

## Organizational silofication: implications in grouping experts for organizational performance

Dave Silberman, Rob E. Carpenter, Elena Cabrera and Jasmine Kernaleguen

### Introduction

Organizational silos are common in workplace settings. The term 'silo' originated from agricultural storage towers that segregate grain uniquely from other types of grain. Similarly, acquired expertise is built uniquely through segregated knowledge. Organizations often structure acquired expertise based on unique functionality such as human resources, engineering, and information technology. Recent scrutiny has associated this arrangement with organizational underachievement (Henman, 2020). This paper offers a viewpoint that workplace expertise may have *inherent* challenges, not as a product of functional arrangement (silo) but rather a consequence of the bounded perspective from which the 'expertise' was developed (e.g. the expertise of a computer programmer is a technical solution drawn from their programming expertise). Moreover, an expert's bounded perspective is typically reinforced in organizational settings for capital advantage. This paper extends this condition to a process of *organizational silofication*.

### Workplace expertise

Organizations need expertise—a distinguishable advanced knowledge or skill—and organizations hire experts to exploit their skills for capital advantage. Rooted in any expertise are boundaries which shape perspective that are selective to inclusion and exclusion. As expertise matures, boundaries—and the expert's perspective—are strengthened. When expertise is introduced to the workplace, so too is the influence of the bounded perspective that formulated the expertise. These bounded perspectives may become impermeable and can provoke cross-functional discord. This cycle is often perpetuated by organizational settings that reinforce bounded perspectives with workplace groupings.

### Workplace groupings

Workplace groupings assimilate expertise to maximize collective benefit. This arrangement creates a singular detached environment because expert groupings tend to only learn and operate from the perspective of their collective expertise (Carpenter, 2021). Workplace groupings based on functional expertise leads to a paradox in which *rationalized dysfunction* evolves from each groups bounded perspective. Worse yet, expert knowledge is rationalized from the group's bounded perspective and acted upon routinely. Consequently, the singular perspective of workplace groupings may contribute to underachievement in cross-functional settings.

Dave Silberman is based at Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

Rob E. Carpenter is based at University of Texas at Tyler, Tyler, Texas, USA.

Elena Cabrera is based at Cabrera Research Lab (CRL), Ithaca, New York, USA. Jasmine Kernaleguen is based at Rhythmic Leader Science Co, Saskatoon, Canada.

© Dave Silberman, Rob E. Carpenter, Elena Cabrera and Jasmine Kernaleguen. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

## Workplace segregation

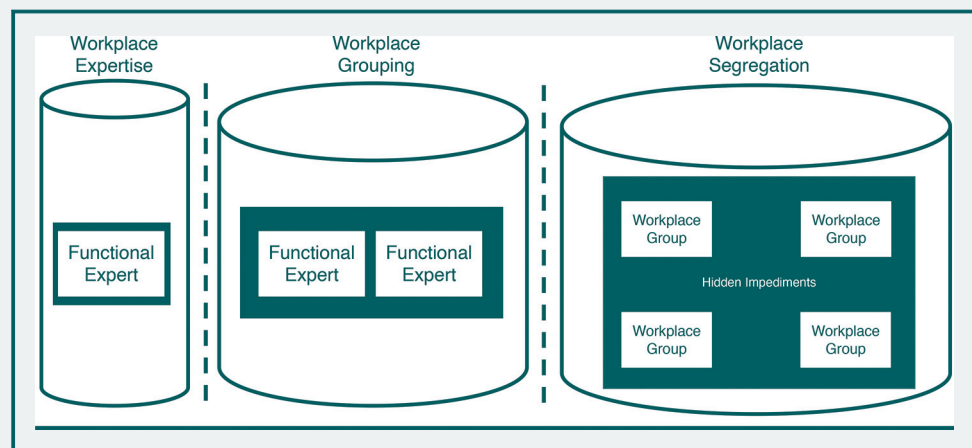
Organizational work is complex; the desire to create simplicity from complexity is important to organizational success (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2018). A popular approach to simplifying organizational complexity is the segregation of work into workplace groupings or 'silos'. Workplace segregation reinforces the comfort of functional bias offered by a bounded perspective of expertise (Schreurs *et al.*, 2019). Through reinforcement of workplace segregation, distance between diverse expert groupings is increased. Functional bias is highlighted when multiple workgroups are asked to work together and struggle to do so. Opportunities for rich contribution made possible by cross-functional expertise become diluted, under accessed, and siloed.

## Workplace silification

Workplace settings reinforce the bounded perspective of expertise. This reinforcement creates challenges to cross-functional settings. A common research thread suggests resolution is found by deconstructing the functional arrangement (silos). While this may overcome restricting influences found within functional groupings, it does not overcome the bounded perspective of expertise within the group. The unadjusted presence of expertise is embedded with impermeability classified by the designation of expertise (e.g. the agency of expertise sees uniquely through segregated knowledge). When not explicated and adjusted, the perspective of expertise tends to create invisible boundaries that prevent productive cross-functional collaboration. By overlooking and reinforcing the bounded perspective of expertise, the conditions that manifest *organizational silification* occur. Here we define *organizational silification* as workplace expertise that is grouped and segregated because of organizational reinforcement of expert perspectives and results in organizational underachievement (Figure 1).

Because functional arrangements (silos) are structurally supported by organizational policies and practices, simply adjusting the structural orientation is insufficient. This action detracts from the ability to consider the hidden impediment restricting cross-functional collaboration. In other words, one must explicate the impeding perspective(s) and actively work to combat the unintended organizational consequences of the bounded perspective. There has been an abundance of research done that demonstrates the simple act of explicating a perspective can have a dramatic effect when diverse perspectives are comingled (Cabrera *et al.*, 2021).

**Figure 1** Organizational Silification



Despite the historic success of workplace groupings, the hidden impediments in *organizational silofication*—magnified by acquired bounded perspectives—should be given keen consideration for maximizing organizational potential. These hidden impediments may include:

- Common language is more segregated than collective (i.e. division, department, unit);
- Grouping concerns override cross-functional needs in priorities of work;
- Conscious or unconscious positioning of grouping priorities to decision making;
- Performance and recognition based solely on expert groupings; and
- Group function has more structure (required), cross-functional is flexible (optional).

### Advice to practitioners and future research considerations

The effects of *organizational silofication* promote organizational underachievement. The following core elements are offered to minimize the impact of *organizational silofication*;

- *Empower “One Team” Thinking*: Adjust performance metrics to reinforce emphasis on ‘we are all working towards the same outcomes’ by associating outcomes to common goal and purpose of the broader organization.
- *Action the Language of Partnership*: Reward co-creation and partnership in action by replacing “internal customer” or “service provider” or “stakeholder” with partnership “we are in this together” devoid of silo or hierarchy.
- *Create Better Value Collectively*: Bring together the right people to engage in dialogue and action to experiment and move initiatives forward regardless of title or position in the organization.
- *Leverage the Power of Invitation*: Actively and curiously seek different views, inviting a broader range in thinking—especially opposing views and discourse—to contribute to actions and outcomes.
- *Shift Thinking to Better Outcomes*: Encourage the underlying thinking of inclusion and multi-perspective contribution to create holistic outcomes over protectionist or expertise driven outputs.

To fully capture the implications of organizational silofication, it will require a future research agenda on the agency of expertise as a constrained barrier. Although this should be the primary focus of future research, it would be prudent to extend this view with other causal conditions. For example, silofication research should be broadened to include an array of experiences, interactions, and interventions more inclusive than just perspective constructed by the agency of expertise. These include not only interactions with leadership and managers, but also interactions with expert peers. The clear weight of evidence indicates that such interactions have important implications on cross-functional execution.

### Conclusion

This viewpoint offers that organizational underachievement sourced to workplace expertise is a product of bounded perspective constructed by the agency of expertise. Embedded in any bounded perspective is limitations to what can be seen. Organizations that seek to leverage expertise solely on their agency risk *organizational silofication*. We conclude that recognizing *organizational silofication* is an opportunity for organizations to address organizational underachievement by addressing the perspectives that create the hidden impediments limiting their overall potential.

**Keywords:**  
Organizational development,  
Organizational performance,  
Organizational expertise,  
Organizational collaboration,  
Organizational silo,  
Organizational underachievement

## References

Cabrera, D. and Cabrera, L. (2018), *Flock Not Clock: Design, Align, and Lead to Achieve Your Vision*, Plectica Publications, New York, NY.

Cabrera, D., Cabrera, L., Cabrera, E., Hernandez, O., Sukhbaatar, U., Fuqua, K., Benitez Collante, A.E., Lemaiyan, E., Warugongo, N., Sekyere, A., Silas, D., Thompson, T. and Doungpummser, P. (2021), *The Origin of Ideas: Empirical Studies in Cognitive Complexity*, Odyssean Press, Ithaca, NY.

Carpenter, R.E. (2021), "Learning as cognition: a developmental process for organizational learning", *Development and Learning in Organizations*, Vol. 35 No. 6, pp. 18-21.

Henman, L.D. (2020), "Silo busting makes good business sense", *Strategic HR Review*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 151-156.

Schreurs, B., Van den Beemt, A., Moolenaar, N. and De Laat, M. (2019), "Networked individualism and learning in organizations", *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 95-115.

## About the authors

Dave Silberman received his PhD in Human Resources Development (HRD), with a specialization in organizational development and change. He is currently a senior executive of a performance centric research, training, and technology firm and serves as an adjunct professor at Boston University. Dave's research agenda centralizes in the domains of strategy, entrepreneurship and the negotiation of workplace and identity-based tension. Dave Silberman is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [dsilberm@bu.edu](mailto:dsilberm@bu.edu)

Rob E. Carpenter received his PhD in Human Resource Development (HRD) from the University of Texas at Tyler. He is currently the Chief Executive Officer of a healthcare investment firm and an adjunct faculty member at the University of Texas at Tyler Soules College of Business. Rob's research agenda is focused towards neuroscientific insights on sociality in the workplace environment.

Elena Cabrera is a Research Associate at Cabrera Research Lab (CRL). In keeping with the lab's commitment to basic research and public understanding, she is currently involved in over a dozen research studies, has published 4 papers and manages the daily social media to highlight systems and cognitive science research for the general public. She wrote a book, *The Origin of Ideas: Empirical Studies in Cognitive Complexity*, which is forthcoming in 2021. She is also the section and copy editor for the *Journal of Systems Thinking*. She holds a bachelor's degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from Cornell University.

Jasmine Kernalleguen is Chief Disruptor at Rhythmic Leader Science Co, AMP Coaching & Consulting, and serves as head of leadership development for the Boston University Agile Innovation Lab. She is leading the charge in developing tech that enables organizational performance via leader agency. Jasmine's research agenda is focused on identity and the interplay between neuroscience, psychology and physiology that revolve under enabling successful leaders.

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:  
[www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)  
Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)