Increasing performance of hierarchical organizations through flexibility enhancing measures

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Abstract:

This paper presents a research design to investigate in flexibility enhancing strategies of hierarchical organizations in order to increase efficiency and performance. In a first step, we present our conceptual model highlighting 4 flexibility enhancing strategies, either implemented by the organization (teams and task forces) or individuals (boundary spanning and collaborative group work). We expect, that through the development of a questionnaire it is possible to show, that contextual variables (hierarchy, diversity and HR practices) have a significant impact on flexibility enhancing strategies and their performance.

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1 INTRODUCTION: INCREASING FLEXIBILITY TO INCREASE PERFORMANCE

The following paper proposes a research project which investigates in flexibility enhancing strategies of strong hierarchical organizations and their impact on efficiency and performance.

Intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations Organization, the European Commission, or the European Central Bank, are under permanent political pressure to increase their performance, while facing a strong hierarchical structure. In recent years, the New Public Management theory emphasizes the need of organizations to concentrate on strategies to increase efficiency (Budäus, 2002; Hughes, 2003; Schedler & Proeller, 2003). Although public sector companies see the necessity of improving performance, i.e. changing rigid and complex organizational structures towards more flexible ones, values of a bureaucratic organizational culture still predominate (Parker & Bradley, 2000).

Management literature highlights teams as a useful strategy to increase performance and efficiency of organizations. Several studies revealed that teams significantly contribute to innovation, quality of service, cost reduction and increased productivity (Swann et al., 2004; Thomas, 1999; Van der Vegt et al., 2003).

A project, lead by Fink, Neyer and Kiefer (2006-2009) found out that organizations as well as individuals develop strategies that allow for more flexibility, while not undermining the existing hierarchical structure. These four strategies shall be tested regarding their impact on performance of private, public and intergovernmental organizations. This will be achieved by developing a questionnaire as described in section 4.

In the following, we shortly summarize the major findings in related research. First, we will focus on flexibility enhancing strategies. Second, we draw our attention to contextual variables that may have an impact on those strategies and formulate our hypotheses. Third, we define the research design and present a detailed work plan. In the last section, we provide a time schedule for the whole research project.

2 FLEXIBILITY ENHANCING STRATEGIES: AN INTRODUCTION

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model that forms the theoretical base of this research project. It visually summarizes the following section, which presents concepts and theories in existing literature and the results of a qualitative study, consisting of 125 interviews, conducted by Fink, Neyer and Kiefer (2006-2009). As can be seen, four different types of flexibility enhancing strategies were found and will be tested in this research project regarding their impact on performance: teams, task forces, boundary spanning and collaborative group work. This model suggests that contextual variables, i.e. diversity, hierarchy and HR practices, have a strong impact on the existence or implementation of such flexibility enhancing strategies. Furthermore we assume that each strategy may differently affect performance. We shortly summarize each item and explain their expected interrelations in the following.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of the research project
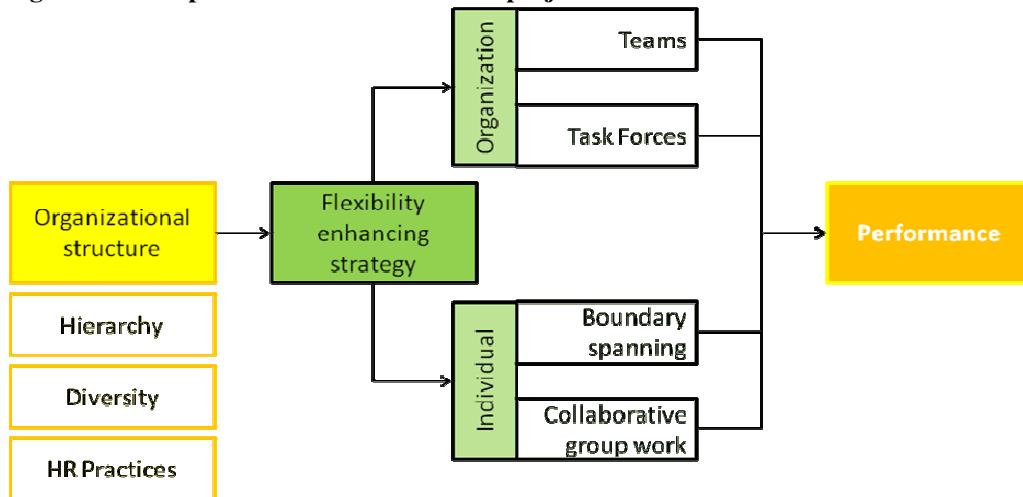
2.1 Flexibility enhancing strategies

In the following, we present four flexibility enhancing strategies which can be grouped into those implemented by the organization (teams, task forces) and others implemented by individuals (boundary spanning, collaborative group work).

2.1.1 Flexibility enhancing strategies by organizations

It is important to clarify that there is a great difference between teams and task forces, although the terms are often used synonymously. Katzenbach & Smith (1993) characterize both types of flexibility enhancing strategies and highlight their major differences as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Major characteristics of teams and task forces

Teams	Task forces
Shared leadership roles	Strong, clearly focused leader
Individual and mutual accountability	Individual accountability
Specific team purpose that the team itself delivers	The task is set by the organization
Collective work-products	Individual work-products
Encourages open-ended discussion and active problem-solving meetings	Runs efficient meetings
Measures performance directly by assessing collective work-product	Task achievement with respect to the given goal of the task force and the goals set for individuals
Discusses, decides and does real work together	Discusses, decides, and delegates

Source: Adopted from Katzenbach & Smith (1993), p.113.

2.1.1.1 Teams

McGrath (1984) defines a team as one that includes two or more persons who are in dynamic interrelation with each other and who work interdependently to accomplish a common goal. Interdependence based on shared rewards is likely to increase the propensity for cooperation between team members (Saavedra et al., 1993).

A psychological aspect as highlighted by Turner (1987) is the adoption of norms and behaviors by a team. Team norms are an important tool to manage team members' behavior as they define the perception and interaction of a team's members, the decision making approach, and the way of how problems are solved (Chatman & Flynn, 2001).

Drawing from these perspectives, we conclude that team members work interdependently based on common decision making processes and shared leadership roles. The aim is to fulfill a common goal which is subject to common team performance measurement.

Fink et al. (2006-2009), interviewed staff of the United Nations and the European Commission. The organizational structure of both institutions is extremely hierarchic. Implementation of teams is difficult, because there is a contradiction between strict lines of authority and responsibility and shared leadership roles in a flat team structure. Performance appraisal systems are mostly geared towards individuals and not at team structures (for details see chapter 2.2).

Nevertheless, in particular the EC gets aware of the benefits of implementing teams to increase its flexibility. Mainly for non-routine tasks teams have been found to be a good solution to overcome hierarchical barriers and thus, to fasten decision-making. In order to generate benefits through teams, organizations would need to align their HR practices with the requirements of team management.

2.1.1.2 Task forces

Similarly to teams, task forces are set up depending on the task which needs to be executed. Task forces refer to a temporary unit established to undertake a well defined task or activity. It can be built out of individuals and equipment from different divisions or departments, without having to go through the paperwork entailed by the hierarchic organization and its bureaucracy. Task forces also can include outside specialists. A task force is easily dissolved when a task is performed, an issue is resolved or when the task force is no longer useful. This goes in line with existing definitions of task forces such as Child's (2005: 102), who defines task forces as "temporary groups comprising people with complementary skills who work to a common purpose for which they are accountable".

Based on the findings of Fink et al. (2006-2009), task forces are particularly put into practice for non-routine purposes and for emergency events. Task forces are flexible; thus, they can focus on whatever problem of immediate importance. Rules and regulations are sometimes simplified for task forces.

2.1.2 Flexibility enhancing strategies of individuals

Not only organizations aim at enhancing their performance. Also individuals develop ways of fastening information flows and decision making through boundary spanning and collaborative group work.

2.1.2.1 Boundary Spanning

Research on boundary spanning activities develops a variety of typologies (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Yan & Louis, 1999). These typologies can be structured along the following lines: outward- and inward-facing boundary activities (Yan & Louis, 1999). Outward-facing boundary activities are those activities that manage a work unit's or organization's relations with its external environment. Inward-facing boundary activities are those activities that internally manage the boundaries of a work unit or organization. Empirical findings show that boundary spanning is a tool to deal with the hierarchical structure of the organizations. Boundary spanning activities support individuals to handle the inherent diversity and to manage HR practices that are not team or group work oriented (Fink, Neyer & Kiefer; 2006-2009).

Apart from that, it is assumed that this flexibility enhancing strategy is a successful instrument to deal with diversity and hierarchy in intergovernmental organizations. Through boundary spanning individuals overcome hierarchical barriers and deal with cultural diversity in situations where cultural differences negatively influence the interactions. The main reason for boundary spanning is to overcome information deficits grounded in the hierarchical structure. This is in line with existing literature, which highlights that boundary spanning is closely linked to bureaucracy and hierarchy and aims at reducing the amount of red tape as well as the number of levels in the hierarchy (Denison, 1996). Individual boundary spanning arises if communication across organizational boundaries is inefficient, time consuming or too costly (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Also the empirical study by Fink et al. (2006-2009) support previous studies by showing that individuals start to span boundaries through networking, communication and exchange of information across hierarchical boundaries to get the information needed. Thus, individual boundary activities create networks beyond hierarchical structures as well as parallel systems to the official system. We argue that boundary spanning is a supportive practice to deal with a system characterized by hierarchy and cultural diversity.

2.1.2.2 Collaborative group work

In line with Milton & Westphal (2005: 192) collaborative group work can be defined as "interactive and relational behavior that occurs between members of a work group and that is directed at task achievement in the group". Although individuals may be aware of the value of diverse cultural and functional backgrounds for getting their tasks done, they need to learn how to identify and deal with them within the rigid hierarchical and bureaucratic organization (Fink et al. (2006-2009).

Chatman & Flynn (2001) emphasize the importance of the establishment of norms that support collaborative group work among individuals. Norms define the perception and interaction of individuals, the decision making approach, and the way in which problems are solved (Chatman & Flynn, 2001). Efficient norms are a tool to facilitate interaction, while at the same time making use of the particular knowledge of individuals based on his/her cultural background. Earley & Mosakowski (2000) refer to these shared team norms as 'hybrid culture'. They define 'hybrid culture' as an "emergent and simplified set of rules and actions, work capabilities expectations, and member perceptions that individuals within a team develop, share, and enact after mutual interaction" (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000 as quoted by Earley & Gibson, 2002: 45). It has to be considered that norms are established and enforced not for every conceivable situation, but with respect to behaviors that have some significance for the team (Feldman, 1984).

The use of informal rules is an instrument to facilitate communication among individuals. The establishment of informal rules within teams allows for the acceleration of information flows. In times of intensive use of information technology, communication via e-mail is quite often used to foster cooperation across hierarchical boundaries.

Interestingly, it was found by Neyer & Harzing (2008), that even though collaborative group work is supported by enabling norms in principle, individuals tend to stick to their culturally-determined behaviors if they are working under time pressure. The influence of specific culturally determined behavior on collaborative group work is dependent on the time available to perform the tasks. In line with Fink et al. (2006-2009), we assume that if there is enough time to work on the task at hand, people feel more relaxed about culturally determined behavior that is different from their own preferred behavior. They decide to limit the influence of their preferred culturally determined behavior in the collaborative group work. In this case, individuals may be more willing to adapt to the behavior of others, and try to find compromises. However, under time pressure, individuals may rely on their preferred behavior, i.e. their own culturally determined behavior and their learned behavioral scripts. Consequently, when working under time pressure, individuals are no longer willing to accept behavior that varies dramatically from their own cultural behavior. In this case, collaborative group work as an individual strategy towards flexibility is no longer working as conflicts are more likely to emerge. In this case, individuals need to develop other strategies to overcome information deficits.

2.2 Organizational structure: diversity, hierarchy, HR practices

As already mentioned in the introduction of this section, three contextual variables may have an impact on the existence and implementation of flexibility enhancing strategies.

2.2.1 Hierarchy

In the proposaed research project we assume that the established hierarchy in organizations has the strongest influence on flexibility enhancing strategies. Hierarchy depicted by distinguished levels of responsibility, authority and power combined with flexible structures, such as team work, seem to be a contradiction, a hybrid at best. However, the four flexibility enhancing strategies, as presented above, may help to overcome the drawbacks of strong hierarchical structures. According to what has been mentioned so far we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1:
The degree of hierarchy significantly affects the existence of flexibility enhancing strategies.

Hypothesis 1a:
In organizations with a strong hierarchy and individual-oriented performance appraisal system, task forces are more common than teams.

Hypothesis 1b:
In organizations with a strong hierarchy and bureaucracy, boundary spanning is more common than in organizations with a less strong hierarchy and bureaucracy.

2.2.2 <u>Diversity</u>

Intergovernmental organizations, such as the European Commission or the United Nations, are multinational places and, subsequently, also multicultural places with diverse ethical, religious and socioeconomic structures. As a consequence, encounters of diverse nationalities and cultures are a fact of daily work life.

As in other organizations, general stereotypes on nationality and gender may also exist. Hence, national and cultural diversity become salient to individuals and different strategies are used to cope with diversity. Fink et al. (2006-2009), for example, found that previous experience with culturally-determined behaviors and experience in working in a foreign language reduce the influence of societal cultures on interactions. Time pressure, on the other hand, makes cultural differences more explicit. Foreign language as the main means of communication may create barriers to team interaction. If people are not very experienced in working in a foreign language, language barriers can give rise to a large number of negative consequences: uncertainty and suspicion, deterioration of trust and a polarization of perspectives, perceptions and cognitions (Feely & Harzing, 2003). Communicated messages can become ambiguous and subject to individual interpretation and, in the worst case, result in conflict. Strategies to cope with this communication barrier are the use of simple language or technical language; both minimizing the propensity for misunderstandings. Interviewees in the study of Fink, Neyer and Kiefer (2006-2009) describe that they are aware of the fact that communication in a foreign language restricts their abilities to express themselves as compared to communication in a native language.

In view of the above, we assume that diversity may affect the performance of all four flexibility enhancing strategies:

Hypothesis 2:
The degree of national/cultural diversity within teams and task forces significantly affects their performance.

Hypothesis 2a:
Teams and task forces perform better, if the official language used in teams and task forces is the same as the native language of most of its members.

Hypothesis 2b:
Teams and task forces which consist of individuals with equal nationalities perform better under time pressure than teams and task forces which consist of individuals with different nationalities.

Hypothesis 2c:
Teams and task forces which consist of individuals with different nationalities perform better if simple or technical language is used.

Hypothesis 3:
The degree of cultural diversity within the organization significantly affects the degree of boundary spanning and collaborative group work.

Hypothesis 3a:
In collaborative group work individuals prefer working together with individuals who have the same native language.

Hypothesis 3b:
The more languages are spoken by an individual the more boundary spanning activities are set by these individuals.

Hypothesis 3c:
The more languages are spoken by an individual the more collaborative group work activities are set by these individuals.

2.2.3 <u>HR practices</u>

One important aspect of the organizational structure that influences the creation of team awareness in intergovernmental organizations are the HR practices in use. McHugh & Bennett (1999), argue that "the new agencies have experienced some difficulty with the implantation of their often disintegrated programs of strategic change. The root cause of these difficulties might lie in a rigid adherence to an outmoded set of cultural values, a bureaucratic structure and old reward systems coupled with a panic-crazed obsession with efficiency, all of which may act as impediments to longer term organizational performance". This is also supported by the findings of Fink, Neyer and Kiefer (2006-2009) who found out that performance appraisal systems influence the development of team thinking. Performance appraisal systems are the systems an organization uses to reward its employees and can either be individual or group-orientated. We hypothesize that team and task force performance strongly depends on the way individuals are remunerated for their successful work. Given the characteristics of teams and task forces, as illustrated in section 2.1.1, we expect the following relationship:

Hypothesis 4:
HR practices significantly affect team and task force performance.

Hypothesis 4a:
Task forces perform better if the performance appraisal system is individual-oriented.

Hypothesis 4b:
Teams perform better if the performance appraisal system is group-oriented.

3   AIMS OF SUCH A PROJECT AND CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING RESEARCH

This proposed research project aims at testing the influence of flexibility enhancing strategies on performance of organizations with strong hierarchical structures compared to those with less strong hierarchical structures. While existing research offer interesting insights into how organizations and individuals try to overcome the inflexibility of their organizational structure, less had been found on performance variables in this context. In addition, the question, whether the degree of hierarchy in an organization has an impact on flexibility enhancing strategies and their performance, has not been answered so far.

We propose to add two variables to the study of flexibility enhancing strategies: degree of hierarchy and performance. Measuring the degree of hierarchy would allow for comparisons of companies that are characterized by strong hierarchical structures with those organizations with weak or loose hierarchical structures, i.e. with a rather flexible approach to organizing work. Looking at the performance of flexibility enhancing strategies in certain contexts will also give insights into the economic adequacy of teams, task forces, boundary spanning and collaborative group work. This seems of special interest as, according to leading literature, organizations and individuals implement such strategies to improve performance. However, definite results proving that are missing.

In order to test our hypotheses specified in section 2.2 it becomes necessary to develop a questionnaire that meets the requirements for the variables put into relation. As a second goal, the proposed research project should aim at the development of such an instrument which plays a significant role in the research design as presented in the following chapter.

4   RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLE

This section focuses on the proposed research design and presents the methods applied to test our hypotheses. At the end of this section we discuss the selection of various samples which will be used to test the questionnaires and to collect data for the final analysis.

Figure 2 illustrates all 6 stages of the research process.

Figure 2: Research design


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┌─────────────────────────┐         ┌─────────────────────────┐
│       Task 1:           │  ──────>│       Task 2:           │
│ Extensive literature    │         │   Development of        │
│      review             │         │   questionnaires        │
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│       Task 3:           │         │       Task 4:           │
│ Analysis of pre-test    │  ──────>│   Adjustments of        │
│ findings and objectivity,│         │   questionnaires        │
│ reliability and validity │         │                         │
│       checks            │         │                         │
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│       Task 5:           │         │       Task 6:           │
│ Data collection and     │  ──────>│ Report of findings, final│
│ testing of hypotheses   │         │ version of manual, working│
│                         │         │ papers, conference and  │
│                         │         │ journal submissions     │
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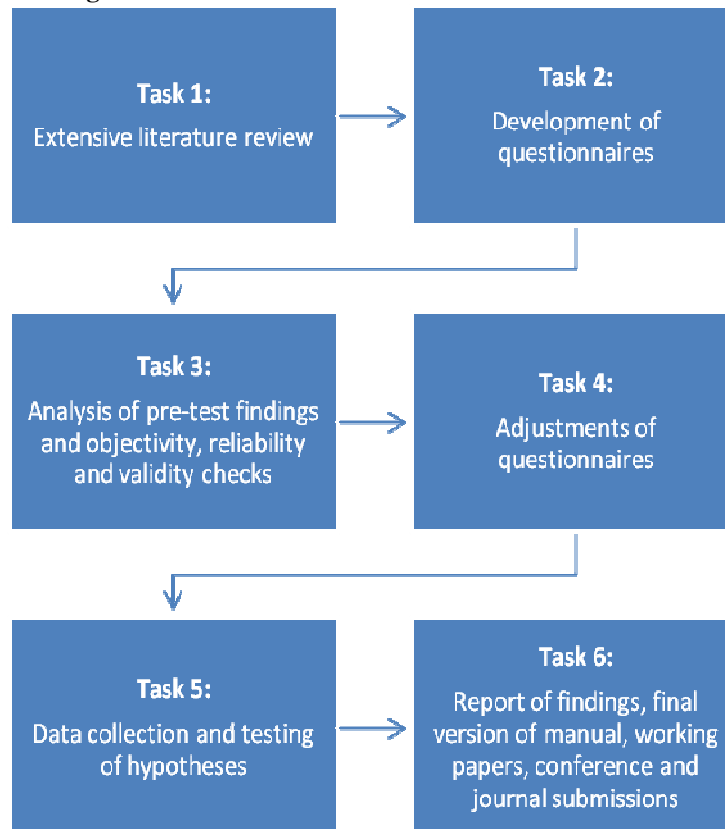
4.1 *The research journey in detail*

This chapter describes all 6 stages of the proposed research project in detail and highlights their relevance for answering the proposed hypotheses.

Task 1: Extensive literature review

In a first step, we plan to run an extensive literature review which will shed light on all variables necessary to create our questionnaire. In particular, the following topics have to be covered:

- Teams
- Task forces
- Boundary spanning
- Collaborative group work
- Degree of hierarchy
- Diversity (in particular cultural diversity)
- HR practices (in particular performance appraisal systems)
- Performance measurement

This should help to build a reasonable basis for the creation of the final questionnaire. Articles reviewed for the proposal of this research project will serve as a good starting point.

Task 2: Development of questionnaires

The literature review and the study of Fink et al. (2006-2009) will significantly support the development of item batteries that allow us to measure diversity, hierarchy, HR practices, the four types of flexibility enhancing strategies and performance in a meaningful way. In this phase we will elaborate a questionnaire in German and English as the final sample will consist of organizations situated in Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom. In addition, we will develop two equivalent questionnaires for each language. This is considered of being the best procedure to control the reliability of questionnaires (Lienert & Raatz, 1998, p. 182).

Task 3: Analysis of pre-test findings and objectivity, reliability and validity checks

After finishing the data collection of the pre-test (for details see section 4.2), the objectivity, reliability and validity of the preliminary questionnaires will be tested.

A questionnaire can be considered of being objective, if responses are by no means biased by the researcher, i.e. different researchers gain the same results from the same sample. Issues dealt within the objectivity tests are:

- Objectivity of running the questionnaire
- Objectivity of evaluation of responses
- Objectivity of interpretation of responses (Lienert & Raatz, 1998)

Another important task to evaluate the quality of the developed questionnaires includes reliability tests. Three various coefficients will be calculated deriving from using equivalent questionnaires, running re-tests and measuring the inner consistency of the questionnaire.

As far as validity is concerned, internal, construct and criterion validity will be examined. In order to hold for internal and construct validity, the literature review will serve as an important source. The development and formulation of item batteries will put emphasis on these findings as they provide a strong base for generating the questionnaire. The questionnaire will also draw on already tested item batteries that proved to be valid and reliable. Table 2 gives examples of articles providing such item batteries.

Table 2: Examples of articles that provide tested item batteries relevant for this research project

Item	Relevant articles
Cooperation	Simsek, Z., Veige, J., Lubatkin, M, Dino, R. 2005.
Connectedness	Jaworski, B. J., & Kohli, A. K. 1993.
Boundary spanning	Susan Hill (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, London Business School, 2008)
Knowledge Transfer	Zarraga, C., & Bonache, J. 2005.
Task interdependence	Bacharach, S., Bamberger, P., & Vashdi, D. 2005.
Task routine	Withey, M., Daft, R., Cooper, W. 1983.
Reward system	Zarraga, C., & Bonache, J. 2005.

At this stage of the project, feedback of respondents regarding the questionnaires will be collected to support Task 4.

Task 4: Adjustments of the questionnaires

Based on the findings of Task 3, we will further develop the questionnaires and design a preliminary manual. The manual will consist of guidelines for using these instruments and reports the findings of the objectivity, reliability and validity tests. At this stage an interim-report is scheduled for presenting our first research results as well as the final questionnaire that will be applied in Task 5.

Task 5: Data collection and testing of hypotheses

Data will be collected from various organizations within three countries: Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom. In addition, intergovernmental organizations will be included (for details see chapter 4.2).

Based on the returned questionnaire we will test our hypotheses mentioned in chapter 2.2. As far as methods are concerned we run statistical standard procedures with the help of SPSS to check for correlations, control variables (e.g. age, gender, nationality, education), etc.

Task 7: Report of findings, final version of manual, working papers, conference and journal submissions

In the last phase of the proposed research project, the final report will be elaborated to present the major findings including the final version of the manual of the developed questionnaires. Apart from that, working papers and conference submissions will be elaborated on the basis of the results. Moreover, papers for journals will be submitted to make our findings public and open to discussion for researchers from different fields. The main focus will be put on journals with high impact factors, such as Academy of Management Journal, Organization Science and Journal of International Business Studies.

4.2   Samples for this research project

Different samples will be used for this research project that fit the necessities of certain tasks as mentioned above.

Table 3: Samples for the research project

Task	Sample
Task 3: Analysis of pre-test findings and objectivity, reliability and validity checks	Vienna University of Economics and Business and several of its cooperation partners in Europe and the United States 125 interview partners contacted in the study of Fink et al. (2006-2009)
Task 5: Data collection and testing of hypotheses	Public and private organizations from Austria, Germany, United States, United Kingdom and intergovernmental organizations

For the pre-test we will send the questionnaire to all departments at the Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU). In addition feedback-interviews will be held with randomly selected respondents. In order to properly test the English questionnaire, cooperation partners of the WU will receive the questionnaire as well. They will be available as a printable file and as a web-based research tool, which allows alleviating drawbacks of both implementation strategies. This should guarantee enough responses to test all four questionnaires and run the necessary quality procedures as mentioned in Task 3. Depending on the validity checks, a second round of pre-testing will be run by issuing the questionnaires to the 125 interview partners contacted for the qualitative study of Fink et al. (2006-2009). If the questionnaire produces valid results in the first round of pre-testing, the sample of 125 interview partners will be forwarded to Task 5. The main sample for testing the hypotheses will be drawn from public and private organizations from Austria, Germany, United States and the United Kingdom and intergovernmental organizations, such as the European Commission, the United Nations, the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank and/or the OECD. Most of the companies can be found in the Amadeus Research Database, provided by Bureau van Dijk Electronic Publishing.

SUMMARY

The presented research project aims at investigating into four flexibility enhancing strategies and their impact on the performance of hierarchical organizations. We distinguish between organization-driven strategies to improve flexibility (teams and task forces) and individual-driven strategies (boundary spanning and collaborative group work). We hypothesize that hierarchy, diversity and HR practices significantly influence the existence and implementation of such strategies in organizations. Based on existing literature we developed four major hypotheses that shall be tested:

H_1: The degree of hierarchy significantly affects the existence of flexibility enhancing strategies.
H_2: The degree of national/cultural diversity within teams and task forces significantly affects their performance.
H_3: The degree of cultural diversity within the organization significantly affects the degree of boundary spanning and collaborative group work.

H$_4$: HR practices significantly affect team and task force performance.

In order to find answers to these hypotheses it is necessary to develop an objective, valid and reliable questionnaire. According to our sample, which will be drawn from organizations located in Austria, Germany, United States and Great Britain, we plan to create questionnaires in English and German. Apart from private and public organizations, we will also collect data from intergovernmental organizations, such as the European Commission, United Nations or the OECD.

Although extant literature highlights the importance of increasing flexibility to enhance efficiency, there are rarely studies relating flexibility enhancing strategies, degree of hierarchy, degree of diversity and HR practices to performance. This research project will give insights into the economic adequacy of teams, task forces, boundary spanning and collaborative group work on a large sample and shall generate recommendations for management as well as stimulate future research in the field of international management.

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