Many companies are undergoing processes to transform their management and organizational methods with the aim of empowering employees, and simultaneously increasing collective efficiency. The need for more reactivity and agility, the digitization of processes, the race for talents, and the expectations of younger generations are all pushing us to put an end to Taylorism. However, many of these initiatives are disappointing, with a significant gap between high hopes and the real pace of change or the anchoring of new behaviors. New dysfunctions linked to such initiatives sometimes also appear.

How to assess progress achieved in an employee empowerment transformation process? With a working group, the FIT² Chair has developed the empowerment index, a flexible and adaptable tool to support this kind of transformation within companies.

The simple answer is always wrong and anything else is unusable. ¹

PAUL VALERY

MOVING TOWARDS EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY: WHY?

Many organizations have taken steps to move towards models aimed at promoting empowerment and accountability among individuals and teams. In the era of the digital society, traditional models of leadership through command and control no longer ensure sufficient responsiveness and adaptability in companies to deal with uncertain and changing market conditions. Success is increasingly dependent on members’ cooperation, intensity of exchanges between teams, speed, ability to take initiative and commitment within a defined framework. Added to this is the need to mobilize groups of employees who are increasingly well-educated, free-spirited and paying attention to the quality of work offered (interest, meaning, skills development). This dual context is encouraging organizations to seek out and experiment new modes of management and organization (NMMO). Numerous are the theoretical models to draw from: sociotechnical systems, lean management, adhocracy, agility, liberated companies, holacracy, teal organizations, etc. Some of them are in fact not that new and have their roots in currents of thought from the first half of the 20th century, which already at that time aimed to correct the perceived failures of Taylorism.

Traditional models of leadership through command and control no longer ensure sufficient responsiveness and adaptability in companies to deal with uncertain and changing market conditions. As dated and diverse as they may be, there is a lot of new interest in these NMMOs. They generally share goals such as: promoting the broadening and enrichment of tasks, delegating a certain level of operational responsibility to teams (including self-organization), reducing the number of management levels, reducing management distance and replacing it with “servant leadership”, breaking down the silos, redefining the role of support services, establishing spaces for discussion and exchange on work organization, encouraging creativity and collective intelligence, etc. The process of achieving these combined outcomes is what we refer to as “transformational empowerment”.

CHALLENGES IN TRANSFORMATION PROCESSES: COMPLEXITY AND INSTABILITY

This type of transformation is often complex and unstable. At the FIT Chair, we have studied about twenty of these transformations by combining field surveys and interviews. What came out is that each adventure in empowerment is unique and that there is no universal magic.

5. The EAO (Empowerment and Accountability in Organizations) case studies were constructed according to a homogeneous methodology, and are copyleft. A synthesis of the lessons drawn from these case studies was given in Weil and Dubey, Au-delà de l’entreprise libérée. Enquête sur l’autonomie et ses contraintes, Les Notes de la Fabrique, Presses des Mines, 2020.
6. The chair is also organizing an EAO seminar documented by reports of each session.
formula. The process of increasing empowerment and accountability of employees is challenging, relies on co-construction with the people concerned, requires great attention to the reluctant people and sustained support to the managers. The most successful experiments are those which, rather than importing an external 'model', have been able to pay particular attention to the specificities of their own organization's situation, history and culture and recognise the diversity of their members.

Each adventure in empowerment is unique and there is no universal magic formula.

Those who have given time to these processes and shown tenacity, tolerating a lack of determination as to goals to be achieved and agreeing to proceed by trial and error, have also been more successful.

Some best practices emerged from the analysis. Organizational hypocrisy is one of the main factors of failure: employees are always the first to notice any discrepancies between displayed management intentions and practical realities. It appears greatly preferable to clearly demarcate which areas are open to changes in operating methods (blue areas) and those where the rules will continue to be imposed by management (red areas). Another frequent stumbling block is also that not all employees aspire to empowerment because i) it doesn’t make sense in the conception they have of their work, ii) they don’t see what they get out of it or iii) they have simply got out of the habit’. Tolerance and consideration for those who lack enthusiasm for the new rules of the game are often markers of the quality of the transformation, and a way of maintaining cohesion into the organizational body. Finally, when it is neither guided nor supported in the effort required to change its practices, management itself can also represent an obstacle.

Employees are always the first to notice any discrepancies between displayed management intentions and practical realities.

At the end of this research, it transpired that some kind of management tool would be helpful to implement the processes: to set headline goals at the start of transformation, to assess progress made and to serve as a guide to compare the perceptions of different stakeholders at various stages. The empowerment index aims to fill this empty space.

HOW TO BUILD THE EMPOWERMENT INDEX?

Developed by a working group brought together by the FIT chair, this tool comes in the form of an “index grid”. It helps visualizing the objectives that an organization has set itself or the maturity it has reached. Like a doctor’s thermometer or a traveller’s compass, it provides useful indications for steering action: it helps you work out at what stage you are in your transformation, set a course of action and priorities. It obviously does not mean you should dispense with the rest of the instrumentation used for piloting transformation.

Like any schematic tool, this one oversimplifies the complex reality of every business. As Paul Valéry said, the simple answer is always wrong but anything else is unusable. Aware of these limitations, we are proposing a tool that has been mainly designed to stimulate discussion between stakeholders, help everyone better...
understand the points of view of others, define what seems to be a desirable goal, measure how far one is from achieving it and find a way of reaching it.

The index has been built around 7 dimensions (or axes) making it possible to express levels of empowerment in the organization under consideration. These 7 dimensions are grouped into three blocks: i) framing and co-construction of the process, ii) key processes revealing the level of involvement or participation open to employees, iii) results achieved (or to be achieved) in terms of maturity of the organization and the satisfaction of its various stakeholders (see Box 1).

For each dimension, an evaluation grid is proposed in the form of a rating scale (generally from 0 to 5). The criteria to be met for each level of the scale are briefly described in such a way as to help everyone situate their organization on the scale. The evaluation grid for the 5th dimension “Level of autonomy and participation” is shown in Box 2 for illustration.

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**BOX 1 - THE 7 DIMENSIONS OF THE EMPOWERMENT INDEX**

**I. FRAMING THE PROCESS**
1. Deployment of the process and level of co-construction

**II. KEY PROCESSES**
2. Availability and flow of information
3. Decision-making mechanisms
4. Skills development and assessment

**III. RESULTS**
5. Level of empowerment and participation
6. Employee satisfaction
7. Satisfaction of other stakeholders

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**BOX 2 - ASSESSMENT SCALE IN TERMS OF LEVELS OF EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION: FROM 0 TO 5**

**LEVEL 0.** Traditional hierarchy (goals, tasks and procedures to be followed are dictated and controlled).

**LEVEL 1.** Room for individual initiative on how employees work (operational autonomy) e.g. prioritization of tasks, choice of procedure followed, tools implemented. Only results are controlled.

**LEVEL 2.** Participation in the continuous improvement of procedures, discussion with peers and management on how work can be well done (professional dialogue).

**LEVEL 3.** Organizational autonomy of the team using its own methods of action (such as distribution and coordination of tasks, choice of working hours and places, integration of transversal functions such as quality control, recruitment, training, distribution of bonuses or increases).

**LEVEL 4.** Coordination with other work teams and services/departments entrusted to operational staff (exceptional management intervention), collective discussion on organizational design* and HR practices.

**LEVEL 5.** Collective discussion on the objectives and operating methods at the level of the entire organization (raison d’être, governance, distribution of wealth, etc.)

*Organizational design refers to an overall assessment of company structure: organization according to function (specialized business entities), division (multipurpose entities centred on a product/service, a project, a geographical sector, a market/type of customer), matrix (combining the 2 previous modalities); definition of the scope of action and responsibilities of each entity; development of coordination methods within each entity and between these different entities; detailing of number of management levels.

10. We chose this dimension because some members of the working group suggested that standalone responses to this question could be sufficient for a rapid diagnosis.
The company then reviews each dimension until it has gone through all the dimensions in the index and obtained a score for each of them. The score obtained on certain dimensions can represent the synthesis of various sub-dimensions, which have to be aggregated to obtain the final score for the said dimension. All of the dimension and sub-dimension assessment scales are provided in the full working group summary.11

HOW TO USE THE EMPOWERMENT INDEX

The index can be used in different ways to visualize and compare:
– different perceptions of the existing situation according to stakeholders (operational staff in various departments, managers, management committee) (see figure 1)
– different aspirations for the process according to stakeholders (operational staff, managers, management team)
– progress at different stages of the process (before deployment, after 6 months, after 1 year, etc.) (see figure 2)
– the subjective perception that a given stakeholder has of the current situation, of what they deem desirable, of what they think management is imposing.

It can be seen from the various index measurement “subjects” that the index should not be used in a static and centralized manner (for example, assessment made only by the management committee or the CEO). The analysis of the organization will be all the richer if the points of view of different stakeholders are brought in: operational staff from various departments, line managers, managers of managers, support functions, management committee, customers, shareholders and other stakeholders (residents, local politicians, NGOs, etc.).

11. Available in copyleft.

FIGURE 1 – EVALUATING DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS ACCORDING TO STAKEHOLDERS

FIGURE 2 – ASSESSING PROGRESS AT DIFFERENT STAGES IN THE PROCESS
To get this multiple views, 360°-type questionnaires inspired by the index dimensions can be proposed or other approaches such as: group meetings or focus groups to discuss grid positioning and to co-construct the evaluation itself. In this sense, the index is not only a photographic instrument, it is also a dynamic medium for discussion and sharing. The co-construction of the diagnostic tool can help to moderate the representations of managers who sometimes overestimate the impact of the process, whether in terms of empowerment actually felt by employees or their desire to go further. It may be useful to distinguish between the perceptions and aspirations of employees: they may be satisfied with what has been accomplished, but do they really want to go further, and at what pace?

The objective may be, depending on the circumstances in which the tool is used:
– to better grasp the differences in perception between stakeholders (and observers) and to detect the diversity of situations and feelings within the organization;
– to highlight the gap between the current situation and the targeted one, progress margins and what is “still to be done”;
– to dialogue on process goals and clearly formalize “blue zones” (where initiatives are desired) and “red zones” (where a framework is imposed)

It seems important to emphasize here that the empowerment index is a self-assessment tool for each company, to be used according to its transformation goals as well as according to its history and specific constraints. Each empowerment process is unique and the tool’s purpose is not to compare organizations one with each other (benchmarking).

Each empowerment process is unique and the tool’s purpose is not to compare organizations one with each other.

A TOOL DESIGNED TO BE ADAPTED TO COMPANY SPECIFICITIES

The tool can (must) therefore be adapted and customized according to each organization and user objectives, as well as according to management goals (degree of detail and number of testimonials requested).

Some of the dimensions proposed may seem unnecessary or taking them into account may be premature. For example, in an initial diagnostic process, some organizations will not want to mobilize the last two dimensions (employee satisfaction and stakeholder satisfaction) if the transformation does not aim to improve these two aspects in the short term. Similarly, depending on the objective pursued, certain subdimensions may seem redundant or irrelevant or add too much complexity.

The criteria contained in the scales proposed for each dimension must clearly be interpreted (even modified) according to the specificities of the company. For example, criteria such as the level of participation in governance will not concern a self-managed company or a cooperative enterprise since equality within the organization is already established. Company size considerations may lead to the modulation of certain criteria. For example, the central functions of a multinational of several thousands of people spread over many countries will interact less with the operational staff on a daily basis than within an SME of 50 people. Similarly, answers concerning middle management can be tricky when there are many levels of management with sometimes different operating rules. Conversely, the very term “manager” is inadequate in a self-managed structure. Furthermore, certain activities (particularly in the service sector) lend themselves to high levels of autonomy of the teams in charge of a given customer, whereas production in highly integrated systems (building an aircraft, operating a nuclear
The first, as we have said, is collating points of view from a number of different stakeholders, with the score then resulting from an average or weighting of the points of view. The second consists in accompanying the “ratings” with qualitative comments that bear them out.

Finally, the third consists in making the single rating system more flexible for each dimension. The fact that the tool uses a rating scale suggests a ‘natural’ hierarchy between levels. The criteria of the lower levels are assumed to have been met before moving on to the next level up. For example, the designers of the tool assume that it is constructive to develop individual empowerment before promoting the empowerment of teams or departments and then possibly participation in the governance of the company. However, this hypothesis can be contradicted by real observations. Some organizations will prefer to encourage autonomy at team or departmental level without determining individual status and attitudes of members in advance. If task-based autonomy is extremely constrained by the production model (just-in-time production lines, call centres, headset-driven logistics, etc.), a company may want to grant greater collective empowerment in terms of working conditions (consultation or discussion for the organization of schedules, flexibility of working hours, consultation on the layout of workplaces and breaks, etc.). Similarly, an organization may wish to consult on certain governance choices (for example, the ‘raison d’être’ or the values of the company), without however developing individual or collective autonomy in other respects.

To deal with such situations, slightly less simplistic representations are proposed in the working group’s synthesis, consisting for example of the use of a range rather than a specific score for each dimension (extended index), or of dispensing with the number classification suggested in the tool and marking each characteristic relating to a level in the scale via a matrix representation (see figure 3) whether or not it is a strength of the organization.

Some tool users may object that a rating scale is a very simplistic system for evaluating a multidimensional people-centred group process. In this respect, we once again refer to Paul Valéry’s wise warning quoted in the preamble. Having said this, we may look to a few solutions aimed at overcoming the simplistic nature of a rating scale.

**OVERCOMING THE SIMPLISTIC NATURE OF A RATING SCALE**

Some tool users may object that a rating scale is a very simplistic system for evaluating a multidimensional people-centred group process. The power plant) can induce very heavy security rules and coordination constraints that limit the autonomy of each employee. However, it seemed relevant to us to keep a common tool architecture across the board, even if it remains possible to use different axes for specific categories of organizations, or even customizing them for each organization and sometimes even for various components of the same organization.

The important thing is to stabilize the tool over time once the modifications have been made so as to be able to ensure valid comparisons.

Ultimately, the adaptations to be made will depend on:
- the type of business and its own specificities (size, sector, context, etc.),
- the person using the index (external consultant from an audit perspective, manager or management committee from a self-assessment perspective, etc.),
- targeted goals (assessing the existing situation, defining a transformation process to establish an action plan, highlighting gaps in perception to put them up for discussion, etc.).
CONCLUSION: A FLEXIBLE TOOL

The empowerment index is a flexible tool that companies on the path to empowerment can use to co-construct their transformation objectives with employees or co-evaluate progress made. It must be adapted to the nature of each company and the objectives it sets itself: many companies do not aim to reach the maximum level on each dimension. The tool itself is also a work in progress which will benefit from feedback from users in order to be refined, according to the same logic of iterative improvement which must govern the transformation process.

The vocation of the index is to help organizations wishing to engage in, or already engaged in this type of process to clarify their goals, understand where they are in their transformation, what still needs to be done and how they can modify or improve processes. Of course, they are free to position themselves at more minimal or ambitious levels/forms of empowerment and participation than those proposed by the index. It seems necessary, then, to engage in a regular self-assessment exercise since it takes several years to transform an organization in any depth and since many obstacles can affect those concerned during such a process.

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TO FIND OUT MORE


Working Paper - Working group summary: the empowerment index (in french)