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

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## CHAPTER 5

### General Discussion

Numerous studies have examined how individual employees can perform as efficiently and effectively as possible within a single team (see Mathieu, Wolfson, & Park, 2018). In the past decades, however, it has become increasingly common for employees to work in multiple teams at the same time. Nevertheless, only a handful of studies have moved beyond the traditional “one person, one team” assumption to examine whether individuals’ multiple team membership (MTM) may come with unique benefits and downsides (Mortensen et al., 2007: 12). The present dissertation extends this nascent line of inquiry by examining individual MTM as a key antecedent of an employee’s job performance and well-being, and by investigating mechanisms and boundary conditions in this regard.

Prior research has depicted MTM as a potentially double-edged sword with both favorable and unfavorable consequences for individual employees (Chan, 2014; Mortensen et al., 2007; Pluut et al., 2014). Scholars have also noted, however, that “existing research does not explain how or why multiple team membership can yield both positive and negative effects” (O’Leary et al., 2011a: 463). Specifically, Chapter 1 discussed three ambiguities in the MTM literature that may have contributed to the lack of clarity on MTM’s individual-level consequences. First, there is considerable ambiguity about whether MTM may improve or decrease an employee’s subsequent performance on the job and, relatedly, whether MTM may be either an antecedent or a consequence of an individual’s job performance. Second, there is ambiguity about the extent to which employees may perceive individual MTM as a positive and challenging work practice, or as a negative and highly stressful situation. And third, prior research suggests that MTM may both obstruct and improve an employee’s ability to establish effective interpersonal relationships at work.

This chapter summarizes how the three empirical chapters of this dissertation help to

address these ambiguities. Building on this summary, I then outline how this dissertation contributes to the literature on teams and MTM. In addition, this chapter describes how future research may build on the dissertation's main findings, and how practitioners can use these insights to manage employees' experiences and performance outcomes when working in multiple teams at the same time.

### **Main Findings**

*MTM and employees' overall job performance.* The purpose of Chapter 2 was to address two ambiguities in current perspectives on the relationship between MTM and an employee's job performance. First, we employed a resource-based perspective to conceptually disentangle prior studies' perspectives on MTM as either a positive (e.g., Chan, 2014) or a negative (e.g., Zika-Victorsson et al., 2006) predictor of an individual's contributions to the organization's overall goal achievement (i.e., his or her job performance). Second, we argued that an employee's prior performance may increase his or her attractiveness as a prospective team member, so that performance serves as both an antecedent *and* a consequence of an employee's MTM. Together, these predictions suggested a potentially reciprocal relationship between an individual's MTM and his or her overall job performance, such that these variables mutually influence each other over time.

We examined this reciprocal MTM-performance relationship using longitudinal archival data from a large knowledge-intensive organization in the Netherlands, comprising 1875 employees and spanning five consecutive years. Using a latent change score modeling approach (Grimm et al., 2012), we examined whether changes in an employee's MTM were related with subsequent changes (i.e., at a later point in time) in his or her performance – and vice versa. Results showed that changes in an employee's performance were positively associated with changes in his or her subsequent MTM, whereas changes in an employee's MTM were negatively (rather than positively) related with subsequent changes in his or her

MTM. Over time, however, an employee's performance recovered from these initial losses and gradually improved. Together, these findings addressed several ambiguities in current perspectives on the MTM-performance linkage by illustrating that MTM functions as both an antecedent and a consequence of an employee's performance on the job, and that the strength and direction of this relationship depend on the time frame under consideration.

*Psychological consequences of individual MTM.* Chapter 3 strived to explain individual MTM's potentially positive and negative psychological consequences. This chapter aimed to resolve associated ambiguities in the MTM literature by incorporating a key individual characteristic that may shape an employee's stress responses to his or her MTM (i.e., organizational tenure). Furthermore, Chapter 3 built on insights from Chapter 2 to position employees' psychological responses to MTM as critical mechanisms that explicate how the work practice translates into important organizational outcomes (i.e., performance and absenteeism).

Building on the challenge-hindrance framework, we proposed that some employees perceive MTM as a positive type of work challenge, whereas others may experience MTM as a hindrance stressor that invokes confusion about their core job responsibilities (i.e., perceptions of role ambiguity). To resolve this apparent contradiction, we integrated these perspectives with insights from organizational socialization theory, proposing an employee's organizational tenure as a moderating factor for the linkage between individual MTM and an employee's work challenge and role ambiguity perceptions.

We tested these predictions using additional data from the same knowledge-intensive organization examined in Chapter 2. Using a time-lagged sample of 1211 employees, we combined archival data with survey measures to examine how individual employees' MTM related to their subsequent work challenge and role ambiguity perceptions. We found that MTM was positively associated with perceived work challenge among employees with

relatively high organizational tenure. These work challenge perceptions, in turn, predicted higher job performance among employees with more organizational experience. For employees with lower organizational tenure, by contrast, MTM predicted lower work challenge perceptions and higher role ambiguity, reducing their performance and promoting absenteeism. Together, these findings help to resolve the ambiguity regarding MTM's psychological consequences by illustrating that the work practice can invoke both positive and negative psychological consequences among individual employees, depending on their overall experience within the organization.

*MTM and employees' interpersonal relationships.* Chapter 4's main goal was to address theoretical ambiguities in our current understanding of MTM's interpersonal consequences. Specifically, this chapter examined whether work practice has the potential to complicate interpersonal relationships (e.g., Pluut et al., 2014), on the one hand, whereas it could also foster positive and productive connections across multiple teams on the other hand (Mortensen et al., 2007). In addition, Chapter 4 built on Chapter 2 and 3 by examining an additional mechanism and boundary condition in the MTM-performance linkage.

Drawing on the social capital literature and research on social networks, we argued that MTM may expand an employee's information-sharing network on the job, offering the potential for performance benefits *and* detriments. More specifically, we proposed that information-sharing relationships differ in the extent to which they can provide relevant and useful information, depending on the frequency and intensity of the respective relationships (i.e., the strength of a network tie). We tested these predictions with independent data gathered in a subset of the organization examined in Chapters 2 and 3. We found that MTM was indirectly related to an employee's job performance by increasing the size of his or her information-sharing network. As expected, this indirect relationship was contingent on the average strength of an employee's network ties, such that MTM only associated with higher

performance when network ties were relatively weak. The indirect relationship between MTM and individual job performance was negative, by contrast, when employees' network ties were relatively strong. All in all, these findings addressed ambiguities regarding the extent to which MTM helps or hinders an employee in establishing effective interpersonal relationships across multiple teams.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The findings described above make several theoretical contributions. This dissertation adds to the team literature by providing a novel perspective on the benefits and disadvantages of contemporary team arrangements that build on individual members' MTM. The chapters in this dissertation contribute to the MTM literature, in addition, by addressing several ambiguities in current perspectives on MTM's consequences for individual employees.

*Contribution to the team literature.* As described in Chapter 1, research on work teams often relies on a classic definition of teams as a stable and bounded set of individuals that work interdependently to achieve a common goal (Sundstrom, DeMeuse, & Futrell, 1990, see also Mortensen & Haas, 2018). Yet in recent years, teams in modern organizations increasingly represent dynamic entities with fuzzy boundaries in which employees regularly move from one team to another (O'Leary et al., 2011a). The present dissertation investigated whether such contemporary team arrangements may distinctly shape individual employees' experiences, behaviors, and outcomes at work. Chapter 2, for example, demonstrated that team memberships dynamically change over time and that these MTM changes are critically related to employees' prior *and* subsequent performance evaluations. Chapter 3 illustrated that some employees (i.e., with longer organizational tenure) are better equipped to navigate the complexities of contemporary team arrangements than others. Finally, Chapter 4 found that employees' information-sharing networks often span multiple teams at the same time, potentially allowing a focal employee to benefit from knowledge resources embedded in

various parts of the organization. Collectively, the chapters in this dissertation help the team literature to progress from a singular focus on bounded and stable team memberships towards a more modern, realistic view of teams as dynamic entities in which memberships are often part-time and where members join and leave as a team develops over time (Mortensen & Haas, 2018; Wageman et al., 2012).

***Contributions to the MTM literature.*** This dissertation enriches the MTM literature with a distinct individual-level perspective. Most of the previous MTM studies have conceptualized this work practice at the team level of analysis. Research by Bertolotti et al. (2015) and Vedres and Stark (2010), for example, found that team-level MTM relates positively to a focal team's performance, suggesting that organizations may benefit from distributing their employees across a higher number of simultaneous teams. The present dissertation, by contrast, examined how *individual* MTM relates to an employee's experiences and behaviors on the job. We found that MTM potentially comes with severe downsides for individual employees, thus suggesting that MTM's consequences may differ markedly across various levels of analysis. In Chapter 2, for example, we found that increasing an employee's MTM initially decreases (rather than improves) his or her overall performance. Chapter 3, in addition, demonstrated that MTM associates with role ambiguity and absenteeism among employees with relatively little experience within the organization. Consequently, it appears that both individual- and team-level perspectives should be taken into account when assessing if MTM is a suitable and beneficial work practice in modern organizations.

Finally, this dissertation addressed three ambiguities in current research on individual-level MTM. As described in Chapter 1, the literature depicts MTM as a double-edged sword that could both improve and harm individual employees' functioning and well-being. Chapter 2 reconciled positive and negative perspectives on MTM's performance consequences by demonstrating that increased MTM associates with short-term performance decreases and

long-term performance improvements. Further, Chapter 3 integrated conflicting perspectives on MTM's psychological consequences. Drawing from organizational socialization theory, this chapter demonstrated that an employee's organizational tenure determines whether he or she perceives MTM as a challenge or a hindrance. And lastly, Chapter 4 provided a clearer picture of the type of interpersonal network structures that enable MTM's performance advantages and disadvantages to unfold, demonstrating that this hinges on the strength of an employee's information-sharing ties across multiple teams. In sum, this dissertation uncovered several mechanisms and boundary conditions that explain why and when MTM is either a positive or negative experience for individual employees.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This dissertation addressed several ambiguities in our current understanding of individual MTM. Nonetheless, several issues remain unresolved and need to be addressed by future research. It is unclear, for example, if this dissertation's findings can be generalized to other, less knowledge-intensive contexts. As noted above, it is also necessary to clarify how our findings relate to prior studies on MTM at the level of the team. Finally, the chapters in this dissertation each used a different behavioral or psychological theory to specify employees' responses to MTM, and it is important to clarify how these perspectives relate to each other.

***Generalizability to other contexts.*** Each chapter of this dissertation examined MTM in one particular research organization in one country (the Netherlands). Hence, it is important to corroborate our findings in other occupational settings. As noted in Chapter 1, survey studies found that most of today's employees work in multiple simultaneous teams, irrespective of their occupation, industry, or cultural context (Mortensen, Woolley, & O'Leary, 2007; O'Leary et al., 2011a). This dissertation's study sample solely came from the research industry, however, and future research may consider reexamining our theoretical models



outside this knowledge-intensive context. Blue-collar workers, for example, often participate in more than one manufacturing or production team (e.g., when working day and night shifts, or on different assignments; Seers, 1989). These settings could be less reliant on a wide variety of perspectives and knowledge sources, suggesting that MTM's potential social capital benefits (see Chapters 2 and 4) are less likely to materialize in blue-collar occupations. Hence, future research could examine whether MTM's potential benefits (e.g., for employees with higher tenure, or with weaker information-sharing ties) also occur in less knowledge-intensive jobs.

In addition, more research is needed to ensure our findings' generalizability to other countries and cultural contexts. In more collectivistic cultures, for example, multi-teamers might prioritize the performance of the group over their well-being (Brett, Behfar, & Kern, 2006). In such cultures, MTM may result in even greater stress experiences, as described in Chapter 3, because employees may try to spend as much time as possible within each work team, potentially resulting in excessive overtime and work-life imbalance (LePine et al., 2005). In more individualistic countries (such as the Netherlands; Brett, Behfar, & Kern, 2006), by contrast, employees may find it less problematic to navigate multiple teams when they perceive MTM as beneficial to their performance (Chapter 2 and 4). Altogether, future research could build on these suggestions to provide a more comprehensive perspective on MTM's individual-consequences across different organizations, occupations, and cultural contexts.

***A multi-level perspective on MTM.*** The present dissertation examined MTM's consequences for individual employees and uncovered that some employees experience severe disadvantages (rather than benefits) from their involvement in multiple teams. Consequently, it is necessary to further clarify how individual MTM can be beneficial the performance of the team (e.g., Bertolotti et al., 2015; Cummings & Haas, 2012), even though

the work practice is often problematic for its individual members. Chapter 3, for example, showed that MTM is particularly harmful to employees with limited organizational tenure. Within a focal team, such employees typically work on less crucial tasks (Cummings & Haas, 2012), and other team members may take over some of the responsibilities of low-tenure employees that perform below an acceptable standard. Thus, although *individual* employees with lower tenure may experience rather severe consequences from MTM, potentially affecting their long-term career due to lower performance evaluations and frequent absenteeism spells, *teams* may find it relatively easy to cover for – and ultimately replace – these employees. Hence, future research could simultaneously examine the extent to which (a) individual team members’ benefit or suffer from their involvement in other teams, and (b) these individual-level consequences translate into team-level outcomes (e.g., depending on a team’s tenure composition or information-sharing requirements; see Chapter 3 and 4).

Related to this, future research could explore whether specific intra-team MTM configurations allow teams to benefit from their members’ MTM without harming these individuals’ well-being and productivity. Team-level studies typically conceptualized MTM as the *average* number of other teams in which a focal team’s members are involved. At the same time, these studies acknowledged that it is unlikely that individual team members are all involved in roughly the same number of additional teams (Bertolotti et al., 2015). A focal team may, for example, gain sufficient access to performance-enhancing resources embedded in other teams (i.e., knowledge bases and materials; O’Leary et al., 2011a; Vedres & Stark, 2010) when only one member is also involved in other concurrent teams. Rather than focusing on a focal team’s average MTM, future research could, therefore, explore the potential performance consequences of MTM differences *within* a team. This can be captured through team centralization measures (cf. Grund, 2012), which assess the extent to which a focal team’s MTM is centralized in a single team member. Chapters 3 and 4 suggest that

employees with more organizational tenure, and who are not required to maintain strong information-sharing connections across multiple teams, are better suited for such MTM positions. Hence, MTM centralization may allow teams to benefit from MTM's potentially positive performance consequences while avoiding its negative consequences at the individual level.

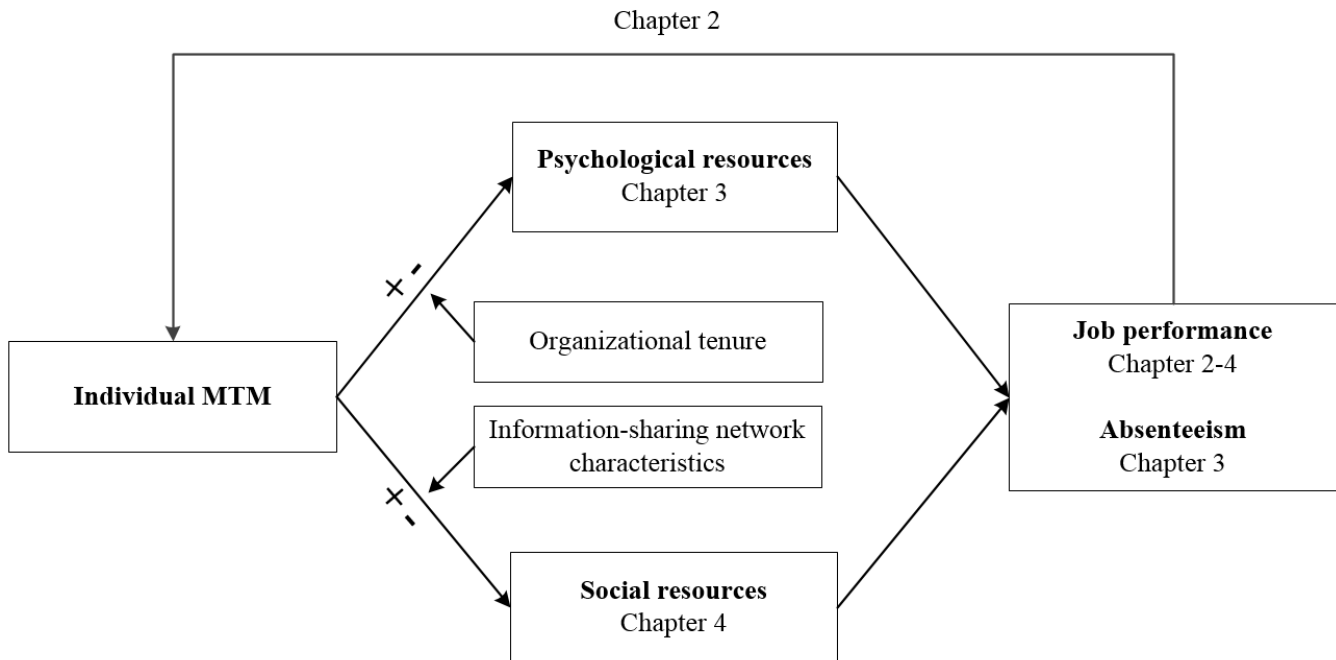
Finally, team-level research may benefit from the dynamic, longitudinal approach outlined in Chapter 2. Using a within-team design, studies could examine whether changes in a focal team's MTM create benefits and/or disadvantage as a focal team develops over time. At the beginning of a team's life-cycle (see Pinto & Slevin, 1988), for example, the focal team may benefit from the additional knowledge sources and perspectives available through MTM. Such information resources may help a focal team to acquire new information, generate ideas, and develop new task approaches in earlier stages of a project. Towards the end of a team's life-cycle (e.g., when a project is finalized), by contrast, team members are required to integrate task outputs and to coordinate their final efforts (Hanssen, 1999) and MTM may decrease members' opportunities to spend time together and to find sufficient overlap in competing schedules (O'Leary et al., 2011a). Hence, team-level MTM may hinder teams from performing effectively at later stages in a team's timeline. Further exploring these MTM-performance dynamics could advance a more nuanced perspective on MTM's team-level consequences.

***Towards an overarching MTM theory.*** The empirical chapters of this dissertation built on a variety of perspectives to theorize about MTM's consequences for individual employees. Chapter 3, for example, used the challenge-hindrance framework (LePine et al., 2005) to explore employees' stress responses to higher MTM, while Chapter 4 focused on social capital theory (Lin, 1999) to examine multi-teamers' information-sharing networks. These different perspectives helped me to address essential ambiguities in the MTM

literature, and each of them tapped into different psychological and social mechanisms that explicate how and why MTM translates into positive and negative outcomes. At the same time, this begs the question of how these theoretical perspectives relate to each other, and whether they can be integrated into an overarching framework that gives more insight into additional processes and outcome variables that could be examined in future MTM studies.

Chapter 2 introduced a resource-based perspective that may offer the conceptual foundation for a comprehensive theoretical model of the antecedents and consequences of individual MTM. Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) appears particularly useful in this regard, as it specifies specific resources (i.e., valued entities that serve to achieve work-related goals; Hobfoll, 1989) that are crucial for an employee's overall functioning at work. This theory is based on the assumption that (1) employees require sufficient resources in order to perform effectively (varying from physical objects to psychological states; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Luthans et al., 2007), and (2) stress occurs when such resources are threatened or depleted (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Hobfoll, 1988). Hence, conservation of resources theory predicts that resource gains improve an employee's functioning, whereas resource threats result in stress experiences and performance issues.

Collectively, the chapters in the present dissertation suggest that MTM is indeed related to an employee's resources on the job (see Figure 5.1). Chapter 3 and 4's findings, in particular, suggest that MTM can both expand and deplete an employee's *psychological* (i.e., perceived growth opportunities, role clarity; Taylor et al., 2000) and *social* resources (i.e., social capital; Lin, 1999). Furthermore, these respective chapters identified contingency factors (i.e., an employee's organizational experience and information-sharing network) that determine if MTM adds to (or subtracts from) these resources, and specified how these resource mechanisms indirectly link an employee's MTM to his or her job performance and absenteeism.

**FIGURE 5.1****A Resource-Based Perspective on Individual MTM**

Notably, MTM's direct relationship with job performance remained significant in both Chapter 3 and 4, even after including the respective mediators in the analyses. This suggests that additional mechanisms could mediate the MTM-performance linkage. Prior research has identified several job-related resources that may be relevant in this regard (Hobfoll, 1989; 2002), and future studies could consider these to provide a more complete perspective on the generative processes underlying MTM's performance consequences.

Specifically, MTM requires an employee to meet multiple and often simultaneous team and task demands, and as such, may lead him or her to develop more efficient *work routines* (i.e., regular and repetitive action patterns; Feldman, 2000; see also O'Leary et al., 2011b). Several studies point to such routines as valuable resources that can improve employees' productivity on the job (Hobfoll, 2001; Monsell, 2003). Multi-teamers may, for example, seek out opportunities to adapt and use one team's inputs and outcomes (e.g., parts

of a written report, leftover materials, newly developed working methods; Page, 2006) to improve their productivity in a second team. Over time, an employee's ability to recognize and utilize potential synergies across multiple teams may become part of his or her work routine (Feldman, 2000). If the different "working spheres" associated with each team are highly distinct from each other (e.g., use completely different methods, knowledge bases, and materials), however, it could be much more difficult for employees to integrate their work efforts across multiple teams (O'Leary et al., 2011a: 468). Substantial variations between multiple team contexts (i.e., MTM variety; O'Leary et al., 2011a) may therefore disrupt, rather than improve, an employee's work routines. In line with this dissertation's findings (see also Figure 5.1), this suggests that MTM can relate both positively and negatively to individual employees' personal resources on the job.

Furthermore, many contemporary jobs require employees to use their *time* (a vital and limited resource; Hobfoll, 2001) as efficiently as possible, and MTM may affect their ability to do so. Scholars have suggested that "being on multiple teams can also lead individuals to make more careful choices about how they spend their time" (O'Leary et al., 2011b; 150). Multi-teamers may prioritize more urgent projects over team tasks that do not require their immediate attention, for example, considerably increasing their efficiency on the job (Mortensen & Gardner, 2017: 60). A potential downside of MTM, however, is that it frequently requires employees to stop working on one task to switch and dedicate their full attention to another team's tasks (Leroy, 2009). It takes time to recover from such task and team context switches (Monsell, 2003), and MTM may, therefore, increase the total amount of time required to complete multiple assignments (Cummings & Haas, 2012). Again, this suggests that MTM is a double-edged sword that can both improve and hinder an employee's effective time use and subsequent job performance.

Altogether, it appears that MTM may have an important impact on additional job-

related resources that were not examined in this dissertation. More research is needed to specify the mechanisms and boundary conditions that allow MTM's potential resource (dis)advantages to unfold. Such research may uncover new ways to make MTM a more positive and less stressful work practice for individual employees.

### **Practical Implications**

As noted in Chapter 1, organizations face increasing competitive pressure from crowded and globalized markets, and therefore try to use their human resources as efficiently as possible. The chapters in the present dissertation suggest that MTM may improve individual employees' productivity on the job, and as such, could be utilized as an effective human resource practice. This dissertation also identified several risk factors, however, that may reduce (rather than improve) an employee's overall functioning in multiple simultaneous teams. Consequently, the chapters in this dissertation offer several implications for managers and practitioners in MTM organizations.

First, Chapter 2 demonstrated that interventions aimed at increasing employees' MTM may backfire when managers expect instantaneous performance improvements. Employees need to adjust to the complexities and demands of MTM environments, and managers should note that MTM first reduces, rather than improves, an employee's performance. Hence, MTM interventions should be avoided if an employee's short-term performance is critical to the success of the organization. Chapter 2 also shows, however, that increasing an employee's MTM may induce pronounced performance gains in the long run that may outweigh initial downsides. If possible, managers may benefit from accepting the initial costs of employees' MTM increases to achieve a more competent and interconnected (see also Chapter 4) workforce.

Second, insights from Chapter 3 suggest that organizations should exercise caution when implementing MTM among relatively new employees. These employees' psychological

well-being is a major source of concern in many organizations (American Psychological Association, 2009), and MTM may further aggravate their stress experiences on the job. If MTM is necessary among employees with relatively little organizational experience, however, it is advisable to gradually increase these employees' number of concurrent team memberships over time, as they gain experience within the organization (see also Chapter 2). This comes with additional benefits for more experienced employees, as they may find that higher MTM provides them with new opportunities for personal development and personal gain (i.e., increases their perceived work challenge). Hence, managers may consider linking an employee's MTM level to his or her organizational experience.

Finally, as described in Chapter 1, project managers and HR practitioners often assume that MTM creates useful information flows between concurrent projects (Mortensen & Gardner, 2017). Chapter 4 demonstrates that employees with higher MTM may indeed benefit from increased access to novel and useful knowledge sources, but also points to the frequency and intensity (i.e., strength) of employees' information-sharing interactions as a risk factor in this relationship. Consequently, it is crucial that managers assess whether multi-teamers' tend to develop stronger or weaker information-sharing interactions across multiple teams (see Valente, 2012). If an employee develops weaker information-sharing ties across multiple teams, substantial performance advantages can be realized by increasing his or her MTM. In contrast, when an employee tends to communicate through stronger and more intense information-sharing ties, managers should either keep this employee's MTM relatively limited or assign him or her to tasks that require more modest amounts of interpersonal information-sharing.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The present dissertation aimed to expand our understanding of the benefits and disadvantages associated with individuals' MTM as a key characteristic of contemporary



work. The studies presented here address important ambiguities in current academic perspectives on MTM. Specifically, the empirical chapters of this dissertation offer new insights into MTM's performance, psychological, and interpersonal consequences. In doing so, this dissertation advances existing management theory and practice by demonstrating that MTM is neither a positive nor a negative type of work arrangement. Rather, the individual-level consequences of MTM depend on the time frame under consideration, on employees' prior experiences within the organization, and on the characteristics of employees' interpersonal information-sharing networks. Altogether, I hope these findings will help organizations to more effectively manage complex team arrangements and stimulate further research on employees' concurrent membership in multiple teams.