Data analytics, inclusion, sustainability: new roles multiply in organisations

New roles are multiplying in organisations. Look around your own organisation and you can probably spot some of these new roles: Is there a data analytics manager? An inclusion manager? A sustainability manager? Organisations often struggle with how to best support new roles. New roles do not come with a blueprint, nor can they be copied from other organisations. They have to be built from scratch. Too much structure will stifle creativity and innovation; too much freedom will lead to ambiguity and chaos. This challenge of "how much to tighten and how much to let go" continues to confound organisations.

As an example, consider the specific case of sustainability managers. Societal and regulatory concerns about businesses' environmental and social impact (e.g., rising emissions and depleting resources) are forcing organisations to take action. Many organisations are now appointing managers to oversee their environmental and social responsibilities. Our research finds that organisations structure new sustainability roles within three configurations (prospecting, orchestrating and championing). Each configuration has distinct implications for the manager occupying the role, and the manager's ability to fulfil a sustainability agenda.

The three configurations

Organisations with the *prospecting* configuration have the least formalised commitment to sustainability. In the absence of formal structures, the managers feel that they are on an uncharted journey. They struggle to access organisation resources and have limited discretion. They have trouble explaining their roles to colleagues and feel lost and adrift. Managers in prospecting configurations are trapped in an Oliver Twist scenario, continually asking their organisations to "please, sir" pay more attention to sustainability concerns.

Organisations with the *orchestrating* configuration have highly formalised and centralised sustainability programs. The sustainability initiatives in this configuration are developed and formalised at the corporate level. In these organisations, the sustainability manager has to justify their activities to managers in other functional areas (who resist the sustainability programs as another corporate imposition). Sustainability managers' roles in these organisations are tightly orchestrated with low discretion. When they suggest initiatives to their organisations, the projects only get a green light if they fit the formal organisational agenda. To avoid being perceived as a bull in a china shop, they learn to curb their passion for social and environmental issues and end up feeling disempowered.

Organisations with the *championing* configuration have a broad overall commitment to sustainability, but the specific sustainability initiatives are not rigidly formalised. Sustainability managers in this configuration have considerable discretion to launch and champion innovative social and environmental initiatives. They leverage their discretion to successfully collaborate with internal (i.e., colleagues in other functional areas) and external (i.e., communities and regulators) stakeholders. Sustainability programs are decentralised, so social and environmental initiatives are not viewed as top-down directives but are embedded in the routine activities of other functions. Managers in championing configuration feel empowered. They see themselves as music conductors who work with their colleagues to co-create a sustainable future.

Stuck in a rut or evolving toward the ideal?

The championing configuration provides the Goldilocks fit to structuring new roles. But structure does not have to be destiny and organisations do not have to be stuck in the other configurations. As organisational programs grow, a need for efficiency and standardisation can lead the programs to evolve from *low* formalisation (in the prospecting configuration) to *high* formalisation (in the orchestrating configuration). However, evolving to the *semi-structured* championing configuration is not a natural outcome of the forces of growth. Evolving towards this elusive balance between structure and discretion demands both managerial and organisational engagement. A deliberate and considered transition toward the ideal configuration occurs only when active managerial championing takes place in a mature organisational context.

Can the evolution be fast tracked?

When their structures prevent organisations from achieving their desired outcomes, but progress is urgently needed, organisations may need to consider "structural overlays". Organisations that are fumbling with creating structure around new managerial roles (i.e., organisations with the prospecting configuration) can consciously incorporate mechanistic overlays to give new managers resources, authority and a clear focus to advance specific projects. The more rigidly formalised organisations (i.e., organisations with the orchestrating configuration) can loosen the iron fist of formalisation by consciously introducing organic overlays, such as "sandboxes" for specific projects that demand innovative and collaborative responses. This will temporarily exempt managers from the organisational bureaucracy and give them the freedom to experiment and innovate. This deliberate attention to structural overlays for new roles can help organisations fast track their journey towards achieving that "just right" balance between how much to tighten and how much to let go.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Shaping and Being Shaped: How Organizational Structure and Managerial Discretion Co-evolve in New Managerial Roles](), in Administrative Science Quarterly.*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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