

## ORGANIZATION VIRTUAL OR NETWORKED?

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### Abstract

**Purpose**—to present distinction between “virtual organization” and “networked organization”; giving their definitions.

**Design/methodology/approach**—review of previous researches, systemic analyses of their findings and synthesis of distinctive characteristics of “virtual organization” and “networked organization.”

**Findings**—the main result of the research is key diverse features separating “virtual organization” and “networked organization.” Definitions of “virtual organization” and “networked organization” are presented.

**Originality/Value**—distinction between “virtual organization” and “networked organization” creates possibilities to use all advantages of those types of organizations and gives foundation for deeper researches in this field.

**Keywords:** virtual organization, networked organization, information communication technologies.

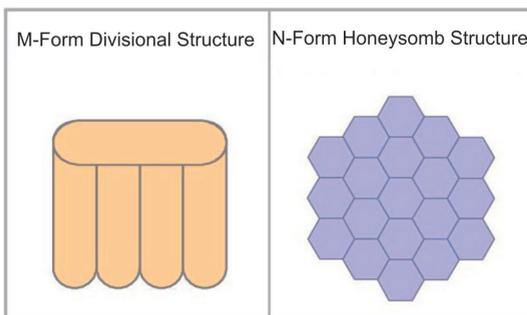
**Research type:** general review.

## 1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies (hereinafter—ICT) have already found their way to personal and professional spaces of human activities. ICT have such an impact on daily activities as it connects people and help exchange information fast and on time. Those technologies create networks in which people interact. As distant interaction means encompass daily life all over the world, necessity to better understand ICT advantages and disadvantages to interaction processes in executing economical activities grows in global scale. To be competitive and “up to date” organizations look for innovative solutions. Management body in an organization faces an obscure task “How to manage distant communication in an organization that would be immediate in social aspect yet fulfilling in an individual level?” Already in the year 1986, Daft and Lengel characterized collaboration technologies in terms of three dimensions:

- Richness: the ability to convey verbal and nonverbal cues;
- Interactivity: the extent to which rapid feedback is possible;
- Social presence: the degree to which collaborating individuals feel close to each other.

Innovative organizations seek for unique ways to execute its’ functions and in order to increase profit. Innovations in organization may be adapted as new products or new ways of creating/supplying the product. Koellinger (2008) analyzing internet and non-internet based innovations found out that product innovations are directly linked to greater profitability contrarily to process innovations. Yet in indirect way, new method adaption in management creates more stable environment for organizational functions. As Sviokla et al (2004) executing contemporary management analyses discovered, better communication can improve coordination, deepen control, decrease risk, and even substitute information for physical assets. Another aspect of organizational management relevant for innovations is the structure of the organization. Traditional hierarchical organizations and bureaucracies are now viewed as outdated and inefficient forms of organization (Vetschera, 1997). To the same conclusion Sviokla et al (2004) presented comparison of a traditional model (M-Form Divisional Structure), where numerous loosely linked, but separate, groups co-exist, and an emerging innovative model



Source: (Sviokla et al, 2004)

(N-Form Honeycomb Structure) where organizational groups are tightly linked, as in a honeycomb (see Figure 1). Network is the most important substance out of which organizations are made (Castels, 2010).

*Figure 1.* Organizational structure of a traditional and an emerging innovative model

Modern, innovative organizations seek for new ways not only in ICT modernization, product/ process update or structural reorganization, but in fundamental pillars of the organization too: administration management, co-working forms or even distribution of leadership. In order to induce effectiveness of a performance of an organization, innovating must be presented according to goals intended. To effectively innovate according to the goals set, it is important to successfully adapt the advantages of the selected type of an innovative organizational model. As follows, successful adaption is not liable if boundaries between types are not clear. This paper focuses on setting distinction between “Virtual organization” (hereinafter—VO) and “Networked organization” (hereinafter—NO) characteristics.

## 2. Virtual or Networked?

Although some authors as Vetschera (1997) refer to “VO” and “NO” as synonyms to the same type of organization, NO, sometimes called collaborative NO (Tramontin Jr., 2010; Camarinha-Matos et al, 2009), networked company (Bednar and Godkin, 2009), networked firm (Child, 1997), networked corporation (Smirch and Morgan, 1982), networked enterprises (Castells, 1996) and VO, sometimes called virtual enterprise (Martins et al, 2004), virtual firm (Mikoláš and Wozniaková, 2009), are two of separate possible innovative solutions to the task arising to contemporary management bodies. In order to define what is a NO and what is a VO, it is necessary to single out their unique characteristics that differs those types from each other.

According to Massey and Ramesh (2003) virtual collaboration is based on e-mail, synchronous messaging systems, groupware (e.g., Lotus Notes), and real-time conferencing (e.g., NetMeeting), thus hold the promise of flexibility and responsiveness, as well as lower costs and improved resource utilization that can impact the organization’s bottom line. Networking is enabled by LANs, WANs; the Internet, intranets, and extranets; and virtual private network connections (Massey and Ramesh, 2003). As we see, virtual collaboration is defined by technologies emphasizing both socially inclusive and simply connecting technologies, while networking focuses on technologies of connectivity. While Massey and Ramesh (2003) refer to *Network* as web of connected hardware, Eggers and Goldsmith (2003) perceive *Network* as web of social and economical relationships without defining them to one obtained eye-to-eye or by technological means. Networking can change social relations: hierarchy and authority are shifted in favour of more decentralized, horizontal forms of organization (Sproull and Kiesler, 1993). Connectivity is not the only characterizing aspect for virtual and NO and as there are many aspects describing those types of organizations, individual authors emphasize divers as essential. In order to this, various definitions for describing a VO and a NO are found in scientific literature.

### 3. Virtual organization

The conception “Virtual” itself according to contemporary English language dictionary means something very nearly a particular thing. “Virtual” is almost something. Yet there are VOs which execute very real functions resulting in products and profit. Scholastic language has deviated from common language as organizations evolve making scholars to follow this evolution and try to define virtuality not in the frame of the philology but in the frame of management. As a consequence, wide range of definitions arises hardly seeking for a scholars’ consensus. VO in literature is defined as:

- a cooperation of enterprises. (Arnold and Hartling, 1996);
- a network of firms held together by the product of the day (Borgatti, 1996);
- a group of people who interact through interdependent tasks guided by common purpose that works across space, time, and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of communication technologies. (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997);
- a geographically distributed organization whose members are bound by a long-term common interest or goal and who communicate and coordinate their work through information technology. (Ahuja and Carley, 1998);
- a task, project or permanent organization which is decentralized and independent of any spatial connection. (Fisher and Fisher, 1998; Hoefling, 2001);
- a network or loose coalition of manufacturing and administrative services using integrated computer and communications technologies to link differing groups of personnel for a specific business purpose, disassembling when the purpose has been met. (Wilson, 1999);
- a short time or permanent group of geographically dispersed individuals, groups, organizational units that do not have to belong to one firm or organization or it can be one organization that depend upon electronic interconnection. (Papazogulu et al, 2000);
- an aggregation of autonomous agents communicating and collaborating to achieve common goals. (Gallivan, 2001);
- a consolidation of composed from actually existing organizations and individuals. (Okkonen, 2002);
- a consolidation of several business units in which human and work processes interact while seeking common results and mutual benefit. Butkus (2003);
- a unit, which uses information technology networks to link people, assets and ideas to create and distribute products and services without the constraint of traditional organizational boundaries or physical locations. (Laudon and Laudon, 2004);
- a network of people or organizations which are independent, realizing a common project or common economic activity, communicate and hold information processes through information technologies and do not depend on time and space. (Vernous and Valcin, 2006);

- a flexible, dynamic structure of geographically dispersed entities, where communication is realized mostly or exclusively by electronic means, where tasks are divided according to member’s specialization or competence. (Dumitrescu, 2009);
- a unit, functioning as a self-sufficient organizational unity and using a joint information system created with networking and information technologies. (Rutkus, 2011).

As VO is mostly described as a unity of partners it diverts perceiving organizational communication direction in VO as external to a member of the unity. Duoba and Savaneviciene (2010) in their research state, that an organization without ICT based communication between partners may only be networked, not virtual. Some authors, as Forslund et al (1998) and Camarinha-Matos et al (2009) do not present a concrete definition for VO, yet they emphasizes that companies, which are service providers, are potential members of VOs. Mowshowitz (2002), Msanila and Afsarmanesh (2008) presented the essence of VO: management of goal-oriented activity in a way that is independent of the means for its realization. As geographical distribution is being mentioned by most authors, there are those who even compare conception “Virtual” as equal to “Geographically dispersed” (Durate and Snyder, 1999; Lipnack and Stamps, 2000; Muethel and Hoegl, 2010). Duoba and Duobiene (2011) stated that characteristics defining VO are: geographic distribution, networking, identity, orientation to essential competencies, trust, orientation to consumer and ICT usage. The review of direct and indirect definitions of VOs allows singling out main characteristics of VOs presenting a possible consensus on the matter (see table 1). Those characteristics have been recognized, not as aspects of VOs, but as possibilities for business already in 1993 as Sproull and Kiesler stated that the NO differs from the conventional workplace with respect to both time and space and that employees whose organization is connected to the Internet or to a commercial network can belong to electronic groups whose members come from many different organizations.

Table 1. Characteristics of Virtual organization

Virtual organization	Characteristics
	Consolidation of organizations, groups or individuals (external communication)
	Self-sufficient unity
	Geographically distributed
	Communicate through ICT
	No dependence on time or space
	Common goal
	Short time or permanent unit

## 4. Networked Organization

A concept “Networked” is not available in contemporary English language dictionary. Only the basic verb form “Network” is given, which is described in two aspects: computer connection and communication with other people. Network is as much part of computer connections as people interaction. Computer networking does not replace other forms of human communication; it increases range of human connectedness and the number of ways in which it is able to make contact with others (Harasim, 1993). Parker (2007) suggested that networks require: actors connected by ties and social relations, decentralized decision-making involving shared power (absence of single-actor control and domination), information transfer and reflexivity (reflection on practice and world views), actors participate out of recognition that they affect and are affected by the behavior of other actors. As the concept “Networked” has no single meaning definition, the “NO” is even farther along to being defined in consensus. In literature NO is described as:

- an organization, or organizational field, all of whose members are connected to a single electronic network through which they communicate (sometimes on non-work affairs) and by means of which they access or provide information. (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991);
- communication rich environments, with information flows blurring traditional intra-company boundaries. (Rockart and Short, 1991);
- communication structures based on electronic networks where information flows flexibly and spans group and organizational boundaries. (Miles and Snow 1992);
- a computer-mediated communication system expanded by acquisition and then reformed in integrated conjunction with its neighbors in other countries. (Lea, 1995);
- a collection of autonomous firms or units that behave as a single larger entity, using social mechanisms for coordination and control. (Borgatti, 1996);
- a distributed or loose coalition of manufacturing and administrative services using business purpose, then disassembling when the purpose has been met. (Wilson, 1997);
- an entity defined by elements of structure, process, and purpose. Structurally, a network organization combines co-specialized, possibly intangible, assets under shared control. Joint ownership is essential but it must also produce an integration of assets, communication, and command in an efficient and flexible manner. Procedurally, a network organization constrains participating agents' actions via their roles and positions within the organization while allowing agents' influence to emerge or fade with the development or dissolution of ties to others. (van Alstyne, 1997);
- a collection of organizations along with the linkages that tie them to each other, often organized around a focal organization. There are numerous variations on the network organizational form including joint partnerships, strategic alliances, cartels, R&D consortia, and a host of others. (Monge and Contractor, 1997);

- an organization that uses information and communication technologies to extend its boundaries and physical location. (Smirnov et al., 2004);
- an organizational structure that relies on multiparty co-operative relationships between people across structural, temporal and geographic boundaries based on the existence of dense networks of flexible communications. (Kimble, 2008);
- an independent company in distributed network. (Smirnov et al., 2008);
- a management structure in which organizational units are tightly clustered, as in a honeycomb, where there is a melded network of relationships and functions. (Sviokla, 2011).

Other authors just emphasize particular aspects of the NO without giving a definition, like Rockart and Short (1991), Wilson (1995), Norvaisas (2003), etc. Rockart and Short (1991) characterize a NO by shared properties: goals; expertise; work; decision making; prioritization of timing and issues; responsibility, accountability and trust; recognition and reward. Wilson (1995) he does not describe the NO, but brings out that in the NO, the behavior of empowered individuals is regulated not through overt repression but through a set of standards and values associated with normality, which are deployed by a network of ostensibly beneficial and scientific forms of knowledge. Norvaisas (2003) qualified NO not as an ICT based communication structure, but as a network based communication structure where ICT is just a tool. Most systemic researches on NOs were found executed by John Sviokla. He presented a definition mentioned above and along with colleagues (Sviokla et al, 2004) presented principles of NOs (information is shared and available throughout the firm; leadership and decision-making changes depending on the situation for optimal organization effectiveness; skills are constantly evaluated and upgraded; emphasis is on establishing trust, relationships, and networks; information “tentacles” reach out to customers and into suppliers) and even suggested their point of view on characteristics of NOs (real-time operations; fluid boundaries; global reach; true market pricing; extended enterprise; centralization and decentralization). As it is seen, until year 2000, although NO was separated from VO, yet just as a term, because the definition was rather the same. The review of direct and indirect definitions of the concept “NO” allows singling out main, mostly agreed on, characteristics of NOs presenting a possible consensus on the matter (only including information after year 2000) (see table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of Networked organization

Networked organization	Characteristics
	Single organization
	Network based organizational structure
	Deliver functions through ICT
	No structural, time or space boundaries in communication
	Flexible

## 5. Separating VO and NO

As the scientific literature review showed, there area authors, which use different concept for the same purpose, yet there are more of those who see the difference between VO and NO. As both types of organizations are closely related to computer mediated processes of relationship expression, yet they encompasses few divers features (see table 3).

Table 3. Divers Virtual organization’s and Networked organization’s features

Virtual organization	Networked organization
Consolidation of units (external communication)	Single unit (internal communication)
Organizational structure set by Consolidation agreement	Flat (Network based) organizational structure
Structural boundaries in communication set by Consolidation agreement	No structural boundaries in communication
Geographically distributed	Geographically centralized or distributed
Deliver functions in most convenient way (computer mediated, face-to-face, etc) at a particular situation	Deliver functions through ICT

A certain organizational structure, boundaries in communication, geographical distribution and function delivery in a one possible way are stronger stressed for NO, while VO in this area may or may not be equal to NO. The key diverse features are (a) the position of the network in communication and function delivery process and (b) number of organizational units involved. In a NO network is established between all the workers in the organization (in the unit). In a VO network is established between the organizations (between the units), while inside each unit network may have different status and importance (see Figure 2).

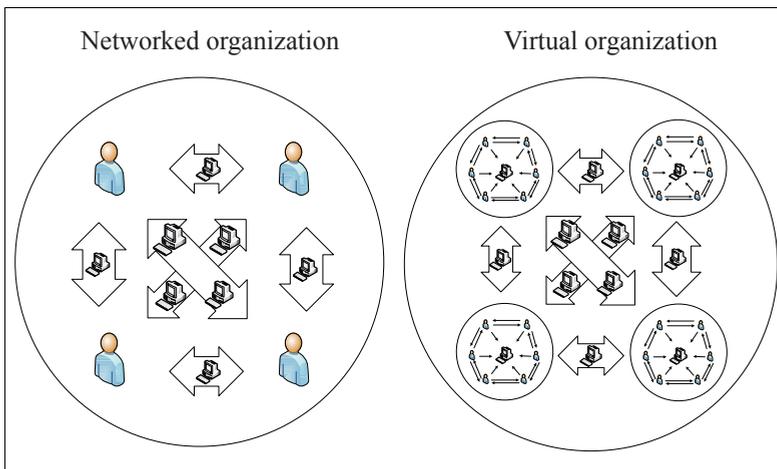


Figure 2. Visualization of (key diverse features in) NO and VO

## 6. Conclusions

Since the rise of computer mediated communication in organizations, rose and necessity to find a better use of the new form of communication which brought along new types of organizational structures and relationships with partners. Most often concepts of new organization are a Virtual organization and a Networked organization.

Until year 2000 in scientific literature concepts “Virtual organization” and “Networked organization” were basically synonyms.

Virtual organization and Networked organization are two different types of organizations:

- **Virtual organization** is a self-sufficient geographically distributed short time or permanent consolidation of organizations, groups or individuals, which/who without time or space hindrances communicate through ICT while reaching a common goal.
- **Networked organization** is a flexible organization with a network based structure in which workers without structural, time or space hindrances communicate through ICT while executing their duties.

Key features separating Virtual organization and Networked organization are

- (a) the position of the network in communication and function delivery process and
- (b) number of organizational units involved.

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## VIRTUALI AR ĮTINKLINTA ORGANIZACIJA?

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**Santrauka.** *Informacinės ir komunikacinės technologijos jau yra atradę vietą tiek asmeninėje, tiek profesinėje žmonių veikloje. Vis labiau plėtojantis šioms technologijoms, vis plačiau jas taikant profesinėje srityje, kinta organizacinė komunikacija, o ji sudaro pagrindą organizacinės struktūros pokyčiams, kai nuo griežtai hierarchinių linijinių struktūrų pereinama prie horizontaliųjų, tinklinių. Taip išskyla nauji inovatyvūs organizacijų tipai. Plačiausiai mokslinėje literatūroje aptinkami tipai yra „virtuali organizacija“ (angl. Virtual Organization) (toliau – VO) ir „įtinklinta organizacija“ (angl. Networked organization) (toliau – IO). Mokslinėje literatūroje konsensuso dėl to, kas yra VO ir IO, aptikti nepavyko, todėl šiame straipsnyje apžvelgiant mokslinę literatūrą siekiama pristatyti VO ir IO atskirtį. (Straipsnyje nepateikiama jokių empirinių duomenų.) Apibendrinus siūlomus VO apibrėžimus ir apibūdinimus pateikiamos VO charakteristikos kaip galimas konsensusas iki šiol pateiktai VO identifikavimo informacijai. Analogiškai ištirta ir IO aprašanti medžiaga bei pateiktos šio tipo charakteristikos. Autoriai ne visada tiksliai vartoja sąvoką ir organizacijos tipo apibūdinimą – pradiniam etape IO sąvoka autorių įvardijamos organizacijos vis dar buvo VO tipo struktūros. Tik maždaug nuo 2000-ųjų metų IO mokslinėje literatūroje igavo savo tikrąjį pavidalą, leidžiantį ją atskirti nuo VO. Išvados pateikiami VO ir IO apibrėžimai, leidžiantys aiškiai vieną nuo kito atskirti abu šiuos inovatyvius organizacijų tipus. Virtuali organizacija – savarankiškas, geografiniu požiūriu išsibarstęs, trumpo laikotarpio ar nuolatinis organizacijų, grupių ar individų susivienijimas, kurio nariai siekdami vieno tikslo bendrauja neribojami laiko ar erdvės. Įtinklinta organizacija – lanksti tinklinės struktūros organizacija, kurioje darbuotojai atlikdami savo pareigas naudoja IKT ir bendrauja be struktūros, laiko ar erdvės trukdžių. Šiuos du organizacijų tipus skiria dvi ypatybės, tai a) tinklo padėtis komunikacijos ir funkcijų įgyvendinimo procese ir b) organizacinių vienetų skaičius.*

**Raktažodžiai:** *virtuali organizacija, įtinklinta organizacija, informacinės komunikacinės technologijos.*