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# Collaborating Without (Formal) Organization:

## How Do Independent Workers Call Into Question the Matter of Organization?<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on independent workers and on the organizational specificities of the independent workers' phenomenon. We treat independent workers as an emergent and continually shifting organizational phenomenon questioning some of our assumptions about what organizations are, and revealing trends that are currently reshaping work. We suggest viewing the independent workers' phenomenon as an open organizational phenomenon in which activities are project-oriented, temporality-oriented, and inclusive. This chapter contributes to an understanding of the independent workers' phenomenon as an organizational one that constantly (re)defines rules, roles, and statuses. It also contributes to a broader reflection on the matter of organization. Considered as an open organizational phenomenon, the independent workers' phenomenon calls the organization–society dualism into question. Finally, revealing the organizational aspects of independent workers' activities allows us to better understand some of the transformations that are nowadays affecting more traditional forms of work.

Keywords: Independent workers, Freelancers, Solopreneurs, coworkers, digital nomads, makers, Organization, Temporality, Project, Process thinking, Transformations of work

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## INTRODUCTION

Makers (Anderson, 2012; Dougherty, 2012; Hatch, 2013), creative freelancers (Debra, 2010), coworkers (Spinuzzi, 2012), and digital nomads (Makimoto & Manners, 1997; Nash, Jarrahi, Sutherland, & Phillips, 2018) have been under the media spotlight for a while as they redefine the way people work, collaborate, and are involved in society. All of them can be called “independent workers” (or “self-employees”), as they are not attached to any company or government, but rather are their own bosses (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Leighton, 2016). “Independent” means there is no subordinate relation between them and their collaborators or clients, but only temporary contracts with the aim of achieving a specific goal (Burke, 2015; Cappelli & Keller, 2013).

This does not mean that independent workers work alone. In addition to examining the specific situation of each of these independent workers, we can also look at them as an ensemble, and see in their collective activities an organizational form that emerges and may persist for a while. In this sense, the independent workers’ phenomenon is an intensive human capital phenomenon (Ployhart, Nyberg, Reilly, & Maltarich, 2014; Schultz, 1961; Wright & McMahan, 2011), as each worker is involved in numerous projects, with various clients, companies, and other independent workers. Seeing this as an organizational phenomenon can seem a bit unusual, but it is also an interesting way to understand how people collaborate in an expanding world of self-employed work.

Although an exact appreciation of the size of this movement is difficult to establish, some studies indicate that the independent workers’ movement already represents about 35% of the US workforce and that the majority of workers could be freelancers by 2027.<sup>i</sup> In Europe, the rate is not as high, but independent workers represent 16% of the workforce, with an important increase shown since 2004.<sup>ii</sup> While it was the common way to work and collaborate during the 19<sup>th</sup> century – at least in countries such as France - (Marchand, 1998), independent working has reappeared as a key trend after a century of decline. Of course, the jobs, skills, and tools have evolved since, but the core principles of independent work remain the same: the workers are free (they are not attached to an organization in a stable way), but their work entails the need to collaborate intensively with each other and with various organizations.

As wage employment has been the dominant model in Western society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, organization scholars have mainly conceptualized the organization as a social structure based on working contracts. In this, organization has been defined as a rational-action system (Selznick, 1948), with a specific behavior (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958), and

evolving in a given environment (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Mainly inspired by the sociology of bureaucracy (Merton, 1968; Weber, 1922) and the economic view of organizations (Coase, 1937; Jensen & Meckling, 1976), this approach was also influenced by the empirical sites that inspired them, mainly large industrial companies (Augier, March, & Sullivan, 2005; March, 2007), and has been anchored in an economic and social context dominated by mass production and standardized goods and services. It thus provided a functionalist and restricted view of organization, in which the organization's borders are clearly defined and its structure of governance is imposed on the workers. Studies have consequently focused on the generative mechanisms inside the organizations or the relations between them, taking for granted the existence of the organizations themselves. Although these conceptions of the organization have been challenged, criticized, and complemented with other perspectives, they have laid the foundations on which organization theories have developed (Chia, 1997; Parker, 1992). In other words, organization theories have been dominated by a view that understands organization as a social or economic entity separate from the rest of society (Chia, 2003). Recent empirical phenomena such as the rise of the independent workers have contributed to questioning assumptions about what constitutes an organization.

A traditional view of organizations would probably not recognize the presence of an “organization” in the independent workers’ phenomenon, given its distinctly open and individualized nature. Consequently, mainstream organization studies generally struggle to understand these open phenomena. This is why an alternative perspective that offers a way to see organization as an open phenomenon, always evolving, is needed. We suggest turning toward process ontology (Chia, 1999; Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014; Langley and Tsoukas, 2010, 2017) and a perspective called the “communicative constitution of organizations” (hereafter, “CCO”; see Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014 or Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011 for overviews) to extend our understanding of organization. These perspectives are mainly anchored in the assumption that organizations are continuously moving and changing, and that they need to be constantly constituted and reconstituted to endure, albeit not necessarily in the exact same shape, over time. These perspectives place becoming, rather than stability (Rescher, 1996), at the heart of all matters, including organizations. In such a view, organization has no predefined limitations and is intertwined with the rest of society. Based on these tenets about organization, we claim that this view is especially relevant to understanding the independent workers’ activities and, more

precisely, how the characteristics of their modes of working and collaborating call into question the matter of organization.

This chapter makes two contributions. First, we contribute to the understanding of the independent workers' phenomenon as an open organizational phenomenon. More precisely, we suggest understanding this organizational phenomenon based on three characteristics of the collaborations that independent workers pursue, which is that they are project-oriented, temporality-oriented, and inclusive. Second, working from the idea that the independent workers represent an open organizational phenomenon, this chapter challenges the classic view of organization and offers some insights into understanding the matter of organization in a general context of evolving collaboration practices and transformation of work.

Based on these two contributions, we discuss two implications of this phenomenon. First, we discuss how the independent workers' movement calls the organization–society dualism into question. Then we discuss the impact of such an understanding on traditional organizations, such as established companies. In a context in which some traditional organizations are experimenting with new work arrangements (Cappelli & Keller, 2013), this inquiry into independent workers is not only about workers opting for this way of working, but also about organizations whose boundaries are becoming blurrier.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first section will introduce the independent workers by highlighting the difference between those working for companies as temporary collaborators (freelancers) and those running their own companies (solopreneurs). The second section will deal with the specificities of the organizational phenomenon emerging from the independent workers' collaborations. The last section will introduce the implications of such an organizational conception of independent workers.

## **BACKGROUND : FREELANCING AND SOLOPRENEURSHIP**

Freelancers, solopreneurs, sole proprietors, mompreneurs, fempreneurs, self-entrepreneurs, digital nomads, coworkers, makers, etc.: given the existence of a variety of labels designating independent workers, it is not easy to define these workers. These notions are often used in the media without any distinction, and are mobilized to refer to self-employed people having a “cool” job, such as photographers or community managers, and working in trendy places such as coworking spaces, coffee shops, libraries, or fablabs. These workers are presented as the trendiest workers of the moment, hipsters spending their day in a shabby-chic coffee shop, drinking lattes, and being creative on their laptops. Print and social media play an important role in spreading this idealized image, but it is also partly built up by the workers themselves. Actually, there is much more to independent work than what is seen in this idealistic, even caricatured, image.

In order to move beyond this image of independent workers, we suggest categorizing them based on the nature of their activities and relation to others.<sup>iii</sup> More specifically, we will make a distinction between *freelancers* (people who work for a company as temporary collaborators) and *solopreneurs* (those who deliver products and services to clients). The next section presents these two main ways of being independent workers and the nature of their activities.

### **Freelancer: a short-term collaborator in a company with a specific objective**

Visiting freelancers’ social media accounts—such as Instagram—is an interesting exercise, as one can see the way freelancers portray themselves. For example, hashtags<sup>iv</sup> such as #freelancing (62,777 posts), #freelancelife (261,584 posts), #freelancers (87,582 posts), #freelance (2,295,800 posts), and others like these offer plenty of pictures from thousands of accounts showing how freelancers have a creative job and lead an exciting lifestyle. These snapshots summarize the promises of freelancing: freedom, creativity, and a “chill” lifestyle. In reality, these workers’ daily lives are often far more complex and less glamorous than they appear, yet it seems important for them to craft this image, since independent workers sell their skills and expertise rather than ready-to-use products or services. They are their own brand and product.

However, this “cool and relaxed” image has not always been associated with the word “freelance,” as this word initially referred to a medieval mercenary, a “free-lance,” selling his services to any lord ready to pay. “Free-lance” thus meant that the mercenary was not permanently sworn to any lord’s service as the contract between the lord and the free-lance was

temporary. The Scottish novelist and historian Walter Scott (1771–1832) apparently coined the word in his famous novel *Ivanhoe* (1820). “Freelance” then gained a figurative meaning around the 1860s.<sup>v</sup> This brief historical and etymological overview of the word “freelance” helps us define what freelancing is. As the medieval mercenary (*free-lance*) was hired by a lord to fight in a specific battle or campaign, the contemporary freelancer is usually hired by a company to complete a specific task.

In a restrictive sense, freelancers are short-term collaborators with a specific objective. Consequently, they are not supposed to sign a full-time employment contract, and always remain independent. However, the freelancer’s independence can vary considerably from one project to another. While freelancers do not normally need to work in a company’s offices, some companies employing them will demand that they do work there with the regular employees for the duration of their contract. In that case, freelancers have no choice but to apply the company’s rules to their own work. Companies thus sometimes impose work conditions and hours on freelancers. The working life of freelancers can sometimes resemble that of any employee of the company, as they are temporarily in a hierarchical relationship with the client for whom they are providing a specific service. Typically, companies hire freelancers to join and help a project team in the completion of certain tasks, such as the development of software, or social media communications. However, freelancers do not always work in their clients’ offices, as many of them work remotely. This remoteness can even be appreciated by some clients, as they do not have to provide desks, computers, and other materials to the freelancer. Freelancing is often perceived as a way for companies to make their business more flexible and adaptable to change. Finally, freelancers can have several clients at the same time. In this case, they manage many projects simultaneously, working for different companies. Generally speaking, freelancers have to constantly find the right organization for their work and make sure all the tasks requested from their different clients are completed on time.

### **Solopreneur: an entrepreneur without employees**

In opposition to a freelancer, a solopreneur sells products and services, which can be customized or not. A solopreneur thus has a proper company and can create a brand, logo, website, and social media accounts to promote his or her business. So, what is the difference with other companies? We usually speak of “solopreneur” when the company is run only by the owner, without a cofounder or other employees. The solopreneur often manages everything alone and has to complete very different tasks and master different skills in various fields such as communications, sales, product development, finances, or networking.

Solopreneurship is quite a trend nowadays, as much as freelancing, and one can easily see this by searching Instagram for hashtags such as #solopreneur (556,940 posts), #solopreneurs (40,930 posts), or #solopreneurship (3,670 posts). The iconography is rather the same as for freelancing. The pictures are a mix of people showing off their lifestyle with inspirational quotes encouraging independent workers to work harder to achieve their goals. Among the new management gurus promoting this activity, Timothy Ferriss, with his globally successful book *The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9-5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich*, is a good example of that. In this book, the author explains how he became rich and successful by being a solopreneur and working only a few hours a week. Given the popularity of this book (more than two million copies sold in North America<sup>vi</sup>), it is not difficult to imagine that it has inspired millions of independent workers in the way they have managed their work and life.

### **Differentiating between freelancers and solopreneurs**

Based on this distinction, we can now easily differentiate between independent workers hired by companies (freelancers) and those having their own companies who sell products and services (solopreneurs)... at least, the distinction is clear on paper. Indeed, these two categories of workers are often confused with one another and the definition of each mainly depends on the type of projects people are working on. A freelancer can also be a solopreneur, as much as a solopreneur can sometimes work as a freelancer. This is the case, for example, when freelancers do not only work with companies, but develop their own projects with other freelancers as well. More specifically, the restrictive sense of “freelancing” means that the workers will be “renting out” their expertise to a company to complete a specific task, such as proofreading a document, shooting photos for events, or writing a press release before the launch of a new product. However, freelancers often collaborate with other independent workers to develop their own products or services. This can be a part-time or full-time job. In other words, freelancers can also be solopreneurs.

Beyond the distinction between freelancers and solopreneurs, and as mentioned previously, there are plenty of other labels, such as *sole proprietor*, *mompreneur*, *fempreneur*, *self-entrepreneur*, *digital nomad*, *coworker*, and *maker*, that can refer to work situations akin to either freelancing or solopreneurship. If we look at these labels, we quickly realize that some of them are closer to identity claims (e.g., *mompreneur*), while others refer more to the form work takes or to its location (e.g., *digital nomad*). On the one hand, a sole proprietor can be defined as a company owned by one person. *Mompreneur* and *fempreneur* refer to female entrepreneurs. These notions are a way to empower and encourage women to create their own



businesses in spite of social pressures or home duties. These labels highlight who the worker is. On the other hand, *digital nomad* refers to independent workers who travel the world while running a business. *Coworker* refers to being a member of a coworking space (Gandini, 2015). *Makers* are independent workers who develop products (Anderson, 2012). They may or may not be members of a “makerspace,” i.e., a workspace that provides the resources they need to develop their innovative products.

Ultimately, our main argument is not about the need to have clear-cut categories to label these independent workers, as their meanings can overlap and evolve over time. Rather, the blurriness of these categories should attest to the constant evolution of the working world today.

### **Numerous projects and intensive collaborations**

Whatever the label, one of the main features of the independent workers’ phenomenon is the heterogeneous and intensive collaborations that these people develop constantly. The sustainability of their business is based on their ability to collaborate and generate new opportunities. Of course, some of them can only work on their own, or prefer to do so. Traditional artisans are a good example of people able to work alone without needing to develop new collaborations, but many have to constantly develop new projects or accept new tasks with new companies. This is particularly the case with creative independent workers who have to produce original and unique deliverables for clients, which often requires numerous skills. These workers cannot work alone, and their activity is often divided into several projects, while the actors, rules, purpose, etc. can be very different from one project to another.

As a consequence, the organizational forms that emerge from these projects are not defined by an imposed hierarchical structure. Each project has its own specific organizational form, which can evolve over time in order to follow the possible evolution of the project (aim, budget, deliverables, etc.). As much as it is difficult to define what independent workers are, it is even more difficult to conceptualize in an unequivocal way how they collaborate. In this context, the traditional understanding of organizations makes it almost impossible to see how independent workers temporarily collaborating together contribute in some way or another to an organized phenomenon. For all of these reasons, independent work is particularly tricky to understand from an organization studies point of view.

To date, scholars have mainly focused on formal organization (Chia, 2003; March, 2007). Classic organization studies have been relevant for studying formal organizations such as companies, but the field has not been developed to deal with independent workers involved in

various projects with numerous actors, especially since the activities of these workers might be diversified in terms of purpose, location, etc. As a consequence, this kind of informal or barely formalized organizational form requires a specific theoretical development that would embrace the openness and the constant evolution of such a phenomenon. This is the basis of our proposition, which builds on process ontology. The next section introduces the theoretical development needed to understand the features of the independent workers' phenomenon.

## THE INDEPENDENT WORKERS' ACTIVITIES AS AN OPEN ORGANIZATIONAL PHENOMENON

To embrace the particularity of the organizational form emerging from the collaborations between independent workers, one needs to establish some tenets about what an organization is. We start from the idea that an organization is something more informal than it is usually thought and constantly evolving. More specifically, we suggest considering activities first in our understanding of organization, because rules, statuses, and roles are defined through activities, and are not imposed on actors. It follows that everything that defines and makes the activity possible only exists in activities.<sup>vii</sup> It means that the organizational features are not given but rather always re/produced through activities. The collaboration rules, the roles of the independent workers in their project, their projects' temporality are defined and maintained for the very purpose of the activity. This is an important shift in comparison to the bureaucratic organization, in which rules are set first, forcing organizational actors to act in precise ways, whatever their activity.

These ideas also echo those at the heart of some recent approaches in organization studies, such as process studies (Helin et al., 2014; Langley & Tsoukas, 2010, 2017) and the CCO perspective (Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2011), that have emerged in order to bypass the limits of classic organization theories. These views suggest seeing reality as a movement, or a flow, in which things only exist as hubs of activities and through their relations. Here, organization is not a predefined entity, but rather “*an ongoing aggregative world-making activity*” (Chia, 2003) in which, first, humans, technologies, and rules are constantly (re)defined through activities, and second, the organization is not an element apart from society, but the very movement of the constitution of it. In relation to the notion of organization, and working with the ideas of CCO, Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) have introduced the idea of *organizationality* to transform the notion of what is (or is not) an organization. Their view consists in enlarging the category of “organization,” allowing it to include social collectives that are more open and fluid than traditional organizations. This opening up of the notion of organization toward informal and more social phenomena—such as social movements and artistic performances, among others—is particularly welcomed as the independent workers belongs to this new range of organizational phenomena,<sup>viii</sup> far from the formal ones.

These approaches might be useful to understand the organizational phenomenon related to the independent workers, as it is mainly defined through all of the independent workers' activities. This phenomenon should not be seen as a kind of formal organization, like an association to

which independent workers would choose to belong or not. Based on the theoretical perspectives we have introduced, this phenomenon must be understood as an emergent effect stemming from all the activities of independent workers. It is constantly evolving and its contours are not fixed. It does not occur in a delimited time, space, and structure of governance, but rather emerges through independent workers' activities. However, it does not mean that there is not a sense of continuity in such organizational phenomena, but rather this continuity is always fragile and uncertain. As stated by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1929/1978), the continuity is always in a state of becoming, and it is constantly reproduced and maintained through the independent workers' activities; but it is not imposed by means of a corporate structure of governance.

Although going into the details of the contributions of these perspectives to the reconceptualization of organizations is beyond the scope of this chapter, our brief introduction to these perspectives already provides us with enough theoretical elements to lay the basis for seeing an organizational phenomenon in all independent workers' activities. Based on these theoretical assumptions, we suggest going deeper into our understanding of the organizational phenomenon related to the independent workers by focusing on three core aspects of their activities: the fact that these activities are project-based, temporality-based, and inclusive. We suggest that we can understand the organizational phenomenon related to the independent workers as a collection of – more or less interrelated – temporary collaborations between actors. Moreover, as we will discuss in the last section, these properties of independent workers' activities not only extend to the organizational phenomenon that they constitute, but also reflect broader trends with which more traditional organizations should be concerned.

### **Project-based activities**

As their activities are always temporary and oriented toward a specific goal, independent workers are organized around projects. Projects become the independent workers' unit of activity and are also a way to evaluate their work. Independent workers are a good example of what Jensen, Thuesen, and Geraldi (2016) called the “project society,” i.e., a society 1) organized around professional and personal projects, 2) oriented toward the future and novelty, 3) in which people define themselves and evolve through their projects, 4) with the aim of living multiple personal and professional lives and achieving as much as possible. In such a project-based society, the organizational phenomenon is multiple and constantly evolving as independent workers work on many projects at the same time, with different actors (companies, other independent workers, etc.), while the tasks can be performed in different

spaces (as is the case with coworking or café-working), online (with collaborative apps such as Trello and Slack), or on the move. Each project adds a layer of relations, emergence, and complexity. However, projects are not clearly separate but are interrelated, as the actors involved can be partly the same, the tasks can be complementary, or synergies can be created between projects. This is particularly the case when several independent workers group together to offer more or less the same services to many different clients. As a consequence, each project is not defined based on a spatio-temporal structure, but rather different temporalities and work places emerge and are entangled.

As such, the organization can no longer be represented as a static structure, like the traditional pyramidal or functional model, but has to be understood as evolving, multiple, and open. With independent workers, the organization is a tangle of interrelated projects in which each project can be both new and a continuation of the previous ones. In such an organizational form, independent workers can partly rely on previous experiences, results, teams, etc., but they also have to innovate by creating new tools, as well as defining new roles and new governance, mainly for the sake of the development of new products or services. The common phenomenon stemming from these projects is a flow of new organizational forms emerging, interrelating, and resembling one another. Every project has its own definition and identity, while it can also partly integrate previous projects through its members, history, results, tools, etc.

In this flow of organizational forms resulting from the involvement of actors in various projects, past forms are enacted to appreciate the present shape of the organizational forms, while these present forms are a potential for future forms (Hernes, 2014). Previous projects are kept present by their shaping of the current ones, and the continuity of independent workers' business comes from the potential new projects, missions, and collaborations that stem from their past and present projects. This is how the organization is a continuation of what has come before and is also constantly renewed. In this view, novelty and stability are concomitant—and not separate—stages, as opposed to what is conceptualized in mainstream organization studies (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013).

### **Temporality-based activities**

As the activities are not repeated simply based on past routines but take the form of projects, their time and space have to be (re)defined as well. In any new project—especially when the independent workers have to develop something new, like a product or service—the time to accomplish this project is always difficult to estimate, while the scheduling of tasks and steps has to often be redefined, and the deadline renegotiated as the project progresses. Independent

workers have to define temporalities for their projects, which are both unique to each project and interrelated, when other projects are taken into consideration. A temporality means that the projects are organized based on past, present, and future events related to these projects. These events are constantly redefined, retained, forgotten, and configured in a specific order to make sense of the project and allow the action to take place (Hussenot & Missonier, 2016). A good example of this is the use of the Gantt tool when managing a project from a classic approach, or the Kanban tool when managing a project from an agile approach. By using these tools, actors define and configure events (called “tasks” or “milestones”) in a way that makes the collaboration possible. These events form a continuum that enables members to make sense of what they have done, what they are doing, and what they will do.

Temporality is not only a way to re/define the past, present and future tasks. It really defines what the organization is (Hernes, 2014). As independent workers can work from anywhere and still always be connected—thanks to mobile technologies—localization and space are not what defines the area of collaboration. Rather, temporality defines the organizational phenomenon, as it defines the very potential to make the activities possible. When independent workers have to collaborate while they live or travel in different countries, the rules of collaboration emerge from the combination of various events. The list of tasks done and to be done, the scheduling of meetings, and the deadlines for deliverables participate in defining a structure of governance from which the independent workers are able to make decisions and define responsibilities among the project’s members. According to this view, the organization is primarily defined by and as a temporality, which implies that continuity and ordering of activities do not come primarily from the sharing of a work space (building, office, etc.). Rather, such continuity and ordering come from the actors who define the past, present, and future steps of the projects.

### **Inclusive activities**

By not being defined by a pre-existing governance structure, the organizational form of the independent workers’ activities is open. “Open” means that it does not exist as a circumscribed entity evolving in an environment with a defined membership. Consequently, the organizational phenomenon that emerges from the independent workers’ activities is inclusive, as it does not exclude anything on the basis of an imposed delimitation. To date, organizations have been mainly conceptualized as delimited spaces, with a specific economic purpose and predefined structure of governance. This view positions a wide variety of actors as being “outside” the organization, thus excluding many stakeholders, and not considering societal stakes as part of the organization’s purpose. This separation between organizations (especially companies) and

society has even been enshrined in law in most countries, such as in the French Civil Code (articles 1832 and 1833). Conversely, the independent workers' phenomenon offers another conceptualization of the organization: one that is more inclusive and does not distinguish between what would be inside and outside the organization—because everything is defined through activities, whoever the actors involved and whatever the field or purpose.

Consequently, with the independent workers' phenomenon, the organization cannot be reduced to a space or even to a stable nexus of contracts (which would be mainly made up of employees), as any project can bring together various people from different sectors, professionals or not. This is particularly obvious in the maker movement, where projects can be managed by specialists (designers, artisans, etc.), students, or enthusiasts like hackers or DIYers. Even if the maker movement has an economic purpose (Anderson, 2012), it also includes a political purpose aimed at changing capitalism and society (Lallement, 2015). As such, the maker movement combines economic and political purposes, and unites professionals and enthusiasts, while the makers can have different backgrounds and work on various projects. The organizational phenomenon of the makers is not outside of society, but participates in its transformation and redefinition. For example, the maker movement is playing an important role in the evolution of the education and industry sectors (Dougherty & Conrad, 2016). This openness can be observed among other independent workers as well, when workers explain their decision to shift from a full-time job as employees to a much more precarious status by their eagerness to reshape their work–life balance. Becoming independent allows them to redefine their family life, hobbies, and even sometimes their role in society. A good example of this is digital nomadism, since one of the main reasons people become independent workers is to travel and seek adventure (Nash et al., 2018). By being digital nomads—i.e., independent workers traveling, working, and living in different countries while running a business—people can both embrace a professional career and have a fulfilling personal life. Contrary to traditional views of organizations, open organizational forms like the ones we discuss here limit neither who is a member of the organization nor what should or should not be part of its mission.

## CONCLUSION

In this final section, we bring together the ideas we have put forward in the previous sections, and draw a few preliminary conclusions about the organizational phenomena behind all independent workers' activities. We touch upon two main implications: considering independent workers' activities allows us to rethink organizations, especially traditional companies, and move beyond the organization–society dualism.

First, we note that the rise in independent work is concomitant with transformations in more traditional organizations. Companies and public organizations are becoming more “projectified” (Midler, 1995), as organizations have been steadily adopting project-based organizing over the last two decades. In a similar way to independent workers, to have employees involved in several projects at the same time is not unusual today. As shown by several recent studies,<sup>ix</sup> workers and employees have been asking for more autonomy in their daily work life, and organizations have started (albeit timidly) to grant them more freedom, be it in the form of more possibilities to work remotely, of renewed workspaces designed to be more open and activity-based, or of more participatory management practices. In terms of the spatial transformations of organizations, some companies are even opening their doors to workers who do not belong to the organization. This trend is called “corporate coworking” or “corpworking,” and it consists of welcoming other companies or independent workers into the company's building in order to create opportunities to collaborate and innovate together. All of these practices tend to make stable employees slightly more independent from their organization, compared to their situation a few decades ago.

Moreover, these transformations also indicate that organizational boundaries, which used to be more closed (at least, from a traditional viewpoint), now tend to become blurrier. Not only are regular employees working more and more outside the organization, but independent workers are now entering the organization. In fact, big companies hire more and more independent workers to collaborate on their projects (Corporaal & Lehdonvirta, 2017). These workers can work online or have a desk in the company's building. In the latter case, it is not always easy to distinguish the freelancers from the employees as they can work together on similar projects.

A second implication is that this more open and fluid organizational form allows us to think differently about the strict divisions between organizations and society, or between business and society. As highlighted in the previous sections, traditional understandings of organizations have led to conceptualize the existence of a separation between organizations and society. Yet, when one moves from this perspective to a more processual one, as suggested in these pages,



such separations appear artificial. Indeed, no organization—be it a traditional company or an open movement—is separate from the rest of society. Organizations are not seen as by-products of society, but as the very definition of it (Chia, 1999). As noted above, the independent workers’ phenomenon is not only an economic challenge, it is also a social one, as it changes not only the way we work, but the way we live, the way we differentiate between life and work, etc. Modifying how we think about organizations is stimulating in theoretical terms, but is also relevant, given the social and environmental challenges we face nowadays.

What we see in these two broad implications is in fact larger trends that are at the heart of current organizational transformations, and are challenging widespread management practices: the “projectification” of work, the rise of mobility and autonomy, and the growing importance of reconnecting the organization to society. The independent workers’ phenomenon is therefore a good opportunity for both scholars and practitioners to question implicit hypotheses about work, management, and organization, especially in a context in which independent work is on the rise.

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<sup>i</sup> According to a survey commissioned by Upwork and Freelance Union in 2017 (<https://www.upwork.com/i/freelancing-in-america/2017/>). This higher rate of independent workers in the United States may also be explained by the variety of workers included under this label.

<sup>ii</sup> According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/oecd-employment-outlook\\_19991266](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/oecd-employment-outlook_19991266)). These percentages should only be seen as indications of the increase in independent work, as each country or economic zone defines “independent workers” in different terms.

<sup>iii</sup> This categorization should be seen as an analytical way to make the phenomenon understandable.

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- <sup>iv</sup> Instagram hashtags consulted on February 20, 2018.
- <sup>v</sup> Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *The surprising history of freelance*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/freelance-origin-meaning>.
- <sup>vi</sup> According to Publishers Marketplace: <https://www.publishersmarketplace.com/members/swhanselma/>
- <sup>vii</sup> This tenet is anchored in process philosophy (Rescher, 1996, 2002) and, even more precisely, in the philosophy of Leibniz (1840/2011).
- <sup>viii</sup> By “new,” we mean that the interest for these phenomena are relatively recent in organization studies (Hussenot, DeVaujany, & Chanlat, 2016).
- <sup>ix</sup> Many surveys made by consulting companies have led to the same conclusion about the evolution of work practices in companies. For example, see the 2018 McKinsey study *Skill shift: Automation and the future of the workforce* (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-organizations-and-work/skill-shift-automation-and-the-future-of-the-workforce>) or the 2018 Fuze study *Workforce futures* (<https://www.fuze.com/workforce-futures>).