

People, Not Roles: a case study of how a growing organization maintains certain characteristics

Overall orienting research issue for dissertation

How do increasingly rationalized or bureaucratic structures affect a growing organization's retention of characteristics that are felt to be critical to the organization and its output?

Most organizational research and theory suggest that as organizations develop, their structures inevitably undergo rationalization or bureaucratization, regardless of the organizations' initial structures. This dissertation examines which bureaucratic structures destroy, enhance, or have little discernable effect upon an expanding organization's essential characteristics.

Synopsis of this chapter

This chapter examines how a developing organization has nurtured certain characteristics while undergoing growth and some aspects of Weberian bureaucratization. Past researchers have examined how some organizations have striven to exist, and even thrive, based on value-rational structures constructed explicitly to counteract the presumed pitfalls of rational-legal bureaucratic structures. When subjected to both internal coordination issues and environmental pressures associated with organizational growth, many of these organizations drastically changed their structures and ethics or "died." This chapter adds to the organizational literature by analyzing how one such alternatively structured organization has, for the most part, managed to maintain certain aspects of its value-rational structures while adopting some rational-legal structures. Another chapter further discusses how the organization has successfully negotiated and even shaped environmental pressures while gradually adopting certain rational-legal characteristics.¹

More specifically, this chapter discusses several aspects of the development of the Burning Man organization that have resisted complete bureaucratization and in doing so, helped the organization to retain characteristics essential to the nature of the organization and its output of the Burning Man event. Based on the organization's more recently stated mission and slogans, I define these characteristics loosely as creativity, innovation, non-commercialism, and an emphasis on participation over non-participation.

¹ This chapter draws upon my conference paper "The Burning Man organization: a case of how a growing organization actively shapes its surrounding environment."

During growth, the Burning Man organization has adopted some forms of rationalized structures and processes, hybridizing them with some alternative structures. Using cross-cutting networks as a complement to some bureaucratic structures, the Burning Man organization negotiates such development issues while attempting to uphold its essential nature, or its ethic of radical inclusiveness and creativeness. First, the entry of potential members is not instantaneous and is dependent on network ties. This growing organization has difficulties incorporating new members, even with attempted rationalization of structures, and such difficulties relate to the unclearly defined roles. Secondly, the placement and retention of members is not based purely on skills or a tight role specification, allowing persons to contribute in ways that they, rather than just the organization, desire. Unlike many organizations, which tend to shed members who are viewed as no longer useful,² the Burning Man organization retains members over generations, retraining them with appropriate skills or constructing better-fitting roles. Overall, such measures enable the organization to nurture its ethic across increasing scale.

This chapter is based on a partial analysis of half of my interviews and some participant-observations of organizational activities during three time periods in 1998, 1999, and 2000. To familiarize the SSRC conference readers with my phenomena, I introduce the Burning Man event and organization before beginning my analysis. Note: **Those who have read my paper for the MARIAL conference can skip to the Introduction section.**

1. Brief description of the organization and event

Currently organized as a Limited Liability Corporation (LLC),³ the Burning Man organization's small board of paid core organizers and their staff oversee a predominantly volunteer force in producing the annual output of the Burning Man event.⁴ The Burning Man event, an annual week-long temporary arts community or festival, has several distinctive features which set it apart from other more conventional events. First, the Burning Man event's retention of creative free expression allows both artists and self-professed artists to create and showcase various types of art, particularly more interactive art, in the vast

² Examples of such practices include the "retirement" of founders in favor of venture capitalists' picks in start-up ventures.

³ The organizational structure underwent a number of reorganizations before eventually assuming its current LLC structure.

⁴ For more information on the organization and its event, please consult the official Burning Man website <http://www.burningman.com>

outdoor venue of the Nevada Black Rock Desert. This venue is unparalleled in terms of its physical and institutional freedoms when compared with the restrictions of conventional public space and art scenes. Furthermore, the event develops and dismantles a fully functional city in a physically adverse and unpredictable environment that is devoid of any infrastructure. In addition to creating a sustainable temporary city, the event simultaneously creates the environs for a temporary large community that fosters smaller and more permanent local offshoots. Finally, the event's adherence to tenets such as no vending, commercialism, or mere spectating on the part of its participants sets it apart from commercial venues that feature paid performers and products. Participants and organizers believe that this combination of features and tenets encourage the development of stronger community relations, as well as a welcome respite from a larger society structured by a commercial and cash-nexus economy.

In contrast to its first informal San Francisco beach burn with a small group of friends, the Burning Man temporary arts community, now an annual week-long city of almost 28,000 members on federally managed land, requires the year-round organizational efforts of its volunteers and organizers. In conjunction with other environmental actors, such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which oversees the event site, local law enforcement, and locals in towns adjacent to the event site, the top tier of salaried organizers and their small administrative staff formulate and implement policies. In addition, organizers direct and oversee the efforts of volunteers who either contribute year-round to the organization or in discrete intervals, such as during the event. Given the growing size of the event in the past years, the bulk of the organizational efforts to establish a safe and enjoyable event has largely depended on the cooperation of event-goers and the contributions of volunteers to fulfill the organization's mission:

Our practical goal is to create the annual event known as Burning Man...to generate an experience that encourages participants to do three things: (1) creatively express themselves, (2) fulfill an active role as members of our community, and (3) immediately respond to and protect that environment.⁵

2. History of the event and the organization

In the earliest years, the Burning Man event was so small and informal that the original two organizers Larry Harvey and Jerry James did not apply for a permit for its first location on San Francisco's Baker Beach. In fact, the first event held was more like a family barbecue, with the organizers' children

⁵ Excerpted from the Burning Man organization's mission statement for 2000.

building and burning their own sculpture of a dog next to the Burning Man sculpture, a wooden humanoid figure, that has since then consistently anchored the center of the event. Organizers initially first invited friends and family to attend the summer solstice event, but word-of-mouth as well as announcements in other pre-existing networks' newsletters, such as those of the Cacophony Society, swelled the numbers of attendees. In addition, Cacophony Society member Michael Mikel, drawing upon his familiarity with Macintosh computers from his experiences with an early start-up, made the first computer database of Burning Man event attendees to facilitate mass mailings.

In 1990, a confrontation with Park Rangers over the safety hazards of burning large items on Baker Beach necessitated relocating the growing event. Based on previous experiences with small events in the Nevada Black Rock Desert, organizers refashioned the event into an overnight camping trip on a remote portion of the Black Rock Desert during Labor Day weekend, where the event again was temporarily able to "fly under the radar" of authorities. At this point, persons experienced from throwing underground urban events through the Cacophony Society, namely John Law and Michael Mikel, had formally joined the organizational team, and they strategically located the event in an area that was less accessible to the general public. However, starting in about 1993, growing numbers of attendees necessitated that the organization formally apply for recreational use permits to hold the event on the Black Rock Desert. In 1995, the organization developed its first official web page, which was initially hosted by WELL and contained information like the Survival Guide, which prepared participants to live in the desert community.

Most organizers and attendees characterize 1996 and 1997 as the pivotal years for Burning Man. At this point, outside entities began to actively exert influences on the growing event, and organizers realized that successfully producing a safer event required full-time, year-round planning by a stronger and more professional organization. The BLM asked the state, district, and county health agencies to step in and oversee the toilet and sanitation issue in 1996, and agency involvement continued to grow with increases in the event's population.⁶ Two factors in 1996 initiated a number of changes in the event's production process for the subsequent years. First, tragic events preceding⁷ and during⁸ the 1996 event invoked

⁶ A few cynically attribute increased agencies' involvement and allowance of the Burning Man event to its achieving a "cash cow" reputation.

⁷ The death of one of the organizers' friends in a motorcycle-truck accident involving other individuals working for the organization.

substantial event redesigns, which included the pedestrianization of the event, an upgrade in medical and communication services, and a shift away from the insular and anarchist flavor⁹ introduced to the event by some of the organizers and participants. Secondly, the critical mass of word-of-mouth recommendation, the official Burning Man web presence, and world-wide media coverage, contributed to the rapid growth of the event to a community of 8,000 campers, in contrast to its original evening Baker Beach crowd of 20 in 1986 and its original Black Rock Desert community of 80 in 1990. For instance, Bruce Sterling chronicled his and his family's adventures at Burning Man for a front cover image-saturated feature article in the November 1996 edition of *Wired* magazine.¹⁰ This publication and the subsequently published *Burning Man* coffee table book of photographs from the 1996 event,¹¹ drew the attention of a number of digerati, introducing a more technological flavor to the event population and art. Following the 1996 event, organizers with more professional skills and a passion for continuing the event¹² joined the organization's top tier, steering the organization towards a more rationalized and Internet-savvy structure capable of developing a safer event.

1997, the "comeback" year of the event, ushered in a number of changes. One important change was the introduction of a more user-friendly web site. Marian Goodell, Rusty Hodge and Eric Waterman redid the web page to facilitate user navigation and posted aliases so that people could contact the organization. Using information from this web page, potential volunteers could use email rather than phone the San Francisco hotline to directly contact volunteer coordinators. As for the physical site of the city, organizers rented privately-held land adjoining the Black Rock Desert and in doing so, entered into relations with two new actors of Washoe County and private land-managers. These two actors imposed a number of regulations that were felt to be unreasonable in terms of financial costs and inapplicable to an event located

⁸ An "under-the-influence" driver injured three participants camped on the edge of the event site. One of the victims, who was seriously injured and permanently crippled, sued the organization for \$4 million. He and his lawyer settled for the organization's \$1 million insurance policy, which was the highest level of insurance that the organization could afford at the time. This incident and other near-accidents led to deeper awareness of organizational and individual liability, as well as a physical redesign of the site. The organization also instituted a "no-driving" policy on the site, in contrast to previous years when event-goers could freely drive their vehicles anywhere.

⁹ A subpopulation of the organizers and participants at this time strongly identified with punk-rock, underground, and/or anarchist ideals.

¹⁰ Sterling, Bruce. November 1996. "Greetings from Burning Man!" *Wired*. 4 (11): 196-206, 274.

¹¹ Weiners, Brad. (Ed.) 1996. *Burning Man*. Hard Wired: San Francisco, California.

in the desert. Several viewed these regulations as a thinly veiled attempt to regulate the event to death, or at least out of the bounds of the county. Compounded with financial difficulties from hefty agency fees, negotiating relations with outside entities took priority over the art mission for that year. As Harvey exasperatedly describes that year, some Burning Man organizers like himself had to spend most of their efforts politicking versus directly cultivating the arts:

...in '97, if you broadly define political, I'd say third-times of my time was taken by that, it was long, long hours.. That's why in that year we had no proper art team [volunteers to handle the placement of art and support the artists] – there was no time. We couldn't be bothered with art, to hell with art, it's politics, and I felt like I had landed into wilderness [laugh] in the name of self expression, how did I end up doing this crap?!!

After this experiment with renting private land, organizers moved the event back to BLM-managed lands. Since then, both the event and organization have continued to grow and mature in terms of the mission of the event and the networks of members. During the past three years, both participants and the organization has strengthened the event's identity as a sustainable arts community. To support this purpose, the organization has continued to develop its utilization of New Economy resources by recruiting and retaining highly skilled volunteers capable of designing and using computer and Internet-based tools. In addition, the organization has strengthened ties among its members and with outside actors, including the once suspicious agencies and locals. The organization now provides a formal space for its members to meet,¹³ as well as a larger selection of on-line discussion and announce lists for everyday communication. In a similar vein, the organization has established more permanent ties with the communities local to the event site by buying and renting land, formalizing business relations, and participating in civic duties, such as contributing to the local senior center, high school, and landmark preservation fund.

As the Burning Man organization and event ages, various challenges could threaten or affect the event's continued existence. Practical considerations, such as the limited supply of portable toilets¹⁴ and the few roads accessing the event site, place upper bounds on the future growth of the event. A few people claim that a highly mobilized and organized opposition group, such as the religious right or an

¹² One major organizer, John Law, left the organization and event, partly due to a divergence between his preference that the event be anarchist and Harvey's preference that the event be more communal and civic-oriented.

¹³ In the past, organizers were dependent on members to volunteer their homes or work spaces for meetings. In 1999, the organization was able to rent office space for its San Francisco headquarters.

environmental group, could threaten the event's future use of federally managed land. In addition, over time, the organization's personnel and members will experience generational turn-over, possibly losing the tacit knowledge needed to continue the event. To alleviate these dependencies on scarce resources, organizers have begun implementing alternative ways to grow, mainly by serving as a model for other events and organization. First, the organization has encouraged the development of local communities called regionals. Several regional groups host their own events, and some, such as the Austin and New York City regionals, have even formed their own LLCs and formal organizations. Given this interest, organizers are planning to formalize this DIY ("Do It Yourself") ethic by providing practical advice on how to manage events and volunteers via written documents and eventually, a book. In providing this information, organizers foresee the hosting of simultaneous events around the world, as well as the continued development of full-fledged year-round local communities. Powered by the self-professed evangelical tendencies of some of the event's participants, this event will continue to grow through such local off-shoots.

Introduction

Note: **Part of the introduction will be expanded and rearranged into Chapter 2, which details organizational challenges common to most organizations experiencing growth.**

The analysis of organizations as bureaucratic structures has dominated organizational sociology since the translation of Max Weber's works. Weber's (1958) typology divided administrative structures into three ideal-types, arguing that the more stable structures drew upon rational-legal bureaucratic authority. According to Weber, structures based on charismatic authority would grow and survive only by transitioning to rational-legal or traditional forms of bureaucratic authority. Most modern, complex, and large organizations are best categorized as rational-legal bureaucracies (Perrow 1986). These organizations exhibit, to differing degrees, the following general characteristics outlined by Weber:

- A fixed division of labor among participants
- A hierarchy of offices
- A set of general rules that govern performance
- A separation of personal from official property and rights
- Selection of personnel on the basis of technical qualifications
- Employment viewed as a career by participants (Scott 1992: 40)

¹⁴ The event apparently rents all available portable toilets in the state for that week.

In addition, such rationalized structures are associated with the challenges of coordinating large or growing numbers of members, inputs, and outputs. Weber argued that the efficiency and “fairness” of the rational-legal bureaucratic structures were superior to the other ideal types, since the other ideal types were more vulnerable to the administrators’ favoritism and capriciousness. Nevertheless, these features of rational-legal bureaucracy draw both praise and criticism. The same structures that cultivate the desirable attributes of impartiality, independence, and stability for its members invoke scathing critiques as stifling responsiveness, creativity, and innovation and as “masking” or legitimizing collective or elite control at the expense of individuals and minorities (Crozier 1964, Perrow 1986). For instance, standardizing procedures might make decision-making more efficient and decrease unfair or arbitrary actions. However, this standardization also may decrease the ability and initiative of members to entertain alternative means of conceptualizing tasks, thereby deadening innovation and risk-taking. Furthermore, rationalization limits members to carrying out only their assigned tasks, with little recourse to contribute to the overall organization (Heckscher 1994). Weber’s conflation of descriptive and proscriptive features and the translation-related confusion about the basis for bureaucratic authority only further cloud the issue (Scott 1992).

Despite such accusations about the pitfalls of bureaucracies, most organizations in the US are expected to develop and display some form of rational-legal bureaucratic structures. Neoinstitutionalists argue that organizations experience strong normative pressures from governments, regulators, suppliers and vendors, and other groups to establish such structures. As a result of such pressures, leaders of alternatively-structured organizations may decide that growth demands the perfunctory display or adoption of certain accepted characteristics and practices, such as a clear hierarchy and chain of command (Rothschild & Whitt 1986). For example, the governmental apparatuses of developing nation-states, despite these collectivities’ “initial” differing characteristics, universally adopt expected practices, such as selecting leaders through democratic elections. Such nation-states also officially drop illegitimate policies, such as discriminatory policies against “undesirables,” to gain acceptance in the world polity (Meyer *et al* 1997). At a smaller scale, for-profit organizations that grow large enough to attract the attention of governmental regulatory agencies and other critical audiences adopt “compliant” structures like an Equal Employment Opportunity policy and human resources staff to avoid perceived potential entanglements

(Dobbin *et al* 1994). Most organizational founders circumvent such conflicts entirely by building accepted bureaucratic forms. Such founders may have never considered installing alternative structures, given the taken-for-granted nature and predominance of bureaucratic structures.

Given the preponderance of bureaucracies and the pressures to conform, researchers such as Perrow (1986) are skeptical that organizations based on alternative structures can resist pressures to bureaucratize during growth. Indeed, several studies have examined the development of alternative forms considered antithetical to bureaucratic structures. Such alternative forms are known as co-operative, collective, or collectivist organizations. Many of these organizations developed in 1960s and 1970s as part of the counter-cultural movement to make organizations more responsive to members and the communities that they served. A few such organizations have roots in the past century, and some still exist today. Such alternative organizations provided complex outputs like services, such as mental health or education, or labor and skill-intensive goods like artwork, architecture, and software. A few, like the communes (Kanter 1972), formed total institutions or self-enclosed societies devoted to certain religious or lifestyle principles. Characteristics that distinguished these organizations from bureaucratic organizations included the following:

- No strict division of labor: instead, members established a rotating system of tasks.
- No strict hierarchy of offices: members practiced some form of consensual or democratic decision-making rather than relying on leaders to enforce top-down decision-making.
- More flexible rules that govern performance: members as a group interpreted and modified rules as needed rather than strictly adhering to them without question.
- No or less separation of personal from official property and rights: some organizations, like the communes, demanded that members meld personal and group property and rights rather than differentiate between the two. Other organizations, like the health clinics and cooperatives, encouraged more personal “ownership” of the organization.
- Less reliance on selecting personnel on the basis of technical qualifications: Members were expected to learn and teach skills rather than concentrate their expertise.
- Membership is not just a career: members tended to believe in the ethos of the organization or its substantive goals rather than viewing membership as merely a means of earning a living.
- A reliance on a “value-rationality” form of authority, which binds members through a collective commitment to an ethic. (Rothschild & Whitt 1986: 22)

Highly committed and idealistic members dedicated tremendous efforts to sustain these organizations, but the majority of these organizations dissolved or assumed more standard bureaucratic structures over time.

Marginalization of these organizations by others often constrained growth until these “deviant” organizations displayed or assumed accepted bureaucratic characteristics and images (Oerton 1996). The

presumed advantages of the alternative structures also had drawbacks that increased member turn-over and contributed towards the bureaucratization of structures. For instance, the group decision-making processes, while incorporating a greater diversity of opinions, often contributed to member burn-out and thus paralyzed organizational activities (Schwartzman 1989).

Rather than engaging in a simple “compare and contrast” of the two ideal types to enumerate their advantages and disadvantages, a more useful set of analyses examines how a combination of both alternative and bureaucratic structures can help an organization to thrive with its certain characteristics relatively intact. I argue that the rationalization of certain structures (i.e. some form of differentiation and coordination) enables an organization to cultivate certain characteristics during growth. These characteristics may have existed at a different level than when the organization was smaller and less likely to engage with environmental actors. However, the practical realities of growth and increased interaction with environmental actors seem to necessitate certain structure changes unless the organization would rather fold or completely abandon essential characteristics. A number of the alternative organizations, such as communes and worker co-ops, did not survive the test of time or growth while simultaneously preserving distinctive characteristics. These organizations fell underfoot to environmental pressures that directly or indirectly attempted to squash these organizations’ missions because of perceived practical difficulties in conducting exchanges, such as bank loans, or “moral” issues. In addition, these organizations had practical difficulties scaling structures such as participative democracies while still supporting the organizational mission or ethic.

This chapter’s contribution to the literature is to examine one aspect of the Burning Man organization’s development: how the organization uses cross-cutting networks to place people, rather than fill roles. During its development, the Burning Man organization has adopted some structural aspects of the bureaucratic organization, but it does so in ways that still maintain the flavor of the organizational ethic. For example, a Weberian would predict that a growing organization’s coordination issues would lead to a more efficient sorting of persons based on their skills into pre-existing roles. In other words, persons fill roles based on their skills rather than say, their nepotistic ties with those in power. While such a conception of placement coincides with the meritocratic ideals of American society, the evidence suggests that the majority of organizations, particularly workplace organizations, do not actively conduct thorough searches

for candidates whose skills best match those of unfilled roles. Rather, many organizations rely on weak ties to disseminate information that locates and places people into positions (Granovetter 19XX), reflecting organizational and human limits to processing information.

To draw in committed volunteers,¹⁵ the Burning Man organization utilizes a combination of both weak ties and bureaucratized placement. Initially, prospective members entered the organization rather haphazardly, depending on the members' initiative or the organizers' capacities to evaluate the members' abilities. With a critical mass of persons, the organization can now rely on networks to draw and screen for prospective members. In addition, the organization's recent implementation of more rationalized means of initially handling the massive influxes of prospective members indicates that the organizers realize that more efficient processes are also valuable. However, such rationalization does not seem to impact core processes of cultivating essential characteristics. While entry has become more rationalized, how the organization hybridizes structures to help people find their place within the organization retains its emphasis on radical inclusivity and usage of individual and group-level creativity. Shaping roles around individuals can constitute a difficult process for all involved parties, but this more flexible path diffuses tendencies to merely slot people into roles while supporting the organizational ethic.

Entry into the organization

For some members, entering the Burning Man organization constitutes an arduous pilgrimage of constantly trying various entrances. A number of interviewees cited difficulties with entering the volunteer structure of the organization. Several of the upper tier organizers, such as Marian Goodell, Harley Dubois, and former volunteer coordinator John Nettle recalled their almost initiatory experiences with entering the organization during the mid 1990s. For instance, Goodell recalls leaving her name on the volunteer hotline and waiting for months to hear back from someone in the organization. She admits that some persons seeking to volunteer for the organization still undergo such a drawn-out process:

Nearly almost every person that I know that has volunteered for BM had to pound on the door more than once. That's just the way it is.

That's the way it was for me. I'd send an email, I'd get a response back for a job that was bigger than I wanted to handle and then I'd leave [additional] messages, and I'd get either no answer or a weird

¹⁵ Discussed in paper to be presented at American Sociological Association.

answer of what's available, and that's totally what we still experience now.

We offer things to people that may not be the right size for them or the right interests. Then sometimes we don't have time to call people back, and then you see the person again, and they show up at another party, and they remind you [that] they want to do this thing....

Goodell's comments pinpoint two key elements. One of these elements reflects the staffing situation of the organization. Actively bringing in new members sometimes assumes a lower priority, depending on the gate-keepers' time constraints. In the past, gatekeepers, namely the organizers, allowed prospective members to keep knocking on doors before finally allowing members in, or waited for prospective members to demonstrate their prowess and intent before inviting them to join. The other element reflects this situation's implications for the sorting process for those who do manage to enter the organization, which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

The experience of volunteers like Media Mecca lead Jim Graham, aka RonJon, a former reporter turned public relations specialist, illustrates the difficulties in entering the organization akin to Goodell's experience. After doing some on-the-spot volunteering at the 1996 event¹⁶ and working the entrance gate of the 1997 event,¹⁷ Graham wanted to utilize his PR skills to help the organization deal with media inquiries and relations. After repeatedly pitching his skills and willingness to volunteer over several months to Goodell, who at the time was working with a small group of about three volunteers to manage relations with the media, he finally joined the team. Over time, he assumed a leadership role, freeing Goodell from some of her responsibilities and allowing Graham to contribute in ways that he finds personally satisfying. Graham's commitment to the Media Mecca team has been exemplary, as he regularly adds several hours of volunteer work to the end of his workday as a co-founder of a start-up.

Alternatively, organizers opportunistically waited for prospective volunteers to demonstrate their skills in venues similar to those of the organization before inviting them into the organization. In addition to demonstrating competency, these invited members developed professional ties with the organizers by working alongside them in related projects. Given a low capacity for actively seeking information on the

¹⁶ While waiting in line at the Center Camp's café to get his morning coffee during the event, Graham responded to Rangers' request for volunteers to help pick up debris from an accident involving two cars.

¹⁷ In the past, volunteers collected tickets and money at the entrance to the event. The organization now relies on paid workers to collect proceeds to increase accountability and decrease the temptation for persons to help themselves.

potential of a prospective volunteer and a high emphasis on trust, organizers tended to wait for volunteers to substantiate their capacities, particularly when recruiting for positions of greater responsibility. Dana Harrison, a former Schwab vice president traces the steps of her entry into the upper level of the organization as a sort of volunteer organizational advisor¹⁸ as follows:

I think that [the organizers] had gotten to know me a little and had gotten confidence in me. In '98, I stayed at clean-up [after the event] and worked at the commissary [which feeds employees and some volunteers on-site] and so kind of got to know people.

A lot of the organization is based on trust, personal relationships. They felt like I was serious about working with the organization and kind of willing to do the dirty work and could be trusted. And then I think when I wandered back and was like "does anyone need help?" It was like [makes sucking noise and grabbing motion] A combination of warm breathing person with pulse and some knowledge of who I was.

Several other interviewees who currently hold or have held positions of greater responsibility within the Burning Man organization were formally invited to join the organization after demonstrating initiative and skills in organizing a project. For example, Holly Kreuter's volunteer work organizing the logistical aspects of a large circus for Defenstration,¹⁹ a San Francisco public art landmark, in 1997 put Kreuter into direct contact with other Burning Man organizers who were also volunteering for this art project. Kreuter's demonstrated competency and contact with organizers led to two separate invitations to join the organization as a volunteer, and Kreuter eventually became a full-time paid staff member. Other high-profile volunteers similarly attracted organizers' attention by organizing local Burning Man fund-raisers to benefit the cash-strapped organization in 1998. Organizers who attended these events approached these individuals and asked them to join or even lead various parts of the organization. Scott McKeown, who organized a benefit in Sonoma, California, joined the recently formed Art Team and now helps artists place their artwork in pre-assigned areas during the event. Similarly, after organizing a local benefit with fellow rave community friends, Monica Senter helped form and now leads the Tech Team, a group of volunteers who design and maintain databases and other computer applications. Likewise, George Paap was so inspired by the event that he organized his own benefit and now heads a LLC for the Austin, Texas regional chapter.

¹⁸ In fact, Harrison was one of the members who introduced the rationalized concept of budgeting.

¹⁹ A project designed by artist Brian Goggin, in which furniture appears to dangle precariously on the outside of a large brick building, located on Howard and 6th St.

This process of entering the organization has not only involved gate-keepers assessing sizing up prospective members. Volunteers also size up the organization, particularly regarding the organizational ethic and organizers' intentions. For example, before deciding to invest substantial amounts of time into the organization, artist and volunteer Steve Raspa invited Harvey and Goodell over for dinner to first interview them about the organizational aims.

I actually decided that Burning Man was so spectacular and so unusual and so inspirational to me that I wanted to help with the organization of it in some way. But before I did that, I wanted to meet the organizers and feel like they were people that had their motivations in the right place.

And so I actually said [to the organizers], "I'd like to get more involved, but I'd like to first to take you out to dinner and talk to you a little bit about why you're doing this, and what's important to you and who you are as people because I won't get involved with anything until I find out more about the people behind it."

So I took Larry and Marian ... out to dinner... And we had a wide ranging talk about a number of different things and after that, I felt pretty confident that they were people that had integrity and that shared my beliefs to a close enough degree that it was something that I wanted to help with.

Likewise, Eric Pouyal pointed out that, in comparison with his commitment to his workplace, he is more committed to his volunteer "boss" Dubois because he was able to choose to work with her. For some members, monitoring this commitment to the organization and its ethic is important to determining whether or not to continue contributing to the organization. For example, Jennifer Holmes, who used to help manage the security detail of the Rangers in 1996, feels that her time is now better spent contributing to "real" volunteer organizations, such as the San Francisco AIDS ride or homeless shelters. [need to check transcript]

Overall, the difficulties of prospective members who lack ties or opportunities to demonstrate their expertise in entering the organization have served as a "natural" weed-out process. Those truly interested in contributing to the organization have the motivation or stamina to continue searching for an entrance. Hopefully, the members' persistence in gaining entry reflects their persistence in carrying out tasks. In addition, in undergoing such a process, these individuals probably have escalated their commitment concomitant with their difficulties in entering the organization. [need to develop this part, add social psychology citations]

Assessing the indirect benefits of entry difficulties upon commitment might be possible for a later research project, given the organization's recent move towards more efficiently processing prospective volunteers' inquiries through more rationalized structures. As the organization and its output has grown larger, both the demands by persons to volunteer and the organizations for volunteers, installing such structures better enables the organization to enforce its slogan of participation at a larger scale. In 2000, organizers began delegating the task of assessing volunteer potential to multiple lower-level gate-keepers, thereby alleviating the top tier of organizers from this labor-intensive task. Such a move to more rationalized structures stems partly from the efforts of the "human resources" equivalent of the organization, namely Dubois and her staff, who along with Goodell, have developed guidelines for cultivating volunteerism. One designated volunteer coordinator, John Nettle, initially served the volunteer intake needs for the whole organization. This single volunteer coordinator was responsible for responding to all prospective volunteers' emails and placing volunteers before and during the event. In 2001, Dubois and Nettle's successor, head volunteer coordinator Molly Tirpak began a concerted effort to assemble a team of volunteer coordinators for the overall organization, as well as install a volunteer coordinator for each volunteer group. Such a process diffused responsibility for taking in and distributing new volunteers across the growing organization rather than centralizing this responsibility in a single department. Increasing the number of gate-keepers capable of assessing volunteer talent increased the organization's responsiveness to people's requests to volunteer and departmental requests for volunteers.

In addition, prospective volunteers with Internet access can use the Burning Man web site to complete a standardized general questionnaire concerning their contact information, skills, and desired roles. Coordinators can access this large database to construct their own databases and lists. Dubois' recommendation that coordinators respond to potential volunteers with a personalized email or phone call within 72 hours of receiving requests decreases the possibility of potential volunteers slipping through the cracks and capitalizes upon the volunteers' presumed enthusiasm. However, the trend towards having prospective volunteers self-report information requires coordinators to more closely monitor and assess volunteer capacities on the job. In such cases, experienced coordinators experiment with unproven volunteers and assess the results, using the results to decide whether or not to entrust the volunteers with future projects.

Concurrently, the coordinators also actively rely on networks to draw in and “vouch” for people’s abilities and commitments.²⁰ Similar to previous reliance on overtly demonstrated competency, the organization depends on networks to account for some prospective volunteers’ abilities. Oftentimes proven volunteers bring in similarly skilled and motivated prospective volunteers from their own work place and extracurricular networks. For example, Graham recruited his wife Roxanne and co-worker Liz Weber to join the Media Mecca team, demonstrating the usage of networks to draw in members. Interviewees like McKeowen and Senter reported becoming “Burning Man evangelists,” convincing their friends to attend and, in some cases, volunteer for their teams. To some degree, the organization benefits from these efforts at recruiting, especially when members prescreen prospective members. A number of interviewees, such as Jess Bobier, Rob Oliver, and Raspa said that they selectively talked about the organization and event with people whom they thought would both contribute to and benefit from the ethic. For example, Bobier explains her criteria for determining whether or not to mention Burning Man to people:

...I guess this is sort of stereotyping, people that aren’t considered average or normal in terms of our usual everyday society and interactions. The people that I feel need to go to Burning Man are people that are really - that want to share, they want to share with strangers, they have something to give, they’re upbeat and positive and really have an enthusiasm for living in general, approaching life in a new way, being fresh, keeping things exciting, sometimes mixing things up...People that are aware of other people, people that have a sense of community. Those are the people that I think should be at BM.

The danger, as in any group that relies on this sort of “chain migration” through networks, is that the resulting population will become increasingly homogenous over time. Such an accusation has been directly leveled at certain volunteer groups for being cliquish by drawing upon a few networks, namely friends, and suspiciously eyeing those who have not “proven” themselves with ties to similar networks. The addition of a more bureaucratic model of recruiting counter-balances such potentially nepotistic tendencies, providing the necessary fresh heterogeneous blood that keeps the organization from stagnating. Combining the two types of entry, “walk-up” volunteering and network ties, ensures a more even mix of individuals, resources, and interests that enhances the organization’s emphasis on creativity and expressiveness.

²⁰ The 2000 manual on volunteerism suggests that coordinators encourage volunteers to bring in their friends.

Shaping roles around people

Some of the prospective members' difficulties with entering the organization are equally reflected in the longer process of matching volunteers with desired roles. Once a person enters the organization, the next step is determining what role to assume. This process can take months, depending upon what both the organization and individuals are seeking. In fact, role specification in the forms of formal job descriptions and even tacit knowledge – even and especially for paid workers – is often determined *after* the person has joined and worked in the organization for some time. The status of the organization as a growing and creative organization only furthers such dynamism. For example, Bobier did not have a formal job description for her role supporting Goodell until at least three months after she was hired as a full-time employee. Kreuter reported a similar gradual amassing of a role under Dubois, including periodically performing tasks that others choose not to perform. She depicts her development of her role as filling a certain niche:

...if the garbage cans need to be emptied, I'll help empty them, it's not a big deal. There's ... ego involved in our organization, and ... some people pick and choose the things that they do, like we all do. So I guess I fill some niches, I think I'm a good niche filler. I see what needs to be done, and I'll just go and do it...

Both Goodell and Dubois, who entered the organization in the mid to late 1990s and now hold upper tier positions, cited how they gradually developed and assumed spheres of responsibilities through pet projects, rather than waiting for other high-ups to directly assign areas to them. Goodell's retrospective look at how she arrived at her current responsibilities shows how the newer organizers, most of whom were working other paid jobs at the time, gradually latched onto whatever responsibilities they had an inclination towards, rather than waiting for others to assign them. She first describes how she started searching for a role, accompanying other organizers on business trips:

My role at that time [in 1997] was as [Harvey's] girlfriend observing the process, looking for the role, and then my work became identified in March, when they started setting up an organizational chart, and we started the permit process [for the event site on BLM managed land] and then I started travelling with them for the permit process.

After that point, Goodell's gradual accumulation of responsibilities included revamping the web site, taking over the print newsletter, conducting PR work, establishing and maintaining governmental relations, and developing a new email newsletter, all of which were responsibilities that others had not taken on:

And then almost anything, anything that wasn't already taken by someone there, like Harley and I tended to grab, she would grab stuff, and I would grab stuff, and I would grab if it related to communications. And there was lots of stuff that no one could do anything about. It would just sit there. There was only so much time. We all had full time jobs at the time.

Similarly, lower level volunteers who have enough initiative can introduce new areas and responsibilities with the support of organizers.²¹ Dubois outlines her role towards volunteers as enabling them to carry out their ideas, even to the point of letting them experience bumps or failures:

My philosophy with volunteers is to kind of let them hang themselves. [laugh] Let them get out there and try it. Empower them. Give them all the information they need so that they can make educated decisions. And empower them to feel confident to go out and do it. And if they do something stupid, that they themselves will realize that they did something stupid, and they will themselves correct what they've done or when it's pointed out to them, they'll want to or they'll say, "I'm not willing to do that," and they'll leave.

In many cases, the organizers cannot predict what is "needed" in the organization, including roles that would be taken for granted in more bureaucratized organizations. For instance, negotiations between Cindy Bakkum, a college student in the Netherlands, and organizers took several months before she could finalize her entrance into the Burning Man organization as arts management intern during the summer of 2000. The organization had never experienced having an intern before and allowed Bakkum to drift through different departments. Bakkum eventually coalesced and carried out desired responsibilities, and her performance led organizers to look forward to the return of a similarly capable intern. Attempts to predict organizational needs by writing out job descriptions for positions before people assume the positions seem to work, at least initially, for only very basic tasks, for example, an assistant who helps process tickets. However, over time, this assistant, like others, usually assumes additional responsibilities because other tasks simply need to be done, or the assistant has interests in assuming these responsibilities. Certainly some members, especially those unable to say "no" to requests, find the expansion of their roles from what they were initially agreed to do distressing and stressful. These are clearer cases in which initial job descriptions might protect members from feeling as they have failed or undergone "bait and switch," as well as decrease the potential for member burn-out. Part of the reason for the retrospective determination of roles has to do with the fact that performing tasks often assumes an ad hoc nature. The absence of a

²¹ This aspect is discussed in the MARIAL conference paper.

union or a large workforce decreases the possibility of shrugging off time-dependent tasks. For example, at a staff meeting, people brought up the fact that the two restrooms in the office were getting messy, and the office did not have a janitor, or a single person delegated to clean these bathrooms, so that responsibility fell on everyone in the office. Immediately after the meeting, a few of the senior staffers cleaned the restrooms.

Apparently, the one reported instance of attempting to design a new department, i.e. the Tech Team, top-down by slotting people into specific pre-determined roles met with resistance. Goodell, the organizer overseeing the team, pushed for a less rationalized way of matching of people to tasks, allowing members to “organically” self-determine roles to some extent. While this tactic may have increased the commitment of those involved who preferred to mold their own roles, this also resulted in a year of sometimes heated negotiations among the team members, as well as repeated wranglings over who would assume positions of leadership. At this point, the organization does annually revamp job descriptions in its operations manual, a binder containing its organizational mission, policies, and flow chart. However, this rationalization does not seem to adversely impact the organization’s ethic or flavor, other than in cases of disputed authority, which will be discussed in a later chapter.

Even after a member leaves the organization, his or her role may be left unfilled, and responsibilities may be added to those holding other positions or dropped entirely, much like an adhocracy. The exit of a LLC member who was a practicing lawyer and the organization’s reaction to this departure exemplify this lack of role retention. Rather than actively recruit another lawyer to replace this person’s area of expertise and responsibilities on the LLC board, the remaining organizers reallocated some of the position’s responsibilities among volunteers who were lawyers but not LLC members. The role has remained unfilled even though given the importance of the legal field in the US, the organization would probably benefit from legal expertise on the LLC. In a similar vein, Goodell predicts that no one would ever take over all of her multiple responsibilities in the event of her departure: “no one is going to take my job. It’s never going to happen. I’m positive of that, if I walked away tomorrow, [my responsibilities] would be divvied up somehow, [the organization] wouldn’t just go hunting for somebody...” To an extent, positions are unique, with personal imprints dependent upon that particular position-holder’s skill and interests. In fact, members are supported in their efforts to develop personas, or at least to express their personalities through

their roles. Members often adopt nicknames,²² wear costumes,²³ and initiate activities related to their interests. Goodell explains how she enjoys her role, which simultaneously utilizes her skills and allows her to be expressive in ways unavailable in previous workplace roles:

I'm leading people, and I'm engaging with people, and I get to wear costumes, and I'm this Cat lady, and I'm the Jack Rabbit, and I've created my persona, and I've created exactly the person I want to be, and I was a lot of a person that I want to be before that, pieces of it.

But I'm a different person than I would have been if I stayed doing web work or something else, but in this world and this space and time, I've been able to do exactly what I want and why not, you know?

On the flip side, the development of persona as part of the role can become, at times like any other rationalized position, an "iron cage" rather than an authentic expression of the self. In a later part of the same interview, Goodell relates how maintaining the persona side of the role can be difficult over extended periods of time:

...I don't want to talk sometimes, I don't want to smile at somebody, I don't want to sit and listen - I went to the Decompression Party [an event after the Burning Man event]. I was there for eleven hours, two of it were late at night, picking up the trash. Six of it were so hard. And the first three hours were exhausting, I wanted to hit someone.

But what do I do? I'm a persona, I'm actually a character. I'm a person that people want to talk to. By having these relationships, it's good for me, it's good for them, it's good for Burning Man, so I reach out beyond the fact that I'd really rather just walk away, and say hi and make that connection because that person - they have something that they need.

Similar to the emotion work rationalized in positions as described by Hochschild (19XX), expressiveness on demand is not always liberating for the individual.

Another advantage of the organization's development is the fact that the organization and event have matured to the point where even difficult to categorize or "out-dated" folks can assume new roles. Rather than just recruiting people to fill pre-existing roles, as Weber would predict, the organization forms roles to fit people and gives individuals opportunities to retool. Founder and lead organizer Larry Harvey explicitly indicates that one general and self-gratifying benefit of organizational growth has been the ability to develop better-fitting roles for individuals:

²² In fact, many people often only go by their legal names on government paperwork, provoking constant surprise among organizers, who tend to know people by their aliases.

²³ Most dress casually or thematically.

What's been happening recently is that as the scope of what we're doing gradually increases, those people with odd little constellations of talent that had no place now have a place because it's a bigger canvas, [so] you fit them in places, [and] that's very gratifying. Like Gerald Parsons,²⁴ we could never figure out what to do with Gerald, a writer with no talent for writing, who principlely by his persistence, by his uncanny willpower, what do you do with that? He had made a little niche in the world that worked for him and where it worked for us.

Now [that] we're opening [a] nonprofit [branch to the main Burning Man organization], I can see ways that you could define a role that would work [for an individual, and] I love doing that. I love finding roles for people, or finding venues for artists, finding ways to make the world consonant with their powers...So the idea of helping someone do that is very gratifying. I enjoy it greatly. I like to make stars out of artists, I like to find the right role for people, and so I'm always looking at it that way. I look at what they are, what we need to do, and how you could possibly match those two things together...

More generally, a number of members recognize the power of the organization's flexibility in terms of role definition. Members and organizers help people find appropriate roles, rather than just slotting people into roles. Dubois, for example, compares her experiences matching prospective volunteers with roles as one of the more rewarding parts of her work.

That's where if you could play God, if someone is really involved in Burning Man at my level, it can be the most beautiful thing because if you can recognize, ok someone has a really low paying kind of stupid job and they can't seem to get out of it, and they're in their mid 30s and pushing 40s and starting to wonder what's going on with their life, "how come I'm still a bartender?" And they have really good carpentry skills, or they have really good interpersonal skills that they don't use on a regular basis at their job, and they might not even realize that they have. If you can see that and then give them an opportunity to use these skills that they don't get to use otherwise, that aren't something that they realize that are skills that are really valuable and that they have.

If you can give them an opportunity to find that they do have those skills, it can just do everything for them, change their self-esteem, they come back and quit their job, and start on a new path, go back to school, whatever it is...

For Dubois, the potential benefits of placing people in appropriate roles, especially for those who cannot fully realize their potential in their every day jobs,²⁵ can be a mutually transformative experience, unleashing otherwise untapped potential for the individual and organization.

²⁴ Name has been changed.

²⁵ A topic addressed in another paper "The Burning Man organization: how a "corporation" develops a community within the middle class," presented at the MARIAL conference.

In addition, the organizational ethic of radical inclusiveness, or the concept of including people – even potentially problematic persons, such as the media – as opposed to exclusion, pre-empts some inclinations towards weeding out those considered by some to be “deadwood.” Harvey directly considers how stages in the organization development resulted in two different types of outcomes for older members, particularly for the other two co-founders:

Years ago when I started the LLC and started the – and I tried to get Michael [Mikel] to come in with us [as a LLC member], and work with – and he was [a member of an earlier partnership version of the organization] Paperman, too – to really come in with us. I said, “what are you afraid of Michael?” He said, “I’m afraid that you’ll get rid of me.” I said, Michael, “you really think [that I’d do that]...” Then he came in with us.

So Michael in his way has been really crucial to us. He has this anomalous position. The truth of the matter is without his help, I don’t know if I would have done it – I would have tried like hell. After that I got reorganized, Michael didn’t have as much to do. We got Rangers working with middle management, and he became a Ranger icon and then there was tension about Michael with the rest of them, because they said, “he’s not managing, what’s he doing, he’s just sopping up the gravy, what’s he doing?” So I had to deal with that...I felt bad about it all this time because I had no role for him, so now I think I’ve found it [a role as a travelling ambassador], so that’s why I’m so happy about it...

It’s just that what happened over time is that the people with no management ability dropped away – they just couldn’t or wouldn’t deal cope with responsibility, like John [Law], they dropped away. But Michael stayed with it, and we worked through it, and we found room for him.

In other words, people such as the other co-founders either self-selected to exit the organization or to develop new roles, given that the organization allowed them the latitude to develop skills for new positions. A number of persons dating from the earlier days of the organization, including Larry Harvey, lacked typical business backgrounds or experiences with office environments. Those who disliked the organization’s formalizing some processes and the growing size of the event eventually left. Over time, a few gradually picked up needed skills, and the addition of more recent members who did have such skills and relevant experiences helped shift the organization into instituting more “standardized” structures that still complemented the Burning Man ethic. In other words, the organization can cut some slack for people who were directly instrumental at one point to the organization but for the time being, drift within the organization without directly contributing. In most bureaucracies, these people, particularly the founders,

who have seemed to outstay their immediate usefulness, would be ousted in the interests of efficiency. Certainly, Burning Man members are not always tolerant or immune to political maneuvering - Harvey's comments indicate how the resentment of those who see these drifters as free-riders could lead to attempted ousters. In the Burning Man organization, for the most part, such people are more tolerated, perhaps in somewhat begrudging appreciation of what they have done in the past. This higher level of tolerance is a tacit acknowledgement that people cannot always be expected to maintain constant levels of commitment or productivity levels, especially if at one point, such people "gave it all" to the organization and event.²⁶ Allowing members to retool and stay with the organization solidifies the linkages among networks and generations, enhancing the basis for tacit knowledge, creativity, and inclusiveness.

In a similar vein, past researchers like Whitt have noted how alternative organizations institute role or job rotation rather than specific job specialization. While the Burning Man organization does not actively encourage persons to try every role, members can shift around departments. In fact, in an effort to build cohesion across units with the organization, particularly ones prone to cultivating a competitive "us vs. them" mentality towards other units, organizers have asked members to act as representatives across groups by participating in other units' meetings and activities. Creating such links among networks counteracts potential divisions created by differentiation within the growing organization. In addition, these formal linkages encourage the freer flow of resources, enhancing organizational activities.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of this organization's deviation from bureaucratization is the willingness to entertain the possibility that supporting the organization's ethic eventually might and should both outstrip and outlive the capacities of organization and its organizers. This belief, if it is enacted over time, will prove an effective counter to the oligarchization tendencies predicted by Michels. Goodell, for example, idealistically foresees a time when the main Burning Man organization and its staff are less central, or even unneeded, to the process of organizing. While she realizes that not everyone shares her vision, she feels that the only way the Burning Man ethic will survive is through the training of other persons of how to organize. She makes the following claim: "If this event is going to be around for 50 years, it will only be around because we empowered people with the information about how to make it run, and that we can step away from it, and it will keep on running on its own." The organization's support of

²⁶ Such a tolerance seems wiser than the assumption of most work design literature, i.e. that people can and

the development of more decentralized nodes of networks through domestic and international regional groups and their own formalized organizations provides the strongest evidence for the members' and organization's commitments towards an ethic. For many, bringing the Burning Man lifestyle into the mainstream constitutes a social movement worthy of contributing to an organization, but not to the extent of valuing the organization's existence over that of the movement's. Those, as will be discussed later, who are seen to be pursuing less than honorable interests, such as consolidating personal power through the organization, are checked by gossip and sanctioning.

Summary

This chapter examines the following two issues, the entry and placement of members into the Burning Man organization. The expansion of the organization has necessitated hybridizing certain bureaucratic structures with previous loose or alternative practices. More specifically, organizers have automated the process of gathering initial information on prospective volunteers, in contrast to previous practices of waiting for volunteers to prove themselves. Rationalizing this process complements the organization's reliance on members' networks to recruit other quality volunteers. In comparison, the placement of these persons is less routinized, reflecting the emphasis on molding the organization around the persons and enhancing individuals' expressiveness. Individuals usually develop their roles, imprinting their unique flavor upon the organization. While in some cases clear role definition would protect individuals from burn-out or uncertainty, the organization's willingness to allow individuals more time and space to find their roles better meets the organizational ethic than a stricter slotting of persons into roles.

will constantly produce, if only given the "right" set of conditions.