

Organizational Structure: Mintzberg's Framework

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ABSTRACT

Henry Mintzberg suggests that organizations can be differentiated along three basic dimensions: (1) the key part of the organization, that is, the part of the organization that plays the major role in determining its success or failure; (2) the prime coordinating mechanism, that is, the major method the organization uses to coordinate its activities; and (3) the type of decentralization used, that is, the extent to which the organization involves subordinates in the decision-making process. Using the three basic dimensions—key part of the organization, prime coordinating mechanism, and type of decentralization—Mintzberg suggests that the strategy an organization adopts and the extent to which it practices that strategy result in five structural configurations: simple structure, machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy, divisionalized form, and adhocracy.

Organizations exist to achieve goals. These goals are broken down into tasks as the basis for jobs. Jobs are grouped into departments. Departments in organizations may be characterized by marketing, sales, advertising, manufacturing, and so on. Within each department, even more distinctions can be found between the jobs people perform. Departments are linked to form the organizational structure. The organization's structure gives it the form to fulfill its function in the environment (Nelson & Quick, 2011). The term *organizational structure* refers to the formal configuration between individuals and groups regarding the allocation of tasks, responsibilities, and authority within the organization (Galbraith, 1987; Greenberg, 2011)

Very early organizational structures were often based either on product or function (Oliveira & Takahashi, 2012). The matrix organization structure crossed these two ways of organizing (Galbraith, 2009; Kuprenas, 2003). Others moved beyond these early approaches and examined the relationship between organizational strategy and structure (Brickley, Smith, Zimmerman, & Willett, 2002). This approach began with the landmark work of Alfred Chandler (1962, 2003), who traced the historical development of such large American corporations as DuPont, Sears, and General Motors. He concluded from his study that an organization's strategy tends to influence its structure. He suggests that strategy indirectly determines such variables as the organization's tasks, technology, and environments, and each of these influences the structure of the organization.

More recently, social scientists have augmented Chandler's thesis by contending that an organization's strategy determines its environment, technology, and tasks. These variables, coupled with growth rates and power distribution, affect organizational

structure (Hall & Tolbert, 2009; Miles, Snow, Meyer, & Coleman, 2011). Henry Mintzberg (1992, 2009) suggests that organizations can be differentiated along three basic dimensions: (1) the key part of the organization, that is, the part of the organization that plays the major role in determining its success or failure; (2) the prime coordinating mechanism, that is, the major method the organization uses to coordinate its activities; and (3) the type of decentralization used, that is, the extent to which the organization involves subordinates in the decision-making process. The key parts of an organization are shown in Figure 1 and include the following.

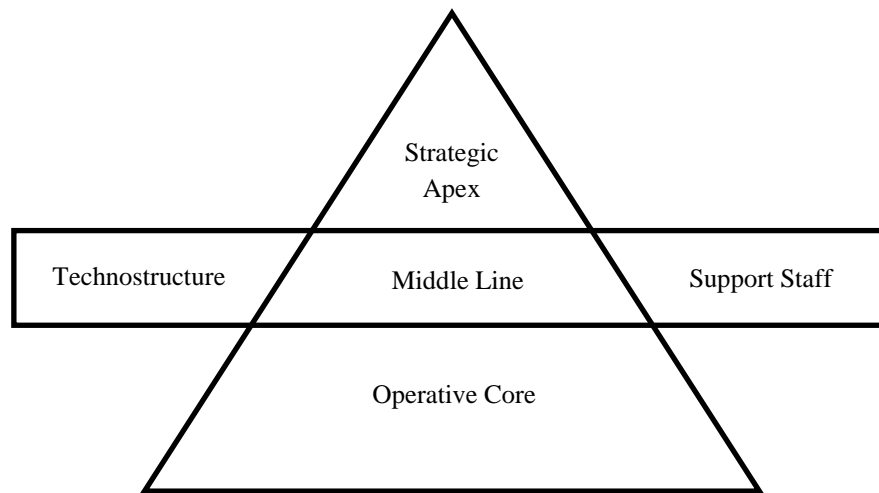


Figure 1. The key parts of an organization.

- *The strategic apex* is top management and its support staff. In school districts, this is the superintendent of schools and the administrative cabinet.
- *The operative core* are the workers who actually carry out the organization's tasks. Teachers constitute the operative core in school districts.
- *The middle line* is middle- and lower-level management. Principals are the middle-level managers in school districts.
- *The technostructure* are analysts such as engineers, accountants, planners, researchers, and personnel managers. In school districts, divisions such as instruction, business, personnel, public relations, research and development, and the like constitute the technostructure.
- *The support staff* are the people who provide indirect services. In school districts, similar services include maintenance, clerical, food service, busing, legal counsel, and consulting to provide support.

The second basic dimension of an organization is its prime coordinating mechanism. This includes the following:

- *Direct supervision* means that one individual is responsible of the work of others. This concept refers to the unity of command and scalar principles.
- *Standardization of work process* exists when the content of work is specified or programmed. In school districts, this refers to job descriptions that govern the work performance of educators.
- *Standardization of skills* exists when the kind of training necessary to do the work is specified. In school systems, this refers to state certificates required for the various occupants of a school district's hierarchy.
- *Standardization of output* exists when the results of the work are specified. Because the "raw material" that is processed by the operative core (teachers) consists of people (students), not things, standardization of output is more difficult to measure in schools than in other nonservice organizations. Nevertheless, a movement toward the standardization of output in schools in recent years has occurred. Examples include competency testing of teachers, state-mandated testing of students, state-mandated curricula, prescriptive learning objectives, and other efforts toward legislated learning.
- *Mutual adjustment* exists when work is coordinated through informal communication. Mutual adjustment or coordination is the major thrust of Likert's (1987) "linking-pin" concept.

The third basic dimension of an organization is the type of decentralization it employs. The three types of decentralization are the following:

- *Vertical decentralization* is the distribution of power down the chain of command, or shared authority between superordinates and subordinates in any organization.
- *Horizontal decentralization* is the extent to which non administrators (including staff) make decisions, or shared authority between line and staff.
- *Selective decentralization* is the extent to which decision-making power is delegated to different units within the organization. In school districts, these units might include instruction, business, personnel, public relations, and research and development divisions.

Using the three basic dimensions—key part of the organization, prime coordinating mechanism, and type of decentralization—Mintzberg suggests that the strategy an organization adopts and the extent to which it practices that strategy result in five structural configurations: simple structure, machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy, divisionalized form, and adhocracy. Table 1 summarizes the three basic dimensions associated with each of the five structural configurations. Each organizational form is discussed in turn.

Table 1. *Mintzberg's Five Organizational Structures*

Structural Configuration	Prime Coordinating Mechanism	Key Part of Organization	Type of Decentralization
Simple structure	Direct supervision	Strategic apex	Vertical and horizontal centralization
Machine bureaucracy	Standardization of work processes	Technostructure	Limited horizontal decentralization
Professional bureaucracy	Standardization of skills	Operating core	Vertical and horizontal decentralization
Divisionalized form	Standardization of outputs	Middle line	Limited vertical decentralization
Adhocracy	Mutual adjustment	Support staff	Selective decentralization

Simple Structure

The *simple structure* has as its key part the strategic apex, uses direct supervision, and employs vertical and horizontal centralization. Examples of simple structures are relatively small corporations, new government departments, medium-sized retail stores, and small elementary school districts. The organization consists of the top manager and a few workers in the operative core. There is no technostructure, and the support staff is small; workers perform overlapping tasks. For example, teachers and administrators in small elementary school districts must assume many of the duties that the technostructure and support staff perform in larger districts. Frequently, however, small elementary school districts are members of cooperatives that provide many services (i.e., counselors, social workers) to a number of small school districts in one region of the county or state.

In small school districts, the superintendent may function as both superintendent of the district and principal of a single school. Superintendents in such school districts must be entrepreneurs. Because the organization is small, coordination is informal and maintained through direct supervision. Moreover, this organization can adapt to environmental changes rapidly. Goals stress innovation and long-term survival, although innovation may be difficult for very small rural school districts because of the lack of resources.

Machine Bureaucracy

Machine bureaucracy has the technostructure as its key part, uses standardization of work processes as its prime coordinating mechanism, and employs limited horizontal decentralization. Machine bureaucracy has many of the characteristics of Weber's (1947) ideal bureaucracy and resembles Hage's (1965) mechanistic organization. It has a high degree of formalization and work specialization. Decisions are centralized. The span of management is narrow, and the organization is tall—that is, many levels exist in the chain of command from top management to the bottom of the organization. Little horizontal or lateral coordination is needed. Furthermore, machine bureaucracy has a large technostructure and support staff.

Examples of machine bureaucracy are automobile manufacturers, steel companies, and large government organizations. The environment for a machine bureaucracy is typically stable, and the goal is to achieve internal efficiency. Public schools possess many characteristics of machine bureaucracy, but most schools are not machine bureaucracies in the pure sense. However, large urban school districts (New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago) are closer to machine bureaucracies than other medium-size or small school districts.

Professional Bureaucracy

Professional bureaucracy has the operating core as its key part, uses standardization of skills as its prime coordinating mechanism, and employs vertical and horizontal decentralization. The organization is relatively formalized but decentralized to provide autonomy to professionals. Highly trained professionals provide nonroutine services to clients. Top management is small; there are few middle managers; and the technostructure is generally small. However, the support staff is typically large to provide clerical and maintenance support for the professional operating core. The goals of professional bureaucracies are to innovate and provide high-quality services. Existing in complex but stable environments, they are generally moderate to large in size. Coordination problems are common. Examples of this form of organization include universities, hospitals, and large law firms.

Some public school districts have many characteristics of the professional bureaucracy, particularly its aspects of professionalism, teacher autonomy, and structural looseness. For example, schools are formal organizations, which provide complex services through highly trained professionals in an atmosphere of structural looseness. These characteristics tend to broaden the limits of individual discretion and performance. Like attorneys, physicians, and university professors, teachers perform in classroom settings in relative isolation from colleagues and superiors, while remaining in close contact with their students. Furthermore, teachers are highly trained professionals who provide information to their students in accordance with their own style, and they are usually flexible in the delivery of content even within the constraints of the state- and district-mandated curriculum. Moreover, like some staff administrators, teachers, tend to identify more with their professions than with the organization.

Divisionalized Form

The *divisionalized form* has the middle line as its key part, uses standardization of output as its prime coordinating mechanism, and employs limited vertical decentralization. Decision making is decentralized at the divisional level. There is little coordination among the separate divisions. Corporate-level personnel provide some coordination. Thus, each division itself is relatively centralized and tends to resemble a machine bureaucracy. The technostructure is located at corporate headquarters to provide services

to all divisions; support staff is located within each division. Large corporations are likely to adopt the divisionalized form.

Most school districts typically do not fit the divisionalized form. The exceptions are those very large school districts that have diversified service divisions distinctly separated into individual units or schools. For example, a school district may resemble the divisionalized form when it has separate schools for the physically handicapped, emotionally disturbed, and learning disabled; a skills center for the potential dropout; a special school for art and music students; and so on. The identifying feature of these school districts is that they have separate schools within a single school district, which have separate administrative staffs, budgets, and so on. Elementary and secondary school districts that have consolidated but retained separate administrative structures with one school board are also examples of the divisionalized form. As might be expected, the primary reason for a school district to adopt this form of structure is service diversity while retaining separate administrative structures.

Adhocracy

The *adhocracy* has the support staff as its key part, uses mutual adjustment as a means of coordination, and maintains selective patterns of decentralization. The structure tends to be low in formalization and decentralization. The technostucture is small because technical specialists are involved in the organization's operative core. The support staff is large to support the complex structure. Adhocracies engage in nonroutine tasks and use sophisticated technology. The primary goal is innovation and rapid adaptation to changing environments. Adhocracies typically are medium sized, must be adaptable, and use resources efficiently. Examples of adhocracies include aerospace and electronics industries, research and development firms, and very innovative school districts. No school districts are pure adhocracies, but medium-sized school districts in very wealthy communities may have some of the characteristics of an adhocracy. The adhocracy is somewhat similar to Hage's (1965) organic organization.

Strategy and Structure

The work begun by Chandler and extended by Mintzberg has laid the groundwork for an understanding of the relationship between an organization's strategy and its structure. The link between strategy and structure is still in its infancy stage. Further research in this area, particularly in service organizations like schools, will enhance school administrators' understanding of school organizations (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012). In the meantime, school leaders must recognize that organization strategy and structure are related.

Conclusion

Henry Mintzberg (1992, 2009) suggests that organizations can be differentiated along three basic dimensions: (1) the key part of the organization, that is, the part of the organization that plays the major role in determining its success or failure; (2) the prime coordinating mechanism, that is, the major method the organization uses to coordinate its activities; and (3) the type of decentralization used, that is, the extent to which the organization involves subordinates in the decision-making process. Using the three basic dimensions—key part of the organization, prime coordinating mechanism, and type of decentralization—Mintzberg suggests that the strategy an organization adopts and the extent to which it practices that strategy result in five structural configurations: simple structure, machine bureaucracy, professional bureaucracy, divisionalized form, and adhocracy.

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