

Team to Market (T2M)

Creating High Performance Teams in the Digital Age

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Executive Summary

- 1. Teams are the essential means of product or service delivery and the fundamental building blocks of modern organisations. An effective team can produce results far outperforming a collection of even the most talented individuals when team members coalesce and jell into a single, well-functioning, fully-aligned organism. This report advances the notion of “Team to Market” (T2M) to help business leaders and knowledge workers understand, create and lead high performance teams in the digital age.*
- 2. Teams are increasingly supported by a new generation of workplace collaboration technologies which enables teams to form, evolve and perform with great fluidity. Such new tools use channel or thread-based communications to reduce our reliance on emails, offering a rich, permanent, searchable record of organisational knowledge. By enabling the seamless integration of custom business processes and third-party apps and software on a single platform, some integrated tools are poised to evolve into new digital working environments for teams which may potentially supersede traditional proprietary systems that have dominated the workplace for decades.*
- 3. With almost all organisations today being a team of teams, improving team performance and their seamless integration is the new battleground for competitive advantage. There is no shortage of guidelines on how to create the dream team. However, despite over half a century’s research and experiment on teams and teamwork, building teams that consistently deliver superior performance remains a hit-or-miss affair. The notion of Team to Market helps business leaders and knowledge workers create high performance teams in the digital age.*
- 4. Teams are work-in-progress and they evolve over distinctive phases of innovation and execution in response to product life cycles and changes in technology, people and business environment. While some teams are long-lived and autonomous with engaged members, others are formed to fulfil a specific goal and then dissolve. Emerging collaborative technologies empower business leaders and knowledge workers to assemble and evolve teams quickly and flexibly, break down spatial, temporal, cultural and organisational barriers, and deliver exceptional performance in response to rapidly changing internal and external demands.*
- 5. Teams vary in size, structure, scope of responsibility and activity domains, cognitive load, team chemistry and cohesion, boundary and mode of interaction with other teams, and team technologies. These factors affect team effectiveness, but no consistent patterns have been identified between team characteristics and performance; and contrasting features have often been found in equally effective teams.*
- 6. Collaborative technologies play a key role in driving communication patterns, cognitive load and communication bottlenecks in teams. Unfettered many-to-many communications can turn into monolithic, tangled, highly coupled, interdependent systems. However, emerging collaborative technologies allow team members to decide how and when to communicate and proactively manage cognitive load to maximise team effectiveness, enabling unrestricted communications without overwhelming team members. The ability of these tools to enable fluid, rapid and flexible team formation, alongside integration with existing software tools and business processes is facilitating the emergence of this Team to Market concept. Its potential to be a source of competitive advantage looks set to increase.*
- 7. Empirical evidence suggests that channel and thread-based communications are on the rise, which challenge the dominance of email in the workplace. A generational gap exists between the*

younger generations who have grown up with instant messaging and the older generations who still rely predominantly on emails and telephones for communications, but the gap is narrowing as messaging is increasingly used both at work and in people's lives outside of work.

- 8. Collaboration is essential for team success, but if not managed effectively, always-on connections and constant real-time communications can exhaust employees, sap productivity and hamper creativity. It may also create challenges for dispersed teams in different time zones. Some new collaboration tools effectively tackle information overload risks by offering granular controls over how and when notifications appear, and which communications are prioritised while advanced search features can help teams get up to speed quickly or find information autonomously. It is up to team leaders and members to collectively decide how best to use such tools in order to deliver high performance and bring the best out of everyone, perhaps through an experimental approach to find the sweet spot between autonomy and control.*
- 9. Despite the enthusiasm of some business leaders to bust bureaucracy and pursue extreme forms of organisations, most successful teams do things in moderation, selectively adopting new organisational forms to alleviate problems of traditional hierarchies without abandoning hierarchies completely. The right organisational form depends on the nature of the tasks involved, with some relying on creativity which calls for flexible structure and self-management, while others relying on execution, which calls for explicit rules, central control and clear hierarchy.*
- 10. Psychological safety is critical for team cohesion and performance, which reduces the risks for people to cover their tracks to avoid being embarrassed or punished, cut corners to meet impossible targets, or simply avoid hurting others' feelings instead of being truthful. It represents the sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up, reflecting the level of interpersonal trust and mutual respect amongst members. Since we are hardwired and socialised to care about what others think of us, creating and maintaining a psychologically safe environment requires persistent effort and a culture of directness. Psychological safety can vary significantly even within one company, with strong relations with diversity, inclusion and belonging. It is an essential condition for organisational learning, innovation and excellence and should be actively supported and cultivated.*
- 11. High performance teams require interpersonal communication and an ability to leverage all of their existing specialist software with ease and simplicity. The complexity and variety of this software is growing with the average enterprise today using over 1,000 different software apps. By integrating existing software tools within a collaboration hub, teams may be able to save time and better share knowledge which would otherwise be siloed within a separate application. For the greatest efficiency gains, these integrations need to be intuitive and accessible for all users, including those who don't have a deep technical knowledge or coding and programming skills.*
- 12. More research is needed to understand how emerging workplace collaboration technologies can be used to redefine communication patterns and team cohesion, optimum team sizes and their capacity to manage cognitive load, enabling organisations to create and sustain high performance teams consistently in the digital age. Future research should also investigate how emerging collaborative technologies can be used to overcome traditional constraints arising from geographical separation, time zone differences, organisational boundaries and cultural diversity, and actively cultivate them as valuable resources for efficiency and competitive advantages in the digital economy.*

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Introduction

As the global economy becomes increasingly more complex, a significant proportion of work has become team-based. Teams are the fundamental units of modern organisations, and success depends on not only how people work, but also how effectively people work together.

Longitudinal surveys of Fortune 1000 Firms have shown a steady increase in the use of team-based structures, from less than 20 percent in 1980 to roughly 50 percent in 1990 to over 80 percent in 2000,¹ and since 2010, nearly all of these firms have formal team structures.² On average, the amount of time people spent in collaborative activities exceeds 50%, and in many organisations, more than three-quarters of an employee's day is spent on communicating with colleagues.³ As teams continue to become increasingly dispersed, diverse, dynamic and digital, it is now more important than ever for business leaders to invest in teamwork initiatives. With the rapid proliferation of digital tools to support remote working and collaboration across time, space and organisational boundaries, organisations have increasingly turned to virtual teams both to create business values and satisfy the growing expectations for flexibility and work-life balance from employees. Nurturing and supporting high performance teams has become a significant source of competitive advantages.

Despite the growing recognition of the strategic importance of teamwork by business leaders, many have failed to convince all of their staff. A study found that, if unfettered, too much teamwork can exhaust employees, sap productivity and destroy creativity.⁴ Virtual teams create unique challenges for managing team cohesion, time-zone difference and cultural diversity; and "always-on" connections can deprive team members of undistracted time and space for creative or cognitively demanding work. Such challenges need to be adequately understood and managed.

The performance of teams varies widely, and despite over 50 years of research and practice, our understanding of what make a team successful remains startlingly inconclusive. Successful teams often display contrasting features in team composition, power structure, decision making process and resource level; while identical teams often produce radically different performance results. This calls for deep reflections to take stock on what we have already learnt, and develop new management approaches to understand, create, support and lead teams that satisfy both business and individual needs.

Furthermore, a new generation of workplace collaboration technologies has emerged, which effectively overcomes constraints of traditional collaboration technologies and enables teams to form and evolve in ways unimaginable only a few years ago. As these new tools proliferate across organisations of different sizes and industries around the world, their roles in enabling team success, and more broadly, in creating competitive advantages need to be systematically understood. This report addresses these issues in order to help business leaders and knowledge workers understand and create high performance teams in the digital age.

¹ Garvey, C. (2002) Steer teams with the right pay: Team-based pay is a success when it fits corporate goals and culture, and rewards the right behavior. *HR Magazine*, 34(5): 33–36.

² Bernstein, E (2014) [The Transparency Trap](#). *Harvard Business Review*

³ Cross, R, Rebele, R & Grant, A (2016) [Collaborative overload](#). *Harvard Business Review*

⁴ Bernstein, E, Shore, J and Lazer, D (2019) [Improving the Rhythm of Your Collaboration](#). *Sloan Management Review*.

'Hunting for Treasure'

High performance teams have been observed in organisations of all sizes and sectors from all over the world - from Australia, France and the USA, to the UK, New Zealand, Japan and China.

In early 2003, China was besieged by the deadly SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak, where schools were suspended, social activities curtailed, and many public places closed. On 7th April 2003, Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba, called eight employees to his apartment for a secret meeting. He asked them to resign from Alibaba and sign a confidential agreement in order to participate in a secret new project. The agreement was written in English, so nobody could understand the terms nor had time to read it, but they all signed it out of trust for Jack Ma.

The project was to develop and launch a C2C e-Commerce web portal as quickly as possible. The team included three developers, three operations specialists, one user experience designer, one accountant, plus Jack Ma and his PA. One month later, on 10th May 2003, [Taobao](#) – which means “Hunting for Treasure” in Chinese - went live. During the SARS outbreak, people were discouraged from going to public places, which created a rare opportunity for e-Commerce to flourish in China.

Just before the secret meeting, eBay entered China aggressively in March 2003 by acquiring the leading local player EachNet with over 80% of the C2C market share in China. This move posed an existential threat to Alibaba and prompted Jack Ma to initiate his secret project. At that time, *“eBay was the biggest e-commerce company in the world and a darling of both Silicon Valley and Wall Street. Alibaba's online marketplace was derided as another Chinese copycat with no right to be in the same room as the big dogs of Silicon Valley”*.⁵ However, by March 2006, Taobao had already significantly outpaced eBay, capturing 67% of China's C2C market against eBay EachNet's dwindling 29%. On 20th December 2006, the mighty eBay threw in the towel and admitted defeat. Taobao went on to dominate e-Commerce in China and the rest is history.⁶

The question is, how could a team of ten, with modest qualifications and experiences, camped in a small apartment in a second-tier city in China, with limited resources and blind trust in Jack Ma's vision, single-mindedly develop and launch Taobao in just over a month, defeat the mighty eBay in three years, and then go on to dominate the largest e-Commerce market in the world?

⁵ Kai-fu, Lee (2018) *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

⁶ Li, F (2018) [Why Western Digital Firms Have Failed in China](#). *Harvard Business Review*, August 2018. Li, F. (2019) [Why Have All Western Internet Firms Failed in China? A Phenomenon-Based Study](#). *Academy of Management Discoveries*, 5(1): 13–37

Team to Market (T2M)

The story of Taobao, as improbable as it sounds, is not an isolated case. Many iconic global companies – from Apple, Amazon and Google, to HP, Dell, Virgin and Disney – were started by small founding teams in garages.⁷ Their remarkable successes give rise to a significant new management concept - “Team to Market”, or T2M. In France, the concept is already being acted on. The three Technology Transfer Accelerator Offices (SATTs) in the Grand Est Region are proactively hiring experienced teams of CEOs and Business Development Managers to work with “inventor-researchers” with scientific IPs in order to launch and scale up deep-tech based start-ups.⁸

Team to Market encapsulates the ability of an organisation to effectively create and align a team and empower them to execute at speed to drive competitive advantage, by creating the conditions for them to overcome significant challenges and deliver extraordinary outcomes. It embodies the capabilities of a team to recruit and retire members as required, establish rules and protocols, resolve conflicts and synchronise energy, deploy (digital) technologies, manage (limited) resources, and calibrate objectives in order to deliver exceptional performance in response to changing internal or external demands.

Team to Market should be distinguished from another popular concept – “Time to Market”, which refers to the length of time it takes from a product being conceived until its being available for sale. Time to Market is important in industries where products are outmoded quickly or for first-of-a-kind products. However, by treating time as the “north star metric” to drive performance, other important metrics – such as quality, cost, customer experience and so forth – are often compromised. After all, time is an arbitrary measure which needs to be balanced with other metrics. In contrast, Team to Market empowers the team to balance multiple metrics holistically based on changing circumstances and emerging intelligence in order to maximise results and business impact.

Such high-performance teams are not limited to new product teams or the founding teams of iconic companies. Other internal and external facing teams that go above and beyond expectations to deliver extraordinary results in customer services, production and distribution, sales and marketing, R&D, strategy and planning, and administrative support are also included. They are the stories of Hollywood movies, where underdogs achieve the impossible to defeat much stronger opponents against huge obstacles, armed only with near spiritual aspiration, unshakable trust in one another, extreme hard work and unwavering determination to succeed.

Successes like these are rare, but they have happened frequent enough to be more than the result of pure luck. A new generation of workplace collaboration technologies is making successes like these much more accessible to teams of any size and sector. Starling Bank, for example, received its banking licence in July 2016 and it has been growing at an incredible rate. It was able to build its IT system from ground up and launch the UK’s first App-Only current account in March 2017. The challenger bank embraced channel-based communications across the whole bank from day one, integrated with a full suite of custom business processes and third-party software, which created a level of agility both within and amongst its teams that incumbent banks find hard to emulate. In particular, the collaboration technologies it adopted enable the technical and customer service teams in the bank to respond to system or customer incidents quickly and effectively.

In team sports, the English football (soccer) team Leicester City FC became the Champion of the most competitive football league in the world against all odds in 2016, the English Premier League.

⁷ [“Here Are 10 of the World’s Biggest Companies That Were Started in a Garage”](#)

⁸ <https://www.team-to-market.fr/>

It beat legendary English football clubs with glorious histories, deep pockets, accomplished players, celebrity managers and steadfast loyal fans. Similar stories have been told in Basketball in the US (e.g. Cleveland Cavaliers in 2016 and Dallas Mavericks in 2013)⁹ and Rugby in Australia (e.g. Wests Tigers in 2005 and Penrith Panthers in 2003)¹⁰. Their successes have been the subject of management research and inspired business leaders and entrepreneurs all over the world.

Outside sports, high performance teams have been observed in many less glamorous, everyday settings. These teams often appear ordinary, but somehow, they manage to deliver extraordinary product or service and exceptional performance. What is the “secret sauce” of their success?

⁹ [“6 Times the Underdog Won the NBA Championship”](#)

¹⁰ [“Can the Sharks join the historic list of unlikely champions?”](#)

Teams and Teamwork

Teams can be defined as small groups of interdependent individuals who share a common mission, goal or responsibility for outcomes. They refer to two or more individuals who socially interact, either face-to-face or via digital communications across space, time or organisational boundaries. A team shares one or more common goals and is brought together to perform tasks relevant to their organisations. Team members exhibit interdependencies with respect to workflows, goals and outcomes; have different roles and responsibilities; and are embedded in an organisational system with boundaries and linkages to the wider work environment.

There are many different types of teams, and they vary significantly in skill differentiation, authority distribution, and temporal stability. Other dimensions, such as team size, market orientation (internal or external facing), organisational seniority (top management teams versus operational teams), and geographical proximity (co-located or dispersed), have also been identified.

There is no shortage of research on teams and teamwork. A search on *Web of Science (1970-2019)* – the academic portal for comprehensive citation data from different academic disciplines - returned 238,469 papers with the keyword “Team” or “Teams” in their Subject. New academic publications have been growing steadily each year, exceeding 20,000 per annum since 2017. A key word search of “Team” or “Teams” on Google Scholars returned 5,890,000 items.

One of the earliest studies is the Hawthorne Experiment by Elton Mayo between 1927-1932 at the Western Electric Company’s Chicago Plant on how working conditions affected the productivity of workers. The study concluded that workers are motivated more by psychological than physical working conditions. Working relationships and social interactions, such as teamwork and recognition, rather than physical working conditions, have the greatest effect on productivity.

Over the last 50 years, numerous academic studies have examined what make some teams successful while others fail. The advent of information and communications technologies (ICTs) has facilitated the rapid proliferation of virtual teams, which have created new challenges and opportunities for workers and organisations. Despite the vast literature, however, consensus remains remarkably lacking in our understanding of what make a team successful.

Previous studies have examined the structural features (e.g. task scope, complexity and structure, technology and virtuality), compositional features (e.g. member ability, diversity and churn), and mediating mechanisms (e.g. motivation, conflict, trust, creativity, cohesion and decision making) of teams and teamwork and their effect on team performance, but no *consistent* patterns have been identified. While some successful teams embody features such as members as friends who socialise outside work, other equally successful teams are composed of members with no social contact outside work. Some successful teams have strong leaders with clear structures, but others are more autonomous with fluid, informal, flatter and less hierarchical structures. There are even teams with nearly identical makeups and overlapping members but materially different performance.

Psychologists and sociologists examined the effect of group norms and team dynamics on team performance, but once again, contrasting features – such as consensus-based decision making versus teams that encourages vigorous arguments amongst members – have been found in equally successful teams. The norms of one successful team often contrast sharply with those of another. Some studies found that what distinguished good teams from dysfunctional ones was how team members treated one another, but others found that a healthy level of competitive tension within teams are effective in bringing out the best in each member.

“Some teams had a bunch of smart people who figured out how to break up work evenly. Other groups had pretty average members, but they came up with ways to take advantage of everyone’s relative strengths. Some groups had one strong leader. Others were more fluid, and everyone took a leadership role.” [Senior Executive of a Global Tech Firm]

In 2012, Google embarked on an extensive study of team effectiveness - code named “Project Aristotle”. They reviewed previous studies, gathered data on 180 Google teams, conduct over 200 interviews, and analyse over 250 team attributes. Surprisingly, they failed to identify any *consistent* patterns of the key characteristics for a dream-team. The composition of a team made no difference to performance. The norms of one effective team often contrasted sharply with another equally successful team. However, the study found that the *unwritten rules* or the *team culture* which govern how people interact, structure their work and view their contributions are key to team performance, and successful teams often share five essential team dynamics:¹¹

1. Psychological Safety: Can we take risks without feeling insecure or embarrassed?
2. Dependability: Can we count on each other to do high quality work on time?
3. Structure and Clarity: Are goals, roles, and execution plans in our team clear?
4. Meaning of Work: Are we working on something that is personally important for each of us?
5. Impact of Work: Do we fundamentally believe that the work we are doing matters?

The study concluded that what distinguishes a good team from a dysfunctional one is how teammates treat one another. Team chemistry and cohesiveness are more critical factors than even talent or resource for team success. Successful teams often display structures and processes that support clarity and dependability; team dynamics that create psychological safety; and work that is meaningful both to team members and at higher levels. However, these are all necessary but not sufficient conditions for team success: successful teams often display some or even all of these features, but these factors offer no guarantee for team success.

Furthermore, most available studies of teams and teamwork are based on the experience of teams supported by “traditional” workplace collaboration technologies such as emails, video conferencing and other disparate, proprietary software. Systematic research on how emerging collaborative technologies – such as channel or thread-based communications and emerging collaboration platforms that enable the seamless integration of apps, bots, business processes and third-party software – affect teams and team performance is still largely absent. This study has found that high performance teams require not only interpersonal communications but also an ability to leverage all of their existing specialist software with ease and simplicity. The complexity and variety of this software is growing with the average enterprise today using over 1,000 different software. By integrating existing software tools within a coherent collaboration hub, teams may be able to save time and better share knowledge which would otherwise be siloed within a separate application. For the greatest efficiency gains, these integrations need to be intuitive and accessible for all users, including those who do not have a deep technical knowledge or coding and programming skills. In doing so, some emerging workplace collaboration technologies are poised to evolve into a new digital working environment that can potentially supersede the proprietary digital platforms that have dominated the workplace for decades and fundamentally transform the way people work, creating sustainable competitive advantages for their organisations.

¹¹ <https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/five-keys-to-a-successful-google-team/>

Digital Technologies and Virtual Teams

Today, nearly all teams - including those primarily co-located teams - are supported by a growing range of digital technologies. Virtual work has become the new normal, with people working flexibly from dispersed locations, often involved in multiple teams, interacting using digital communications. This phenomenon has been studied from different perspectives across the world, from telecommuting and teleworking in the 70s and 80s, virtual teams and computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) in the 90s and early 2000s, to more recently, how a new generation of workplace collaboration technologies can be used to transform teams and teamwork.¹²

Despite over half a century's research, practice and policy initiatives, the projected disappearance of traditional offices in city centres has failed to materialise. During the first oil crisis in 1973, Jack Nils famously advocated telecommuting for office workers. Instead of travelling to offices for work, work can be electronically transmitted to the workers. This concept soon evolved into teleworking where information resources can be accessed remotely via computers and telecommunications. However, after numerous experiments and repeated failures, it is increasingly recognised that work is not just what you do, but also where you go and who you go with, which gives rise to the notion of team-teleworking and virtual teams.¹³ Since then, management focus has increasingly shifted from teleworking to using ICTs to support geographically distributed teams working together.

Today, full time remote working remains rare, and only around 5% of American workers are full time remote workers, but 43% spend at least some time working remotely.¹⁴ Historically, France trailed other OECD countries in telework, but since it was written into French law in 2005, attitude has changed, and the sweeping overhaul of labour rules in 2017 made the introduction of telework more flexible. According to a recent [study](#), 29% of French employees worked remotely in 2018, up from 25% in 2017. Today, France has one of the most flexible working cultures in the world, according to the [IWG's 2019 Global Workplace Survey](#), with 60% of businesses in France are offering flexible working policies for employees. In Australia, 68% employers allow remote working but attitudes are sharply divided, according to research by [Indeed](#).

Within virtual teams, members use digital tools to varying degrees to work across spatial, temporal, and organisational boundaries when accomplishing interdependent tasks. Compared with traditional co-located teams, virtual teams face additional challenges associated with geographic separation, time zone difference, cultural diversity, and organisational membership; but the benefits of virtual teams – both to employers and employees - are also increasingly recognised.

Over the years, numerous workplace collaboration tools have been developed to support both virtual and co-located teams. In the past, most teams used stand-alone tools with single or limited functionalities to support meetings or information sharing. More recently, a new generation of integrated collaboration tools with bundled services have emerged, some of them allow the seamless integration of business processes and third-party software. Below is a list of popular tools:

- Meeting and Video Conferencing (e.g. Zoom, Skype, GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts)
- Collaboration (e.g. Slack, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Spark, Facebook Workplace, Google Hangouts)
- Messaging and Chat (e.g. Slack, Twist, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, Glip, Flock)

¹² Raghuram, S, Hill, N S, Gibbs, J L & Maruping, L M (2019) [Virtual Work: Bridging Research Clusters](#). *Academy of Management Annals*. Vol. 13, No. 1.

¹³ Li, F (1995) *The Geography of Business Information*. Wiley, Chichester

¹⁴ [State of Remote Work 2018](#); [State of Remote Work 2019](#)

- Document Storage and File Sharing (e.g. Dropbox, Google Drive, Sharepoint, One Drive)
- Document Co-Creation (e.g. Scribblar, Google Docs)
- Project Management (e.g. Trello, Jira, Asana, Microsoft Project, Basecamp, Wrike, Apollo)
- Social Networking (e.g. Yammer, Jive)
- Scheduling (e.g. Doodle, Calendly)
- Workflow Automation (e.g. Zapier, Microsoft Flow, Monday)
- Shared CRM (e.g. GreenRope, HubSpot CRM, Bitrix24)
- Screen Sharing and Interactive Displays
- Immersive Technologies, particularly 3D, VR or AR supported virtual environment
- Other emerging tools and technologies, such bots, tracking tools and people analytics.

“Today’s knowledge workers expect these tools to be as quick and easy to use as the Apps on their mobile devices, highly integrated with other business processes, closely aligned with their work styles, reliable and secure, and easy to set up and use.” [CTO of Global Media Firm].

“We bought ourselves a huge head start using some great collaborative software off the shelf, including Slack, Zoom, Airtable and Zapier. With these tools we could do things in an hour that would perhaps take people a month 10 years ago ... We are starting to replace some of them with internally built tools now that we know exactly what we need and need it to scale, but getting up off the ground was much easier for us than for founders in the past.” [Founder of a Unicorn in the US]

Although technology providers are expected to offer tools that enable as much connectivity and transparency as possible, more transparent environments are not always better, and privacy is just as essential for performance.¹⁵ If unfettered, “always-on” connectivity, compared to intermittent collaboration interspersed by protected periods of individual work offline, can reduce rather than increase team creativity and performance. For cognitively demanding tasks, scheduled meetings and online collaborations need to be punctuated by individual work time by creating coordinated unplugged times for deep work. There is an enormous and largely unmet demand for effective ways to coordinate and align people, a gap some emerging collaboration tools are aiming to fill. Today, email remains the default coordinating point for business communications supporting enormous information flows, but each person has only a partial view, and the rich history held in email systems – the decisions made, questions answered, and information shared – are only partially accessible. If the emails are in the “wrong inbox”, or if you are new to an organisation, you will have no access to them. Some emerging collaboration technologies using channel or thread-based communications are built to overcome such traditional constraints, which can significantly increase transparency and alignment, and make the shared history and organisational knowledge equally accessible to everyone regardless when they join the project.

To mitigate the “transparency and always-on trap”, some organisations even considered abandoning real-time collaborations and explored asynchronous ways of working, but this approach has been criticised as “throwing the baby out with bathwater”. Some real-time workplace collaboration tools allow highly personalised control on how these tools are used to mitigate potential problems while enabling new ways of collaboration that are not feasible via traditional collaborative technologies.

The rapid proliferation of workplace collaboration technologies is fundamentally transforming the way teams work, enabling teams to take their products or services to internal and external markets with ease and in ways that were not feasible only a few years ago. This is clearly

¹⁵ Bernstein, E (2014), *op cit*; Bernstein, E, Shore, J and Lazer, D (2019), *op cit*.

reflected in the live coverage of FIFA 2018 Football World Cup by Fox's production team. The team consisted of 35 people spread across multiple sites in Russia as well as in Los Angeles, New York City and Charlotte, North Carolina. In the past, individual producers and teams would have had their favourite workflow and messaging tools; and most of the editorial process would be conducted over emails. Teams would not be able to get immediate feedback on assets before broadcasting live or posting on social media. Shared resource teams who worked with multiple programmes or departments would have to keep track of a dozen different apps on their phones and their computers. Emails also made it difficult to distinguish between those that require immediate attention and those that are less urgent.

To ensure the seamless live coverage of FIFA 2018, Fox adopted channel-based communications integrated with a large number of workflows and third-party software among its ever-growing pool of productivity and communication applications. These tools enabled the team to collaborate in real time in front of a live audience of millions, from producers to designers to on-screen talent, of whom few are in the same location. They also allow team members to stay up to date and coordinate coverage as easily as if they were in the same location, allowing them to make quick decisions on how to make the most of their real-time coverage. These tools also allow freelancers to search for information they need and get up to speed with the work already done.

"Our video editors, social media managers and producers are creating content by collaborating with each other in real time on Slack, which helps us fulfil our goals of breaking down internal silos while still giving each group a level of control and privacy when needed." [Fox CTO John Herbert]

A further example can be found in Xero from Wellington, New Zealand, a worldwide leader in cloud-based accounting software with over two million subscribers from 180 countries. The company was ranked by Forbes as *the World's Most Innovative Growth Company* in 2014 and 2015. In late 2017, Xero rolled out a cohesive communication system across all business units, using channel-based communications on Slack to replace or integrate a myriad of other messaging and collaboration tools and third-party software used by different business units. By using one universal platform for collaboration and conversation, integrated with a wide range of business processes and third-party software, the customer experience teams, platform services and product teams are able to communicate easily across its offices in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States, effectively overcoming barriers arising from distance and time zones when addressing internal incidents and customer issues.

"It has enabled faster and more transparent information sharing across our teams, improving employee engagement and ultimately making it easier to build beautiful products." [Levi Allan, GM Product, Xero]

"I've got the peace of mind that there's been someone online and that people were going to the right person at the right time." [Matt Simpson, Lead Workflow Coordinator, Xero]

Teams to Markets

The notion of Team to Market is not limited to one single team executing a task or fulfilling a responsibility to internal or external customers. People are increasingly involved in multiple teams, and emerging workplace collaboration technologies enable the fulfilment of rapidly changing demands using highly fluid team structures where members join and leave teams as required, old teams dissolved and new teams formed as demands change. These tools also enable the effective collaboration between teams and the seamless handover of a project from one team to another over different stages of the product life cycle. Importantly, some new collaboration platforms allow the seamless integration with external contractors and partners and shared channels between organisations. The notion of Team to Market is increasingly extended to “Teams to Markets”, as multiple teams evolving and collaborating to satisfy changing demands in internal or external markets, or over different stages of the life cycle of a product or project.

gTech is a support and operations organisation within Google, where users and products division work together to ensure users and partners get the most out of Google. Traditionally, gTech was organised around individual products but whenever product strategies shifted (which happens frequently at Google), old teams are disbanded and reformulated into new teams around new products. This model was inflexible, new teams often lacked the right mix of technical and operational skills, and onboarding new team members can slow down progress. It also offered limited development opportunities for career mobility and knowledge sharing. gTech tried hiring buffer capacity to meet fluctuating demand, but it was too expensive. It also experimented with a rotation programme, which proved too rigid.

In the end, a new marketplace approach was developed, which asked employees and managers to “bid” for new assignments. Code named “Project Chameleon”, gTech deployed an algorithm to match employees to roles based on their preferences and those of the managers. The project not only improved business prioritisation, transparency, agility and choice, but also significantly increased staff mobility and facilitated networking. The system enabled gTech to deploy a scalable and dynamic staffing model to support frequent strategy shift and employee development. People join and leave teams, and old teams dissolved and new teams formed fluidly as demand changes, giving employees and managers increased choices while significantly improving productivity. This transformation not only enhanced the effective functioning of individual teams in fulfilling their responsibilities, but also enabled different teams to evolve flexibly in response to rapidly changing internal or external demands.

Similarly, in a large residential property business in Asia, providing services to residents has been a thankless task, which are costly for the business but with low levels of customer satisfaction. For large residential properties, the company historically maintained their own service teams on site to ensure quality and timely services – plumbers, electricians, joiners, cleaners, handyman and even child minders. However, due to fluctuating demands, some service teams often had little to do for long periods, punctuated by sudden high demand which they could not satisfy in a timely fashion.

An enterprising team leader experimented with an online marketplace based on an instant messaging platform where new jobs from residents are displayed in real time for service providers to bid. The system is based on real time communications between the customer, service provider, team leader and property management staff, keeping all relevant parties informed of progress. Each service team is free to organise its own shifts. The marketplace was so successful that it was soon opened to residents from properties in adjacent areas. Vetted external service providers, alongside the company’s own service teams, competed for new jobs. The new system not only allowed the

company to turn a loss-making division into a profitable business, but also offered different teams of service staff more flexibility and higher income through fluid team structure in response to fluctuating demands. Customer satisfactory soared. This would not have been possible without the marketplace to match supply with demand in real time; and the messaging system for real-time communications. This scheme has since been rolled out to all managed properties in the group. It also enables service teams to serve external customers when internal demands are low, and external contractors and partners to bid for jobs during peak demands.

Teams to Markets is also reflected in the experience of Electronic Arts (EA) during the development and launch of its FIFA19, which sold a staggering 260 million copies, the highest number ever for a video game. The game was the result of a major project involving 600 people in 78 teams and 32 locations, involving not only teams of employees from EA Sports itself, but also external contractors and partners around the world. These teams used channel-based communications on Slack integrated with a full suite of business processes and third-party software both for collaboration within each team and the coordination and handover of the project amongst teams during different stages product development, launch and after sale services.

During product development, the design team interacted extensively with core game engine development team. When launching approached, publishing, analytics, player development teams are also involved. After launching, the technology operations team and game design team worked together to respond to the rapid increases in user numbers. Crucial for these teams to work seamlessly together to take their respective products or services to internal and external markets around the world are channel-based communications, together with the seamless integration with over 550 third party applications and workflows within EA. The collaboration platform allows these teams from different functions and locations, together with external contractors and partners, to carry out the required tasks and confidently hand over the project from one team to another over different stages of product development and launch.

Team Structure and Leadership

Since the 1980s, bureaucracy has been under relentless attack for its rigid hierarchy and slow decision making. New forms of organisations that promote flatter and more flexible structures, decentralisation and self-management have been advocated. Teams are widely regarded as substituting a peer-based control of work for hierarchical control and coordination.¹⁶ Management guru Gary Hamel even called for *'the end of bureaucracy'*, citing the example of Haier, the world's largest appliance maker with annual revenue of \$35bn and 75000 employees worldwide. Haier divided itself into more than 4,000 microenterprises – or teams, most of which have 10 to 15 employees; and decisions are made by these small autonomous teams. Other examples, from Zappos and Medium to Valve and Blinkist, have been used to illustrate new organisational forms that promote self-management and team-based structures, such as holacracy or modularity, where decision power is conferred to fluid teams, circles and roles rather than individuals.

New forms of organisations are also emerging along the temporal dimension. For example, the [flash organisations](#) allow complex work to be completed via crowdsourcing, by structuring the crowd as organisations. This has been described as [the pop-up employer](#) - build the team, do the job and then dissolve the team and say good bye - by using ephemeral setups to execute a single, complex project in ways traditionally associated with corporations, non-profit groups or governments.

Keeping bureaucracy at bay is a never-ending struggle, and two categories of solutions have been advanced. Internal market mechanisms allow users to decide whether bureaucratic procedures are excessive by putting a "price" on the contributions. The community building approach emphasises strong values and culture, which encourage employees to rise above their formal job descriptions to contribute their discretionary effort because of a feeling of belonging and higher purpose.

However, it has also been found that non-hierarchical organisational forms can cause confusion and complication in hiring, compensation, career progression and in carrying out work, and most of them do not scale easily. Many organisations that enthusiastically adopted such new structures have since reverted to hierarchies, albeit with more flexibility, fewer layers and more decentralised decision making.

Today, hierarchy remains the most widely used organisational form for nearly all organisations around the world. Despite the many criticisms it received, hierarchy offers clarity and simplicity which is particularly effective for virtual teams when members are often in different locations, time zones and cultures. The limitations of flexible, fluid, non-hierarchical team structures are increasingly recognised. For example, Blinkist abandoned its experiment with radical management after it found that being governed by a rule book was as onerous as being ruled by a controlling boss; and according to its co-founder Niklas Jansen, *"[i]nstead of solving problems, we were spending all our time asking how we solve them Holacratically?"*

A [recent study](#) found that the clear management structure offered by hierarchies can help firms hire and keep their best people, and more structured managerial practices have a strong correlation with higher productivity in firms.¹⁷ For most teams, hierarchy offers the clarity of roles, structures and decision processes which are essential for team success; and the desire to go to extreme forms of organising is increasingly resisted. From the perspective of employees, ["boss-less business is no workers' paradise"](#) despite the potential benefits such as greater autonomy and flexibility. Teams

¹⁶ Child, J (2019) *Hierarchy: A Key Idea for Business and Society*. London: Routledge

¹⁷ Cornwell, C, Schmutte, I M & Scur, D (2019) [Building a Productive Workforce: The Role of Structured Management Practices](#). CEP Discussion Paper, No 1644.

need leaders, and even in self-managing teams with fluid structures, natural leaders and informal pecking orders nearly always emerge over time.

Back in 1999, Gallup published a mammoth study based on interviews with over 80,000 managers from organisations of all sizes in different industries.¹⁸ The study explored what great managers do differently from ordinary managers to coax world class performance out of their workers, and key issues have been further examined in a series of follow up studies both by Gallup and others. These studies found that great managers balance the priorities and expectations of individual talents with the goals of teams and strategies of organisations. Having great team leaders are not only essential for superior team performance, but also for recruiting, nurturing and retaining talents. In fact, it has been found that between 60-75 percent of the reasons that people quit an organisation come down to their immediate managers. When a team is failing to perform, perhaps the first step is to review or replace the team-leader.

The rapid proliferation of team-based structures is the result of the broader digital transformation of work that is currently taking place. In traditional job design, organisations create fixed, stable roles and then add supervisory and management positions on top. When parts of these jobs are automated or digitised, the work that remains for humans is generally more interpretive and service-oriented, involving problem-solving, data interpretation, communications and listening, customer service and empathy, and teamwork and collaboration. These higher-level skills are not fixed tasks like traditional jobs, so they are forcing organisations to create more flexible positions and roles, supported by team-based structures and rich and flexible collaboration technologies.

¹⁸ Buckingham, M & Coffman, C (1999). *First, break all the rules: what the world's greatest managers do differently*. New York: Simon & Schuster

Building and Leading Effective Teams in the Digital Age

Team to Market is part of a seismic shift in the digital transformation of work and everyday life. On the one hand, the nature of our economy has changed radically; and the success of any organisation depends on the productive use of the most valuable resource of our time - information. On the other hand, we have increasingly more powerful digital technologies at our disposal that are ubiquitous, affordable, customisable and easy to use, which empower all of us to capture, share and use information in ways we could not even imagine in the past. This powerful combination has been driving the digital transformation of strategy and organisation across different sectors and domains. As the fundamental building block of modern organisations, teams must evolve as an integral part of such a seismic shift in order to meet the rapidly changing internal and external demands. The notion of Team to Market allows business leaders and knowledge workers to understand and create effective teams in ways that might be inconceivable only a few years ago, by taking advantage of the significant new capabilities afforded by a new generation of workplace collaboration technologies.

High performance teams can be observed everywhere, from product teams that open-up new markets, founding teams of iconic companies and unicorns, to every day teams in offices and factories, restaurants and shops, customer service departments and warehouses, marketing and sales, R&D labs and head offices. Many of these teams appear ordinary in composition, structure, talent, resource level and decision process, but somehow, they manage to deliver superior products and services and extraordinary performance to internal and external markets. The rapid development of collaborative technologies and tools has facilitated the proliferation of virtual teams across organisations of all sizes in different industries, often with members dispersed in different locations, time zones and cultures. Such technologies empower teams with growing capabilities and transform the way teams work, not only by overcoming the constraints of space, time and organisational boundaries, but also by enabling teams to recruit and retire members, dissolve old teams and reformulate new ones as demands change, collaborate and hand over projects seamlessly over different stages of project or product life cycles. Most of all, some new collaboration platforms enable teams to build custom tools using bots, apps and via full integration with business processes and third-party software, both within an organisation and in collaboration with external partners.

Team to Market encapsulates the effective functioning of a team that aligns people and resources and overcomes significant challenges to deliver extraordinary outcomes. United by a common purpose, Team to Market embodies the ability of a team to recruit and retire members as required, establish rules and protocols, resolve conflicts and synchronise energy, manage resources, calibrate objectives and deliver exceptional performance in response to changing internal and external business environment.

Team to Market is not limited to one single team executing a task or fulfilling a responsibility internally or externally. A new generation of workplace collaboration technologies has emerged which enables a team or teams to fulfil rapidly changing demands using fluid team structures where old teams are dissolved, and new teams formed as and when required. These tools also enable the effective collaboration and seamless handover of a project or product from one team to another over each stage of its lifecycle. Many also enable flexible collaboration with external partners.

Since teams are the fundamental building block of modern organisations, Team to Market offers genuine opportunities to transform organisation and work and manage the transition to new ways of working by creating a new digital working environment using a new generation of workplace collaboration technologies. Those taking the leap ahead of competitors may find new opportunities

to gain sustainable competitive advantages. Those failing to do so risk being left behind in the digital economy.

About the Author

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Feng's research has attracted the support of over £40 million of external research funding, from the UK Research Councils, Innovate UK, the EU, and the private sectors. He speaks regularly as a keynote speaker at international business forums, panels and workshops for senior business leaders. He is the Founding Chair of the e-Business & e-Government Special Interest Group at the British Academy of Management. He has been conferred Fellow by both the British Academy of Management (FBAM) and the Academy of Social Sciences (FAcSS) for his contributions to theory, practice and policy.