

University of Groningen

Individual employees' multiple team membership: a double-edged sword

van de Brake, Hendrik Johan

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van de Brake, H. J. (2019). *Individual employees' multiple team membership: a double-edged sword*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen, SOM research school.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

CHAPTER 1

General Introduction

Numerous management books and magazines have stressed the pivotal role that teams (i.e., sets of individuals who work interdependently to achieve a common goal; Hackman, 2002) play in the success of contemporary organizations (e.g., Maxwell, 2003). Indeed, teams are an integral part of today's work environment. Group assignments are a key component of most business schools, job advertisements call for candidates with "a passion for teamwork", and managers spend large amounts of their time fostering teamwork (The Economist, 2016).

Following this trend, a large body of research has examined optimal team compositions, collaboration, and performance strategies (for an overview, see Mathieu, Wolfson, & Park, 2018). Thousands of empirical studies have been conducted, several meta-analyses have been performed, and numerous reviews of the literature have been published (e.g., Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Kozlowski, 2015). Indeed, considerable progress has been made in team research over the past six decades. At the same time, however, it appears that today's teams are markedly more diverse, unstable, and complex than ever before (Wageman, Gardner, & Mortensen, 2012). Consequently, some scholars question whether existing perspectives are fully "capturing and embracing the complexities of current team arrangements", leading them to call for research that seeks to better understand contemporary teams "rather than to fit them into our current frameworks" (Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008: 463; see also Mortensen & Gardner, 2017).

A central assumption of most team studies to date has been that, at any given point in time, individual employees work in a single team. In contemporary jobs, by contrast, employees often work in multiple teams at the same time (O'Leary, Mortensen, & Woolley, 2011a). Indeed, team scholars frequently encounter such multiple team membership (MTM) in empirical studies. In a sample of hospital teams, for example, Kolbe et al. (2014: 1263)

“had to accept that the participating physicians and nurses were members of more than one team. As a consequence, teamwork behavior could not be considered to be completely independent between the teams”. Similarly, in a study of 96 multinational project teams, Haas (2010: 995) noted that “only 18 of the team members surveyed appeared on more than one team roster, indicating that respondents who participated in more than one team were unlikely to bias the data” (for another example, see Shah & González-Ibáñez, 2011: 4). Hence, it appears that scholars often approach MTM with great caution, as it violates the common assumption that team memberships are full-time, stable, and limited to a single team (Mortensen & Gardner, 2017).

This assumption may no longer hold, given that approximately 65 percent of today’s employees, spanning a wide variety of countries, industries, and occupations, participate in more than one team at the same time (Mortensen, Woolley, & O’Leary, 2007). Prior research has largely ignored the causes and consequences of individuals’ MTM, and it remains unclear whether MTM is a useful and efficient work practice. Multi-teamers can only spend a limited amount of time within each of their teams, for example, and they frequently need to move from one team to another to streamline competing demands on their time. MTM may thus significantly complicate an employee’s work schedule and task requirements. On a more positive note, MTM may also allow individual employees to develop and express themselves in unique and meaningful ways (O’Leary et al., 2011b). Consequently, there is a real need for insights into the benefits and detriments of MTM, thus helping organizations and individual employees to manage the challenges and opportunities of contemporary teamwork.

In the present dissertation, I aim to provide such insights. Specifically, the purpose of this dissertation is to systematically address if, why, and when MTM is either a positive or negative experience for individual employees. In doing so, I will focus on important ambiguities in current perspectives on the consequences of individual MTM. I will begin by

exploring why MTM is such a common occurrence in contemporary work. Subsequently, I will review the literature on MTM, provide an overview of critical ambiguities in existing MTM research, and, finally, describe how this dissertation will address these issues.

Why Is MTM so Prevalent in Contemporary Work?

Recent case studies, as well as my exploratory interviews with project leaders, human resources managers, and individual employees, suggest that there are several reasons why many employees work in multiple teams. First, as noted by O’Leary et al. (2011a, 2011b), firms assign their employees to multiple teams because they want to use their human resources as efficiently as possible. Organizations face greater competitive pressure due to globalization and increasingly crowded markets and, as such, they try to stretch human resources and keep costs down. Consequently, individual employees are expected to maximize their number of billable hours (i.e., project work that is directly charged to a client), and MTM is a particularly useful work practice in achieving optimal efficiency: “being on more teams concurrently gives individuals more opportunities to offset the ebbs in one team’s work with the flows of another team’s work” (O’Leary et al., 2011a: 467). Employees that participate in only one or a few teams, by contrast, may accumulate ‘non-billable’ work hours during slow periods in a project, or when they wait for inputs from other team members (Kerzner, 2013).

Second, project teams increasingly draw on more than one type of expertise to solve complex, knowledge-intensive problems (Cummings, 2004). An employee’s unique expertise is often required in multiple simultaneous teams, so that project managers and team leaders increasingly recruit individual team members on a part-time basis (O’Leary et al., 2011b). In academia, for example, research projects often involve specialized researchers (e.g., a conceptual scholar, qualitative researcher, and a statistician) that contribute to the project’s end product (e.g., a research manuscript). When an employee’s specific expertise is

temporarily not required, he or she can allocate more time to other concurrent teams (Cummings & Kiesler, 2014). A statistician, for example, may have to wait until the team has finished collecting survey responses before he or she can analyze data and test hypotheses. In the meantime, this person therefore works on other concurrent projects in which he or she is of greater use.

Lastly, companies increasingly use MTM as a work practice that facilitates knowledge sharing and learning across multiple teams (Mortensen et al., 2007). A core assumption held by many project managers and HR practitioners is that MTM creates useful information and knowledge flows between concurrent projects (Mortensen & Gardner, 2017). MTM allows managers to recognize potential synergies and opportunities across multiple projects, and to select and assign relevant employees accordingly. In a series of concurrent projects for the same client, for example, a project manager may assign the same employee to each project team to ensure that task procedures and end products are compatible across projects.

Altogether, these observations suggest that MTM is a common phenomenon in today's work environment because it generates several benefits for efficiency and knowledge-sharing. Recent research indeed suggests that teams and organizations benefit from employees' concurrent involvement in multiple teams. MTM has been associated with, for example, opportunities for inter-team information exchange, intra-team learning, and team performance improvements (e.g., Bertolotti, Mattarelli, Vignoli, & Macrì, 2015; Cummings & Haas, 2012; Vedres & Stark, 2010). It only seems logical, then, that organizations are so eager to utilize MTM as an efficient and effective human resource practice.

MTM may come at a price, however, paid by individual employees. Although there are good theoretical reasons to believe that MTM has similarly positive consequences on the individual level of analysis (see O'Leary et al., 2011a), MTM may also create considerable stress experiences and could, thus, be perceived as a negative rather than a positive experience

by individual employees (Zika-Viktorsson, Sundström, & Engwall, 2006; Pluut et al., 2014). More specifically, the current MTM literature suggests that MTM potentially comes with both benefits *and* disadvantages for individual employees' (a) overall performance on the job, (b) psychological well-being, and (c) interpersonal relationships within and across teams (Pluut et al., 2014; Zika-Viktorsson, Sundström, & Engwall, 2006). In what follows, I will summarize the current MTM literature and identify key research gaps that need to be addressed to increase our understanding of the potential costs and benefits of individual MTM.

Conceptualizing Multiple Team Membership

Team-level MTM. Prior MTM studies focused almost exclusively on the team-level consequences of MTM (e.g., Bertolotti et al., 2015; Mortensen, 2014). These studies defined MTM as the extent to which a focal team's members are simultaneously involved in other teams in the organization. Mortensen (2014: 920), for example, operationalized MTM by asking individual team members to report the number of other teams of which they were current members, using the team-level mean of responses as a measure of the extent of MTM in the focal team. Hence, team-level MTM is considered a configurational team property that emerges from the aggregated characteristics of a team's individual members (LeBreton & Senter, 2008).

Most team-level studies examined whether MTM relates positively or negatively with team performance. Cummings and Haas (2012), for example, asked a panel of senior executives in a large multinational company to rate the overall performance (i.e., usefulness and uniqueness of work output, value delivery, and tangible results) of 285 project teams. The authors found that having members who also participated in additional teams was beneficial, rather than detrimental, for a team's performance (see also Vedres & Stark, 2010). Bertolotti et al. (2015) re-examined and further nuanced these findings in a sample of 40 R&D teams. The authors hypothesized, and corroborated, that "the relationship between multiple team

membership and team performance is curvilinear in the shape of an inverted U, such that teams whose members are, on average, engaged simultaneously in few or many teams experience lower performance” (p. 914). Together, this suggests that MTM can improve the performance of a team, although its advantages may disappear when a team’s average MTM exceeds a certain optimum.

Individual-level MTM. Prior studies’ predominant focus on team-level MTM is surprising, in particular, because MTM emerges when an *individual* becomes a member of more than one team at the same time (O’Leary et al., 2011a). Employees often differ markedly in the number of teams in which they are simultaneously involved (Cummings & Haas, 2012), and these individual-level variations are not adequately captured in team-level conceptualizations. Indeed, as noted by Bertolotti et al. (2014), team-level MTM measures “rest on the assumption that there are apparent differences between aggregated and non-aggregated data. Therefore, it is not necessary that individual or lower-level data demonstrate consensus prior to aggregation” (p. 197). Hence, even though existing research generated important insights into the benefits and disadvantages of team-level MTM, these studies may have neglected the unique demands and opportunities experienced by individual multi-teamers (Pluut et al., 2014).

This dissertation specifies MTM as an individual-level construct that denotes the extent to which an employee is a member of more than one team at the same time. Specifically, we define MTM as an employee’s simultaneous and active team memberships, reflected in the number of teams to which he or she actively allocates his or her working time (Mortensen et al., 2007). With higher MTM, an individual employee works on a higher number of teams within a respective period (e.g., per week; O’Leary et al., 2011a), whereas employees with lower MTM focus on only one or a few concurrent teams.

What We Already Know About Individual-Level MTM

As noted before, a handful of studies have already explored the individual-level consequences of MTM. These studies paint a picture of MTM as a double-edged sword that can both hinder and improve an employee's overall functioning and well-being at work. More specifically, the literature points to three ambiguities regarding MTM's consequences for an employee's overall performance, psychological well-being, and the quality of his or her interpersonal relationships at work.

Performance consequences of individual MTM. First, research suggests that individual MTM distinctly shapes an employee's overall performance on the job (i.e., his or her contributions toward the organization's goal achievement; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). When an individual's tasks are spread out over a greater number of concurrent teams, he or she is subjected to more complex and demanding job requirements across diverse team settings (O'Leary et al., 2011b). Accordingly, employees regularly need to relocate their time and attention to different tools, tasks, and technologies (Leroy, 2009; Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). Conceptual work proposed that "these switching costs reduce individual productivity" because "each additional team exacerbates the division of people's attention and slows their reengagement with any one team's work" (O'Leary et al., 2011a: 467).

At the same time, MTM may create unique opportunities for personal growth and productivity improvement. In an exploratory study, Mortensen et al. (2007: 5) concluded that "although MTM work is demanding, it provides employees with opportunities to shape their careers by joining projects related to expertise they have or want to develop". Relatedly, research on social networks suggests that MTM provides "deeply familiar access to knowledge bases and productive resources," which "enables the redefinition, redeployment, and recombination of resources" (Vedres & Stark, 2010: 1151). Together, this suggests that MTM allows an individual to develop new skills and to transfer useful information and resources (e.g., task materials, work practices) across multiple teams, potentially improving

(rather than hindering) his or her productivity. Unfortunately, there is very little empirical research on the individual MTM-performance linkage (for a notable exception, see Rapp & Mathieu, 2018), and it remains unclear if an employee's MTM is indeed related to his or her job performance.

Further complicating matters, an employee's job performance may also function as an antecedent (rather than a consequence) of his or her MTM. Cummings & Haas (2012) examined why some individuals work in more teams than others. They proposed that employees with skills and abilities that are in greater demand within the organization are invited (or assigned) to a higher number of teams. Accordingly, Cummings & Haas (2012) found that employees with (1) greater work experience, (2) a higher rank in the organizational hierarchy, and (3) more education were more likely to be involved in multiple teams simultaneously. Extending this line of reasoning, it seems logical that an employee's performance reputation similarly shapes his or her attractiveness as a prospective team member and, as such, predicts his or her number of simultaneous teams.

In sum, there are good theoretical reasons to expect that an individual's MTM is related to his or her overall job performance. Whether this relation is positive or negative, and whether MTM is an antecedent or a consequence to his or her performance, however, remains unclear. Chapter 2 of the present dissertation employs a resource-based perspective to address these issues. It proposes that MTM can either improve access to, or distract from, key resources required for an employee's effective performance at work, and subsequently examines how MTM and individual performance dynamically influence each other over time.

Psychological consequences of individual MTM. A second set of studies has focused on the psychological impact of individuals' involvement in multiple teams. Zika-Victorsson et al. (2006), for example, developed the concept of "project overload", referring to the perceived fragmentation, disruption, and inefficiency caused by switching between

simultaneous project teams. The authors examined a large sample of Swedish project workers across nine organizations and found that respondents with MTM were more likely to experience project overload than employees involved in only a single team (see also Leroy, 2009). These perceptions of project overload, in turn, were related to impaired performance (measured as lack of adherence to schedule), psychological stress reactions, and decreased individual competence development (Zika-Victorsson et al., 2006).

The work appraisal literature, by contrast, points to MTM as a potentially positive work arrangement that may satisfy employees' intrinsic need for positive and challenging work experiences. LePine, LePine, and Jackson (2004) examined individuals' psychological responses to demanding and potentially stressful work situations. In a study of 696 undergraduate students, the authors found that respondents appraised MTM (i.e., being involved in multiple concurrent projects) as a demanding yet positive challenge, motivating them to "exert more energy trying to learn because they believe that by doing so they will eventually come to understand and master the material" (LePine, LePine, & Jackson, 2004: 885). Extending this line of reasoning, one could argue that employees may perceive MTM as an opportunity for learning and personal growth, allowing them to break away from established work routines and familiar settings (Boswell, 2004).

All in all, there appear to be negative and positive perspectives on the psychological consequences of individual MTM. Again, very little research has been conducted in this area, and it remains unclear whether MTM is a positive or negative experience for individual employees. Chapter 3 addresses this issue by examining individual MTM's through the lens of the challenge-hindrance framework (LePine et al., 2005). Building on this framework, we will propose that an employee's psychological responses to MTM depend on his or her experience within the organization (i.e., one's organizational tenure).

Interpersonal consequences of individual MTM. A third and final set of studies has

focused on MTM as an inherently social and interactive work practice. MTM requires employees to collaborate with a wide variety of coworkers on interdependent assignments across multiple teams (O’Leary, Woolley, & Mortensen, 2011b; Wageman et al., 2012). Accordingly, multi-teamers may experience unique interpersonal demands and opportunities that decisively shape their relationships at work.

In a recent survey study, Pluut et al. (2014) argued that each team membership adds colleagues that impose demands and expectations on an employee (see also O’Leary et al., 2011a). Accordingly, the authors found a positive association between an employee’s number of simultaneous team memberships and his or her perceived interpersonal demands (i.e., the extent to which communicating with coworkers is perceived as highly demanding). Pluut et al. (2014: 343) therefore concluded that “when employees had a hard time distributing their personal resources (e.g., time and energy) to multiple teams, they experienced more demands associated with team processes (such as communication and coordination) as well as more interpersonal demands”. MTM also limits the time an individual can spend within any given team, potentially making it more difficult to fully understand the interpersonal demands and expectations of each additional coworker. Kauppila (2013: 737) thus theorized that “where employees work in several teams and report to several managers, role clarity can easily be compromised”. Taken together, it appears that MTM may result in more demanding and potentially ambiguous interpersonal relationships.

Other conceptual and exploratory work, by contrast, suggests that individual employees may benefit from their interpersonal connections across multiple teams. Mortensen et al. (2007) proposed that MTM allows an employee to establish new and meaningful relationships with coworkers in various parts of the organization. In a series of qualitative interviews, one employee noted that “the benefits [of MTM] are that I have a global awareness of what is going on in other programs, and I get more exposure to company staff,

and I am getting to know a lot of the talent in the company which is helpful” (Mortensen et al., 2007: 6). Relatedly, O’Leary et al (2011a) argue that MTM substantially expands an employee’s social network, which “generates more varied inputs and creates sufficient interpersonal connections to stimulate learning” (O’Leary et al., 2011a: 469). Hence, MTM may expand an employee’s interpersonal network across multiple teams within the organization, potentially improving his or her access to useful knowledge and information.

Again, the literature review points to MTM as complex work practice that has the potential to complicate interpersonal relationships, while at the same time, it may foster meaningful and productive connections across multiple teams. This apparent contradiction further illustrates the need for additional research on the interpersonal consequences of individual MTM. Chapter 4 therefore draws on social capital theory (Lin, 1999) to examine how MTM shapes an employee’s social network on the job.

This Dissertation: Resolving Ambiguities in the MTM literature

Altogether, the literature points to three ambiguities in existing MTM perspectives that could trouble effective management of contemporary team arrangements. The present dissertation aims to address these issues by focusing on mechanisms and boundary conditions that may critically determine whether individual MTM is a positive or negative experience for individual employees. By doing so, this dissertation strives to provide a more complete picture of MTM as an increasingly popular type of work arrangement in modern organizations.

First, while there is theoretical agreement in the literature that MTM may relate to an individual’s job performance, there is debate regarding the strength and direction of this linkage. Chapter 2 of the present dissertation employs a dynamic perspective to address this issue. Specifically, Chapter 2 uses a large longitudinal sample from a knowledge-intensive organization in the Netherlands to examine whether changes in individuals’ MTM associate

with subsequent increases *or* decreases in their job performance evaluations. Moreover, within-person changes in job performance are examined as predictors of MTM increases at later points in time. Hence, Chapter 2 uses a temporal perspective to clarify (a) whether MTM and job performance are dynamically related in a counteracting feedback loop in which increases in one variable instigate decreases in the other or (b) whether MTM and job performance reinforce each other in a positive feedback loop that spirals both variables toward higher (or lower) levels over time. By doing so, Chapter 2 answers essential questions about the potentially reciprocal relationship between individual MTM and performance, and sheds new light on the temporal dynamics that need to be taken into account to achieve optimal performance in MTM situations.

Second, the literature review paints a complex picture of MTM's psychological consequences. Chapter 3 integrates existing perspectives on MTM's psychological benefits and disadvantages with organizational socialization theory to identify a critical moderating factor in these relationships. Specifically, Chapter 3 proposes that an employee's psychological response to MTM depends on his or her organizational tenure, and it develops an overarching model that acknowledges and explains why MTM can function as a source of positive and challenging work experiences for some employees, while other individuals may perceive the work practice as a source of ambiguity and confusion. In doing so, Chapter 3 builds on Chapter 2 by examining the psychological mechanisms that potentially link individual MTM to an employee's job performance (and absenteeism), thus providing a better understanding of individual MTM's implications for important organizational outcomes.

Lastly, ambiguity exists regarding the extent to which MTM helps or hinders an employee in establishing effective interpersonal relationships across multiple teams. Chapter 4 examines the relationship between individuals' MTM and the size and strength of their information-sharing network across multiple teams. Subsequently, this chapter draws on

social capital theory to examine specific information-sharing network characteristics as boundary conditions that either improve or obstruct employees' productivity in high MTM settings. In doing so, Chapter 4 builds on Chapter 2 and 3 by introducing an additional mechanism and boundary condition in the MTM-performance linkage. As such, it provides a clearer picture of the type of interpersonal network structures that enable MTM's performance advantages and disadvantages to unfold.

Taken together, these chapters aim to advance a broader understanding of the consequences of individual MTM. By doing so, this dissertation strives to resolve theoretical ambiguities regarding the performance, psychological, and interpersonal aspects of individual MTM. Chapter 5 discusses if (and how) the dissertation succeeded in resolving these ambiguities in the current literature. In this chapter, I will reflect on the theoretical and practical implications of this dissertation's core findings, discuss the most critical limitations of the current work, and explore essential avenues for future research.