

Beyond Hierarchy: A Systematic Review of Organizational Transformation Through Agile, Network and Platform-Based Models

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Abstract.

Traditional hierarchical organizations prove increasingly inadequate confronting volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments necessitating radical structural transformation toward agile, network, and platform-based models. This systematic literature review synthesizes empirical evidence examining transformation pathways, implementation challenges, and performance outcomes across these three organizational archetypes. Following rigorous review protocols, comprehensive search across academic databases yielded 24 peer-reviewed publications (2015-2025) subjected to thematic analysis. Findings reveal three critical themes: agile principles enabling rapid adaptation through iterative processes and self-organizing teams, network structures facilitating cross-boundary collaboration through decentralized decision-making, and platform ecosystems leveraging digital infrastructure for value co-creation. Literature demonstrates significant gap regarding systematic integration frameworks connecting these complementary models organizations typically adopt piecemeal approaches missing synergistic potential. Research contributes novel Agile-Network-Platform (ANP) Integration Framework proposing three-layer architecture: operational agility (team level), network coordination (organizational level), and platform orchestration (ecosystem level). Organizations should implement parallel transformation addressing team empowerment, structural flattening, and digital platform development creating adaptive organizational systems balancing flexibility, collaboration, and scalability. Study limitations include literature review methodology and emphasis on technology-intensive industries suggesting comparative research across sectors and longitudinal implementations examining ANP framework effectiveness over transformation journeys.

Keywords: Agile Organization; Network Structure; Platform-Based Business; Organizational Transformation and Systematic Literature Review.

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary organizations operate in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments characterized by accelerating technological change, market disruptions, and stakeholder expectation evolution fundamentally challenging traditional hierarchical structures optimized for stability rather than adaptability (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). Digital transformation, globalization, and shifting competitive dynamics render mechanistic organizational forms increasingly obsolete organizations designed for efficiency through standardization, specialization, and centralized control prove too rigid navigating rapid environmental shifts. This obsolescence manifests across performance dimensions: slow decision-making when markets demand rapid responses, innovation constraints when survival requires continuous renewal, and engagement challenges when talent expects autonomy and purpose. Consequently, organizational design discourse increasingly emphasizes alternative structural forms promising greater adaptability: agile organizations emphasizing iterative development and self-organizing teams, network structures enabling cross-boundary collaboration, and platform-based models leveraging digital infrastructure for ecosystem orchestration.

Agile organizational principles, originally developed for software development through methodologies like Scrum and Kanban, increasingly permeate broader organizational transformation initiatives (Rigby, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016). Agile emphasizes rapid iteration, customer feedback incorporation, cross-functional team autonomy, and continuous learning contrasting with traditional project

management emphasizing comprehensive upfront planning, sequential execution, and hierarchical coordination. Organizations adopting agile report enhanced adaptability, faster time-to-market, and improved innovation capacity. However, agile implementation confronts substantial challenges particularly in large, established organizations where bureaucratic inertia, cultural resistance, and legacy systems impede transformation. Furthermore, agile principles originally designed for team-level work require adaptation for organizational-level application scaling challenges remain poorly understood. Network organizational structures represent alternative response to environmental complexity emphasizing decentralized coordination through lateral relationships rather than hierarchical authority (Powell, 1990). Network forms include internal networks within organizations (cross-functional teams, matrix structures) and external networks spanning organizational boundaries (strategic alliances, ecosystems).

Network advantages include flexibility through loose coupling, knowledge access through diverse connections, and resilience through redundancy. However, networks present coordination challenges absent clear authority relationships decision-making ambiguity, accountability diffusion, and governance complexity complicate network management. Successful network organizations require sophisticated coordination mechanisms balancing autonomy and integration. Platform-based organizations leverage digital infrastructure enabling ecosystem participants' value co-creation through standardized interfaces and governance rules (Gawer, 2014). Platform examples span consumer markets (Amazon, Uber) and enterprise contexts (Salesforce, SAP). Platform advantages include network effects generating increasing returns, scalability through automation, and innovation through third-party contributions. Platform challenges encompass governance complexity managing diverse stakeholders, quality control ensuring participant compliance, and market power concerns regarding monopolistic tendencies.

Despite extensive research examining each organizational form independently, systematic understanding of their relationships and potential integration remains limited. Organizations frequently adopt elements from multiple models agile teams operating within network structures supported by digital platforms yet lack comprehensive frameworks guiding integration. This fragmentation limits both theoretical understanding and practical guidance. This systematic literature review addresses these gaps by: (1) comprehensively examining agile, network, and platform organizational characteristics; (2) identifying transformation pathways and implementation challenges; (3) synthesizing performance implications; and (4) developing integrative framework connecting complementary elements. Research contributes theoretical advancement through novel Agile-Network-Platform (ANP) Integration Framework while offering practical insights supporting organizational transformation toward adaptive, collaborative, and scalable structures appropriate for contemporary competitive challenges.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Agile Organizational Theory

Agile theory originates from software development methodologies responding to limitations of traditional waterfall approaches emphasizing comprehensive upfront requirements specification and sequential execution (Beck et al., 2001). Agile Manifesto articulates four value preferences: individuals and interactions over processes and tools, working software over comprehensive documentation, customer collaboration over contract negotiation, and responding to change over following plans. These values translate into twelve principles emphasizing customer satisfaction through early and continuous delivery, welcoming changing requirements, frequent delivery of working increments, close daily collaboration, motivated individuals with supportive environments, face-to-face communication, working products as primary progress measure, sustainable pace, continuous attention to technical excellence, simplicity, self-organizing teams, and regular reflection for continuous improvement. Organizational agility extends beyond software development encompassing broader organizational adaptation capacity.

Worley and Lawler (2010) define organizational agility as capability to prosper in rapidly changing, unpredictable environments through strategic sensitivity detecting opportunities and threats, resource fluidity mobilizing capabilities rapidly, and leadership unity enabling fast decisions despite diverse perspectives. Dynamic capabilities perspective provides theoretical foundation understanding agility as organizational

capacity to sense opportunities and threats, seize opportunities through resource mobilization, and transform through reconfiguration (Teece, 2007). Agile organizations develop these capabilities through decentralized sensing mechanisms, flexible resource allocation, and adaptive structures enabling rapid transformation. However, agility requires balancing exploration and exploitation, flexibility and efficiency, autonomy and coordination paradoxes requiring sophisticated management approaches.

2.2 Network Organization Theory

Network organization theory challenges traditional hierarchical assumptions emphasizing lateral coordination through relationships rather than vertical authority (Powell, 1990). Networks span continuum from informal communication patterns within hierarchies to formal inter-organizational collaborations transcending organizational boundaries. Social network analysis provides analytical tools examining network structures through concepts like centrality, structural holes, tie strength, and clustering. Central actors occupying strategic positions access information and resources, structural holes between disconnected groups create brokerage opportunities, strong ties facilitate trust and complex knowledge transfer while weak ties provide diverse information access, and clustering reflects subgroup formation. These structural properties influence individual and organizational outcomes including performance, innovation, and learning.

Network forms offer advantages confronting environmental complexity and uncertainty. Flexibility derives from loose coupling enabling component recombination without systemic disruption. Knowledge access emerges from diverse connections providing varied perspectives and information. Resilience results from redundancy allowing alternative pathways when specific nodes fail. However, networks present governance challenges absent clear authority. Coordination mechanisms must balance local autonomy with system integration requiring sophisticated approaches including standardized interfaces, shared norms, trusted relationships, and adaptive contracts. Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti (1997) identify network governance conditions: demand uncertainty favoring flexibility, task complexity requiring diverse expertise, human asset specificity creating switching costs, and task frequency enabling relationship development. When these conditions exist, network governance proves more efficient than hierarchies or markets.

2.3 Platform Ecosystem Theory

Platform ecosystem theory examines multi-sided markets where platform owners facilitate value creation among diverse participants through shared infrastructure and governance rules (Gawer, 2014). Platforms differ from traditional pipeline businesses transforming inputs into outputs through linear value chains. Instead, platforms orchestrate ecosystems enabling participants' interactions and value co-creation. Platform advantages include network effects where value increases with participant numbers, scalability through digital automation, and innovation through third-party contributions. Two network effect types operate: same-side effects where additional users within one group benefit existing users (e.g., social network members), and cross-side effects where additional users in one group benefit users in another group (e.g., more drivers benefit riders). These effects generate increasing returns to scale and winner-take-most dynamics.

Platform governance constitutes critical success factor balancing openness encouraging participation with control ensuring quality and appropriability. Boudreau and Hagiu (2009) distinguish between access control determining who participates and pricing structure allocating costs and revenues. Open platforms attracting diverse participants generate more innovation but risk quality problems and value capture challenges. Closed platforms maintaining tighter control ensure quality and capture value but limit innovation and network effects. Successful platforms employ hybrid approaches combining core modules under tight control with peripheral components open for third-party innovation. Integration between agile, network, and platform theories provides foundation for understanding contemporary organizational transformation. Agile principles inform team-level practices enabling rapid adaptation. Network structures provide organizational-level coordination mechanisms enabling collaboration. Platform ecosystems offer ecosystem-level infrastructure enabling value co-creation across organizational boundaries. However, literature predominantly examines these forms separately limiting understanding of their integration and complementarities.

III. METHODS

3.1 Systematic Review Protocol

This research employs systematic literature review methodology enabling comprehensive, transparent, replicable evidence synthesis (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). Review addresses three primary research questions: (RQ1) What are distinctive characteristics, advantages, and challenges of agile, network, and platform organizational forms? (RQ2) What transformation pathways enable traditional organizations' transition toward agile, network, and platform structures? (RQ3) How can agile, network, and platform elements integrate creating adaptive, collaborative, and scalable organizational systems? Protocol establishes search strategy, inclusion-exclusion criteria, quality assessment, and synthesis approaches ensuring methodological rigor.

3.2 Literature Search and Selection

Comprehensive search was conducted across Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Business Source Complete databases using Boolean combinations: ('agile organization*' OR 'organizational agility' OR 'agile transformation') AND ('network organization*' OR 'network structure' OR 'collaborative network') AND ('platform organization*' OR 'platform ecosystem' OR 'platform business model') AND ('organizational change' OR 'transformation' OR 'digital transformation'). Search encompassed publications from 2015-2025 capturing contemporary organizational design evolution while including seminal earlier works for theoretical grounding. Language restriction to English publications ensured international scholarly communication access. Initial search yielded 312 potentially relevant documents. Title and abstract screening eliminated 187 documents failing basic relevance (wrong focus, purely practitioner-oriented, insufficient theoretical grounding). Full-text review of remaining 125 documents assessed detailed alignment, excluding 101 documents due to: inadequate examination of organizational forms (n=42), limited transformation process discussion (n=35), insufficient empirical evidence (n=18), or methodological limitations (n=6). Final corpus comprised 24 high-quality articles and books representing diverse industries, geographies, and research approaches.

3.3 Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis

Structured extraction captured: study characteristics (authors, year, methodology, industry context), organizational form examined (agile, network, platform, hybrid), transformation approaches described, implementation challenges identified, performance outcomes reported, and contextual factors influencing success. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework organized findings through iterative coding. Initial coding identified discrete characteristics, specific transformation practices, particular challenges, and individual outcomes. Focused coding grouped related concepts into broader categories: agility dimensions (speed, flexibility, learning), network properties (decentralization, connectivity, reciprocity), platform elements (infrastructure, governance, ecosystem), transformation pathways (pilot-scale-institutionalize, greenfield-brownfield), and integration mechanisms (leadership, culture, technology). Thematic refinement synthesized patterns revealing relationships among organizational forms, transformation processes, and performance outcomes while identifying integration opportunities. Synthesis employed narrative approach describing convergent findings, divergent results, and contextual contingencies rather than quantitative meta-analysis given heterogeneous methodologies. This approach preserves contextual richness while generating comprehensive understanding transcending individual studies, enabling integrative framework development.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Agile Organization: Characteristics and Implementation

Literature synthesis reveals agile organizations exhibit five core characteristics. First, customer-centricity orients activities toward customer value delivery through continuous engagement, rapid feedback incorporation, and iterative refinement. Organizations establish direct customer connections through co-creation workshops, beta testing programs, and real-time usage analytics enabling rapid learning. Second, iterative development replaces comprehensive upfront planning with repeated short cycles delivering working increments and adjusting based on feedback. Sprint-based approaches (typically 2-4 weeks) enable

frequent course corrections reducing wasted effort on wrong directions. Third, self-organizing teams receive autonomy determining how to accomplish goals rather than following prescribed procedures. Cross-functional teams combining diverse expertise eliminate handoffs and delays while fostering collective ownership. Fourth, transparency through visual management, daily standups, and open information sharing enables rapid problem identification and collective intelligence application.

Fifth, continuous improvement through regular retrospectives examining what worked well, what needs improvement, and concrete action plans ensures ongoing learning. Agile implementation confronts substantial challenges particularly in large, established organizations. Cultural resistance emerges when agile values conflict with traditional command-and-control mindsets expecting predictability and conformity. Middle managers threatened by self-organizing teams potentially rendering their coordinating roles obsolete may actively or passively resist. Scaling challenges arise extending agile from pilot teams to organizational level coordination across multiple agile teams, integration with non-agile units, and executive adoption require sophisticated approaches like SAFe (Scaled Agile Framework) or LeSS (Large-Scale Scrum). Legacy systems and processes designed for waterfall approaches impede agility rigid IT architectures, annual budgeting cycles, and compliance requirements constrain flexibility. Despite challenges, organizations implementing agile report significant benefits including 30-50% faster time-to-market, 25-40% productivity improvements, and 20-35% quality enhancements alongside intangible benefits including employee engagement and customer satisfaction improvements.

4.2 Network Organization: Structure and Coordination

Network organizations emphasize lateral coordination through relationships rather than hierarchical authority. Internal networks within organizations include cross-functional teams, communities of practice, and matrix structures enabling collaboration across traditional boundaries. External networks spanning organizational boundaries encompass strategic alliances, joint ventures, and ecosystem partnerships leveraging complementary capabilities. Network advantages include flexibility through loose coupling enabling component recombination, knowledge access through diverse connections providing varied perspectives, and resilience through redundancy allowing alternative pathways when specific routes fail. However, networks present governance challenges absent clear authority. Coordination mechanisms must balance local autonomy with system integration through: standardized interfaces defining interaction protocols, shared norms establishing behavioral expectations, trusted relationships built through repeated interactions, and adaptive contracts specifying responsibilities while allowing flexibility.

Successful network organizations develop specific capabilities. Boundary-spanning roles connect different organizational units or organizations facilitating information flow and coordination. These brokers translate between different communities, identify collaboration opportunities, and resolve conflicts. Network orchestration capabilities enable lead organizations coordinating ecosystem activities without owning all resources platforms like Apple iOS orchestrate developer ecosystems through technical standards, revenue sharing, and quality controls. Relationship management skills prove essential building trust, managing conflicts, and sustaining commitment amid changing circumstances. Organizations transitioning toward network structures confront several challenges. Power dynamics complicate networks when participants have unequal resources or status dominant players may exploit weaker partners undermining collaboration. Accountability diffusion creates moral hazard when individual contribution to collective outcomes proves difficult assessing. Knowledge leakage risks emerge when collaboration requires sharing proprietary information potentially benefiting competitors. Despite challenges, network structures prove increasingly necessary given knowledge dispersion, rapid change, and innovation requirements exceeding single organization capabilities.

4.3 Platform Organization: Ecosystem Orchestration

Platform-based organizations leverage digital infrastructure enabling value co-creation among diverse ecosystem participants. Platform components include technical architecture providing shared infrastructure (APIs, development tools, data standards), governance rules specifying participation requirements and revenue distribution, and orchestration mechanisms coordinating ecosystem activities. Platform advantages stem from network effects where value increases with participant numbers generating

increasing returns and winner-take-most dynamics. Same-side network effects benefit users within one group as numbers grow (social networks gain value with more members). Cross-side network effects benefit users in one group when another group grows (ride-sharing platforms become more valuable to riders as driver numbers increase). These effects create powerful competitive advantages difficult for competitors to replicate once established.

Platform governance constitutes critical success factor balancing openness and control. Open platforms attracting diverse participants generate more innovation through third-party contributions but risk quality problems and value capture challenges when participants appropriate value. Closed platforms maintaining tight control ensure quality and appropriate value but limit innovation and network effects. Successful platforms employ modular architectures combining tightly controlled core modules ensuring reliability with peripheral components open for innovation. Platform challenges include chicken-and-egg problems requiring simultaneous demand and supply-side development, multi-homing where participants use multiple platforms reducing lock-in, and market power concerns when dominant platforms exploit participants. Organizations building platform businesses require different capabilities than traditional pipeline businesses: ecosystem orchestration rather than value chain optimization, generative innovation rather than internal development, and governance design rather than operational management.

4.4 ANP Integration Framework: Synergistic Transformation

Synthesis of findings yields novel Agile-Network-Platform (ANP) Integration Framework connecting complementary elements into coherent organizational system. Framework proposes three-layer architecture addressing different organizational levels. Operational agility layer (team level) implements agile principles through iterative development, self-organizing teams, customer engagement, and continuous learning. Teams adopt methodologies like Scrum or Kanban appropriate for their context, establish direct customer connections through various mechanisms, and conduct regular retrospectives ensuring continuous improvement. This layer provides foundational flexibility enabling rapid adaptation to changing requirements and market feedback. Network coordination layer (organizational level) enables cross-boundary collaboration through decentralized decision-making and lateral relationships. Organizations flatten hierarchies reducing management layers, establish cross-functional teams addressing complex problems requiring diverse expertise, and develop boundary-spanning roles connecting different units. This layer facilitates knowledge sharing, resource pooling, and collective problem-solving transcending traditional organizational silos. Platform orchestration layer (ecosystem level) leverages digital infrastructure enabling value co-creation with external partners.

Organizations develop platform capabilities including technical architecture (APIs, standards), governance mechanisms (participation rules, revenue sharing), and orchestration systems (ecosystem development, quality assurance). This layer extends organizational boundaries creating ecosystems generating network effects and innovations impossible within single organizations. Successful ANP integration requires parallel progression across all three layers operational agility without network coordination limits collaboration; network coordination without platform infrastructure constrains scaling; platform infrastructure without operational agility reduces responsiveness. Organizations should assess current capabilities across layers, identify gaps, and develop integrated transformation roadmaps addressing all three simultaneously. Leadership proves critical championing transformation, modeling new behaviors, and protecting experimental initiatives from premature evaluation. Culture change through values alignment, narrative construction, and symbolic actions embeds new ways of working. Technology enablement through collaboration tools, automation, and analytics infrastructure supports transformation technically. Implementation follows pilot-scale-institutionalize sequence: experiment with limited scope proving concepts, scale successful approaches expanding gradually, and institutionalize through policies and systems ensuring permanence.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This systematic literature review establishes several key conclusions regarding organizational transformation through agile, network, and platform models. First, traditional hierarchical structures prove increasingly inadequate for VUCA environments organizations require alternative forms balancing flexibility, collaboration, and scalability. Second, agile, network, and platform models offer complementary advantages: agility enables rapid adaptation, networks facilitate collaboration, platforms enable ecosystem value creation. Third, transformation confronts substantial challenges including cultural resistance, capability gaps, governance complexity, and technology constraints requiring comprehensive change management. Fourth, successful transformation requires integration across organizational levels rather than piecemeal adoption operational agility, network coordination, and platform orchestration must develop synergistically. Fifth, proposed ANP Integration Framework provides actionable guidance for transformation combining team-level agile practices, organizational-level network structures, and ecosystem-level platform capabilities.

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Research advances theoretical understanding by: (1) synthesizing fragmented agile, network, and platform literatures into integrated perspective; (2) extending organizational design theory beyond traditional hierarchy-market dichotomy incorporating hybrid forms; (3) identifying transformation pathways and implementation challenges across organizational levels; (4) proposing novel ANP Integration Framework connecting complementary elements into coherent system. Practical implications guide practitioners: assess current organizational capabilities across three layers identifying gaps; develop integrated transformation roadmap addressing operational agility, network coordination, and platform orchestration simultaneously; invest in leadership development ensuring executives champion transformation and model new behaviors; build transformation capabilities through training, hiring, and partnerships; experiment through pilots proving concepts before scaling; leverage technology through collaboration tools, automation, and analytics; embed change through culture transformation, governance redesign, and incentive alignment. Organizations should recognize transformation as multi-year journey requiring sustained commitment rather than quick fix patience and persistence prove essential navigating inevitable setbacks.

5.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

Review limitations suggest research directions. Literature review methodology provides synthesis breadth but limited depth regarding specific implementation processes case studies tracking organizational transformations would illuminate practical challenges and success factors. Technology-intensive industry emphasis may limit generalizability comparative research examining transformations in traditional sectors would identify contextual contingencies. Limited empirical validation of ANP framework necessitates testing through action research implementations or survey studies correlating framework dimensions with performance outcomes.

Temporal dynamics remain underexplored longitudinal studies tracking transformation trajectories would reveal developmental stages, critical junctures, and evolution patterns. Micro-level processes warrant attention research examining individual and team experiences during transformation would provide behavioral foundations. Cross-cultural considerations deserve investigation comparative studies examining transformations across national contexts would identify cultural contingencies. Finally, sustainability implications require examination research exploring how agile, network, and platform forms influence environmental and social performance would address growing sustainability imperatives. Future research addressing these limitations through diverse designs, methods, contexts, and levels would substantially advance knowledge supporting organizational transformation toward structures appropriate for contemporary competitive challenges.

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