea of such a classification was described by Hoda (2011) as the adherence to agile methods used by a particular organization and the importance of customer relationship management that becomes critical to the success of both product-oriented and service-oriented organizations. The application of this model was further enhanced through the analysis of relationship between the roles and issues with inadequate collaboration with customers and investors, the problem of the multi-level task distribution, and the setting of individual priorities depending on the self-management skills possessed by an individual (Hoda, Noble, and Marshall 2011; Hoda, Noble, and Marshall 2013; Hoda and Murugesan 2016). However, the role classification model did not consider the cultural implications, while still referring to the aspect of the self-organizing teams and their importance for the global projects,

particularly referring to the teams involved in IT business. Hence, the current research is action-oriented and focuses on refining the model proposed in the original work by Hoda (2011) based on the applied investigation of cultural aspects typical of a specific country with the established norms and principles.

The newly proposed framework for adjusting the cultural context to the self-organising teams is shown in Figure 1. The idea of the framework presentation is majorly inspired by the efforts undertaken by Hoda's (2011) research as well as revitalized with the additional interventions aimed at searching for the new ideas related to self-organization in agile communities. Conceptually, the background view relates to the idea that agile team members are frequently changing roles and responsibilities, which makes them prone to be culturally flexible in roles transition and role practicing. However, in the agile team context, it is reasonable to admit that roles should not be considered as claims, given that leaders (in the proposed case, facilitators) could not appear spontaneously, whereas technical savvies are not evident for each and every project depending on the technical requirements. Therefore, the model was developed using the idea of competency-based development of the individuals outlined by Lominger, suggesting that any person involved in the business is capable of becoming stronger and more capacitive in his / her effort to support team productivity.

The outstanding ideas provided in the framework is that role assignment is critical to ensure that all cross-cultural team members are able to learn and comprehend new knowledge, replicating the scope of responsibilities otherwise defined for larger projects. The initial team responsibilities are summarized in the following table.

Role	Definition
Collaborator	A self-organized IT professional has experience in cross-cultural communication both in the conventional and business situations based on his / her past experience. Could be either an international student or experienced cross-cultural Scrum master

Initiator	A self-organized individual with an outstanding ability to generate innovative ideas based on new software development paradigms, who is culturally tolerant to accept or reject these ideas.
Cultural Savvy	A self-organized individual could manage cultural clashes and mutual intolerances by advising on the activation and elimination of the existing team processes based on interactions with other team members and advisory comments to the facilitator.
Technical Savvy	A self-organized individual has experience in multiple software development technologies and could act as the first point of contact for technical consultancy independent of the cultural concerns to support project execution.
Executor	A self-organized individual executes tasks regardless of cultural inputs and prefers to work autonomously, as well as demonstrates outstanding performance in delivering excellent technical solutions.
Facilitator	A self-organized individual takes informal leadership over the project. The role scope does not significantly change from its alternative manifestations in other agile methodologies, while cultural competence is required to be motivated by the collaborator and cultural savvy.

Table 1. Roles and definitions for the proposed framework.

The transformational learning process is suggested to be done in the way of competency development, proposed through the following behavioural comparison.

Competency	Description
Apt Communicator	Effectively communicates with other team members using mutual respect, tolerance, and persuasion. Is able to handle conflicts by collecting insights into the

	existing problems through communication and connecting the dots.
Culture Champion	Is knowledgeable about the cultural differences existing within the team and capable of identifying the cause of such differences through exploration. Is skilled in providing cultural assessments and linking the analysis to the job requirements.
Skilled Executor	Has a unique mastery in performing the assigned tasks and approaches them with high attention to details. Is capable of working autonomously without numerous external interventions.
Technical Master	Possesses unique technical knowledge base and experience that are otherwise not available for others. Uses research and analytical inquiries to master and combine technical skills.
Process Optimizer	Has a profound understanding of the team work and service delivery processes. Is capable of providing and designing process improvements and is skilled in modelling tools.
Holacratic Leader	Is capable of leading and directing other team members without using formal hierarchic procedures. Is able to develop and coach followers based on work observation rather than managerial power.

Table 2. Proposed competency model.

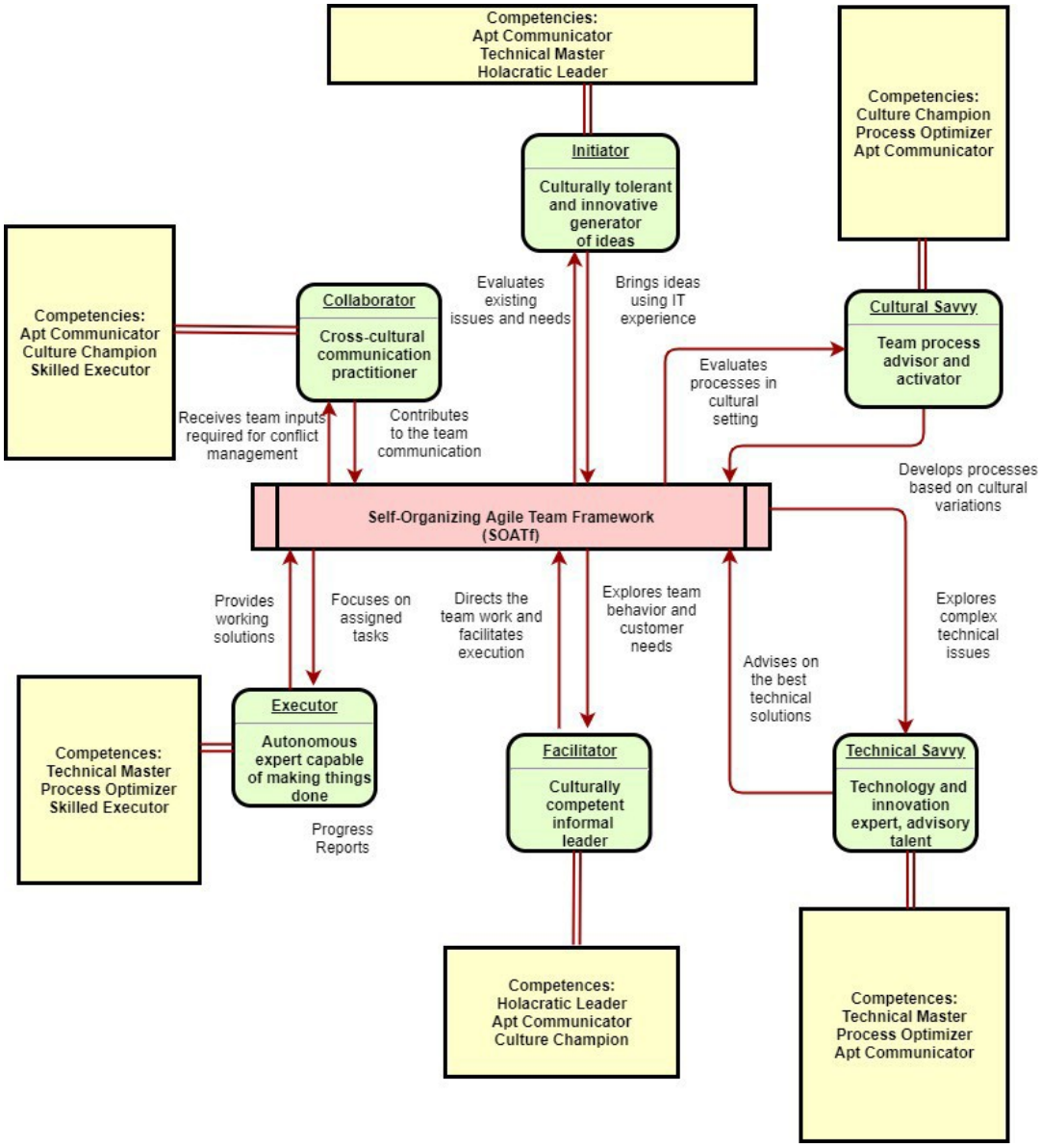

Figure 1. Self-organizing agile team in a cultural context.

The research will be conducted using a qualitative approach, where the existing knowledge of the stance of the self-organizing agile teams is explored based on the awareness of the chosen organization in Turkey. It is imperative to indicate that Turkey has been chosen as the research setting based on the several assumptions informed by the research gaps outlined in the literature and the intermediate conclusions made with a specific reference to the need of exploring the clash between the western and eastern societies. The local researchers in Turkey provide a rather superficial observation on the self-organized agile teams; meanwhile, they admit that agile development as a part of IT is favoured and actively practiced, primarily focusing on the provisions of Scrum

as the development methodology (Karabult and Ergun 2018; Moe, Dingsoyr, and Dyba 2010). Furthermore, the rest of academic efforts is primarily devoted to the literature reviews and does not involve any action research, relying on the secondary data that gives a superficial overview on how the self-organizing teams are evolving in Turkey and what is the benefit of holacracy and self-management for the areas other than IT outsourcing (Abdalhamid and Mishra 2017). For the country that inhabits approximately 80 million of residents and geographically locates in the area where the western and eastern civilizations clash together, such a gap is fruitful to be explored and analysed to come up with meaningful recommendations for the business structures, given that self-organization in Turkey could become an asset for the fields, such as e-commerce, tourism, and transportation services. However, such an approach requires that the cultural impediments typical of the Turkish population itself should be considered. First, self-organization in Turkey already exists at the tourism and agriculture levels, since the rural areas of the country enjoy the profitability of these businesses as the critical source of revenue (Ertugrul 2015). However, it is doubtful that agility is typical of such teams considering that the rural areas represent the major part of the country, with Istanbul being the separate agglomerate, which is seen locally as the location with the western preferences, while the rest of the country pursues the eastern principles of work. Practically, it means that a model proposed by Hoda (2011) is not applicable to the case of Turkey in its straightforward use, since it includes individualist role classifications, such as promoter, champion, and coordinator, which are not suitable for the case of Turkey where the clash of collectivism and individualism could be observed at the rural level. Meanwhile, it is still important considering that Turkey is located in the area where economic interests should be considered in terms of the location, infrastructure, and overall economic partnership. The above proposition means that human capital in Turkey is highly valued and that the self-organizing teams could be considered as the strategic driver of economic growth.

4. Discussion

The proposed model attempts to shift away from the nomenclature definitions of the roles that pursue the idea of leadership and coordination. While the self-organizing concept was primarily informed by the transitional shift in the companies involved in information technology business, the agility itself is a direct outcome of the

transformational leadership theories actively explored by the contemporary leaders who attempt to match their business efforts to the emerging consumer needs. Respectively, self-organization and agility are extensively dependent on customers as the primary source of the revenue. Cultural implication in this case suggests that even small organizations extremely depend on the global markets, where the choice for a specific product or service is motivated both by the quality of the provided service / product and the decisions made by the organization related to specific customers (Taylor 2016). However, such decisions are no longer regulated by individual leaders based on the following reasons. Firstly, IT specialists are currently in demand and empowered to dictate their own rules for the money acquisition as an exchange for the quality of service, which assumes the preference for freelance jobs (Sharp and Ryan 2011). It means that self-organization itself is dominant and is based on soft skills, such as initiation and collaboration apart from the technical competences possessed by the individuals. Secondly, self-organization and agile teams should no longer be considered as the area related to the IT field only, since there are other areas such as e-commerce or business consultancy that rely on the abilities of developing the self-organizing structure that supports the initially defined business objectives (McHugh, Conboy, and Lang 2011; McHugh, Conboy, and Lang 2012). Finally, the clash of cultures is a temporary period, which would be revised based on the exposure to the international markets and the outcome of the projected effectiveness, while specific models and role orientation would be required to ensure that teams are ready to operate efficiently without a direct leadership.

5. Conclusion

Organizations are facing the period of major transformations, where the remote work and self-organization of teams become more important than traditional approach of hierarchical subordination. Business internationalization adds the cultural variable in this context, suggesting that the effectiveness of self-organizing teams operating globally needs further conceptualization as the future organizational model that meets requirements of modern customers. Respectively, this article considered the case of self-organizing framework proposed by Hoda (2011), the potential model refinement proposed from the perspective of the cultural variable, and argued that the refined model could be further validated based on the case of Turkey as a highly multicultural country.

Further research, based on the primary data collection, will be performed to validate the model and develop recommendations for the IT and e-commerce business regarding the model application, with respect to the positive and negative aspects of the clash of cultures.

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