Article

Organiblò: Engaging People in "Circular" Organizations and Enabling Social Sustainability

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Abstract: The present analysis related to social sustainability aims at evaluating and understanding how a "circular" or "round" organization such as the so-called *Organiblò* (i.e., a fusion of the terms "organigram" and the Italian word for "porthole") functions. More precisely, the present article wants to raise awareness among companies that a profound cultural change seems necessary to push the search for sustainable objectives further. In this specific regard, independent interviews with the CEOs of 11 medium-sized enterprises and 46 young middle managers were conducted. Based on their responses, our analysis highlights the advantages of a "circular" organization, which range from better corporate sustainability to greater freedom of staff and cross-functional activities as well as the valorization of individuals and enhanced flexibility and collaborative spirit. However, time is needed to effect such a profound cultural change. The main difficulties consist in the approach to decision-making processes, because top management is often not yet prone to strongly encourage transparency, a culture of feedback and inclusiveness in the workforce. Consequently, a new, additional manager (i.e., a "wheeler manager") might disseminate a new managing culture and involve employees in contributing to the company's sustainability.

Keywords: "circular" or "round" organizations; corporate mission; creativity, flexibility and empowerment; human resources management; new managing culture; social sustainability; "wheeler manager"

1. Introduction

The present article aims at raising (further) awareness among companies as to why a profound cultural change is necessary to push the search for sustainable objectives further. Moreover, it analyzes the pros and cons of "circular" or "round" organizations and how they can actively contribute to achieving social sustainability. In this specific regard, the present article operates in a twofold way:

- On the one hand, we introduce the new concept of *Organiblò* (i.e., a fusion of the terms "organigram" and the Italian word for "porthole") as well as a new, additional manager (i.e., a "wheeler manager") to enhance a culture of continuous feedback and inclusiveness in companies;
- On the other hand, we conducted independent interviews with the CEOs of 11 medium-sized enterprises and 46 young middle managers to explore why "circular" organizations are particularly able to cope with today's complexity in terms of corporate as well as individual needs.

The present article aims at contributing to the existing literature on "circular" or "round" organizations by providing new insights from CEOs as well as young middle managers, but also future research inputs and potential solutions to strengthen companies' sustainability. Our research hypothesis is, therefore, that "circular" or "round" organizations (compared to flat ones) are particularly capable of enhancing corporate sustainability as well as flexibility and collaborative spirit (provided that a profound cultural change is effected). For instance, Ref. [1] found that "companies and sole proprietorships with a higher circularity score have a significantly higher resilience score during crises and during normal times, compared to less circular companies". In this specific regard, Section 1 is devoted to introducing the topic, the adopted methodological approach as well as the relevant literature on "circular" or "round" organizations. Section 2 analyzes, on the one hand, the results obtained from our independent interviews with top-level managers and, on the other, those gained from middle managers. Moreover, we highlight specific key concepts like "transparency", "culture of feedback", "diversity" and "decision-making system" which "circular" or "round" organizations can particularly reshape. Section 3 presents the main research limitations and future perspectives. Additionally, we introduce the innovative concepts of *Organiblò* and "wheeler manager" and we analyze their value-added nature. Section 4 discusses further aspects of "circular" or "round" organizations and of our research framework, while Appendix A contains additional data from and questions asked in the above-mentioned independent interviews.

Summing up, the present article explores how organizations characterized by flat organizational structures can engage employees, enhance social sustainability and overcome existing challenges in terms of cultural mindsets. Moreover, it is not the article's aim to provide rigid conclusions; rather, the aim is to provide additional food for thought in light of the ongoing debate on hierarchical organizational structures. The starting point is that "in a circular organization [. . .] every person in a position of authority—each manager and supervisor—is provided with a board which is made up of the manager, his or her immediate superior, and his or her immediate subordinates" [2]. *Organiblò* and the "wheeler manager" are in this specific regard two never-before mapped concepts which can contribute to such ambitious (but achievable) goals. In a sense, as we will see, "circular" organizations are comparable to those organizations which are often defined as "lean" or "flexible" (and therefore more "resilient") and have been more frequently analyzed. Moreover, "round" organizational structures are not just "less formal" but are better prepared to cope with increasing needs of coordination and dialogue between corporate departments, better able to fulfill expectations of newer generations of employees and to fit in circular economies in which every single economic actor can make a difference in terms of contributing to (social) sustainability. Further research is needed to assess how the relatively new concept of "circular" or "round" organization will evolve over the next decades and whether there will be consistently and throughout companies a strongly defined differentiation from "flexible" or "lean" companies.

1.1. Introduction and Review of the Relevant Literature

In this preliminary subsection, we comparatively present research on "tall" versus "flat" organizational structures. We do not aim to display the entire spectrum of contributions made so far, but some of the most relevant studies necessary to convey the pros and cons of "circular" or "round" organizations are discussed.

For sure, the economic literature has so far displayed a significant consensus on the fact that the most innovative organizations, namely, those "engag[ing] everyone throughout the organization in the task of developing and implementing new ways to reach the organization's goals" [3], are mostly pioneering in terms of developing managerial approaches [4]. Hierarchical organizations, whose structures are often represented by a pyramid and which are "not just an organizational construct [but] a phenomenon intrinsic to the complexity of the natural world. Indeed, all biological organisms are made up of systems—circulatory, skeletal, and respiratory—which themselves comprise many subsystems" [5], are instead

generally associated with a rather "traditional" or "conservative" approach to innovation but also to openness to diversity, inclusiveness and new challenges [6–9]. Moreover, the pyramid's layout represents per se authority and control, which are typical of top-down approaches. "Tall" organizational structures are thus very different from "flat" organizations. Among the main differences are, certainly, communication, flexibility and creativity [10]. In flat organizations, communication may be more open because most employees are involved [11] while maintaining their autonomy, responsibility and authority, which might in turn nourish a spirit of empowerment, satisfaction and creativity [12].

Interestingly enough, both "tall" and "flat" organizational structures as summarized above are significantly different from a new "circular" organizational structure which our article focuses on. Different from a vertical organizational structure—tall or flat—a round organizational structure allows employees to focus much more on pursuing the corporate's mission collectively [13]. Functional competences are still differentiated, but they are conceived to reach the same goal, namely, to make the vision real. Focusing on the corporate's mission, a new complementary managerial figure has to be created to induce the corporate's units to consistently orbit around the same mission.

There is also growing empirical evidence that organizational structures, i.e., "the way in which a large company or organization is organized, for example, the types of relationships that exist between managers and employees" [14], have flattened over time even if managers sometimes still take major decisions [15] or restrictive control structures emerge after the flattening of organizational hierarchies [16]. Moreover, ref. [17] recognizes in the definition of "flat organization" a symbolic importance rather than a literal meaning consisting in "[f]latness symboliz[ing] proximity, informality, and free communication". In fact, flat organizations compared to tall ones have come a long way in terms of overcoming cultural resistances, but they also face difficulties in terms of practical implementation [18] as well as empirical verification [19]. At the same time, organizations characterized by flat structures have to make sure that "each manager's span of control does not become too wide so that they cannot manage their direct reports effectively" [20]. In this specific regard, ref. [21] highlights that flat organizational structures have been associated with smaller firms and "self-actualization", while taller organizational structures are associated with bigger companies and "security needs". Among such pioneering studies on the trend of "flattening" organizations, ref. [22] finds more satisfaction with respect to self-actualization and higher performance efficiency than with "teams [. . .] achieving "toweringly" higher results" in tall organizations [23]. The hypothesis that flat organizational structures enable employees to make optimal use of their competencies while benefitting from greater freedom of action is also confirmed by [24]. In this specific regard, Figure 1 represents one of the very first visual depictions of tall versus flat organizations grouped as in the experiment reported in [25].

Among the main critiques against flat organizational structures characterized by the absence of middle managers [26], a recent strain of contributions to the literature claim that this organizational trend might entail a hidden cost of "decreasing the diversity in the applicant pool" [27] or of struggling with creative inertia due to the absence of formal management [28], which requires a higher level of leadership [29]. While early studies, such as [30], have not glossed over potential drawbacks of reducing hierarchical levels—among them, the higher amount of time needed to resolve potential conflicts and coordinate efforts—and more recent ones, such as [31], have highlighted how decentralized (networked) organizations develop new "filtering tactics to sort out members who are valuable to the group", it appears that there is a surging resistance to such an organizational trend.

Especially in recent years, although "the idea of autonomous teams self-determining how to execute to achieve a pre-specified goal can be traced back at least to king Gustav II Adolph of 17th-century Sweden" [32], an increasing number of companies are nevertheless abandoning traditional hierarchical organizational structures in favor of more sustainable, flexible and collaborative approaches: the objective of these new structures is precisely to create a more agile and sustainable working environment focused on sharing responsibil-

ities, the fluidity of information and continuous innovation [33]. Following millennials'
main working ambitions [34], a circular organizational structure allows participants to act
around an identified and shared mission, which in turn avoids the existence of a hierarchi-
cal chain of command but keeps functional areas of individual competences that allow for
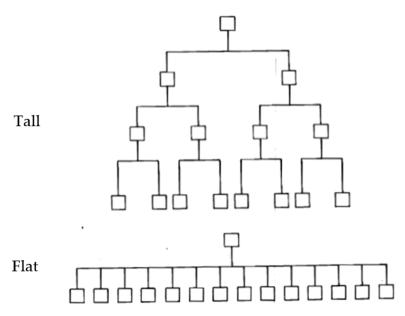the achievement of holistic outcomes [35].

Figure 1. Ref. [25]'s early depiction of tall (see upper scheme) versus flat (see lower scheme) organi-
zations.

1.2. The Relevance of Engaging Employees in Organizations

Frenetic daily activities characterized by a high degree of complexity have induced
organizations to create an increasing number of hierarchical levels to manage problems and
have let them forget how the individual remains at the core of achieving any objective. The
active involvement and valorization of each individual in an organization is fundamental
to guaranteeing continuous improvements and creating an antifragility structure [36],
which is a step towards greater resilience. It is therefore necessary for each collaborator to
become an integral part of this evolution and to be actively involved in co-participating in
continuous improvement solutions. Moreover, such active engagement is a fundamental
step in terms of social security, which every company must take care of if they want to
foster a culture of trust. Flat and open organizations support ideas and generate innovation.
In this specific regard, all employees participate in finding new ideas in a transversal and
open manner without hesitation due to subservience towards others. A company exists
thanks to its employees and because it is able to draw transversal excellence from each
one. This is an added value which, thanks to flat organizational models, can be developed
further. Certainly, corporate culture is at the basis of this evolution to reach a consistent
corporate mission. Therefore, a balanced model of corporate well-being is indispensable to
achieve this by means of organizational behaviors enhancing trust and mutual respect.

A crucial concept in this specific regard is that of "social sustainability", which is also
contained in the 17 objectives of the UN 2030 agenda for sustainable development [37]. To
achieve such ambitious goals, human-centricity is the determining factor contributing to
reshaping behaviors. An organization particularly engaged in implementing Corporate
Social Responsibility (CSR) or in using different ISO certifications defines how much it
respects individuals and valorizes them, as well as its development, transversal growth,
engagement, mutual trust and responsibility towards society. All these elements make
it possible to increase loyalty, motivation and especially corporate well-being, which is
often insufficient in its "all-round" application. Being an integral part of the continuous
improvement of organizations thanks to the adoption of leaner work methodologies, the

above-mentioned elements are crucial for the growth of a company but also for the professional growth of all involved individuals. To implement these behaviors, it is necessary to have a specific corporate culture and, even more, particular corporate values, which should clearly identify the positioning of the company.

The latest research on the future of work by [38] highlights how the employee experience is fundamental because a company is made more attractive and capable of retaining its talents by applying flat and transversal organizational models in which employees work and think like start-uppers. In this entrepreneurial, new work environment, an innovative managing figure has to be conceived to encourage a new corporate culture and to drive changes. In fact, as reminded by [39], employers have, over time, put more emphasis on "core" work skills. This trend is also linked to changes in the organization of work, which have in turn created flatter work structures, and stresses the relevance of communication, collaboration, problem solving, consistency in performance and personal responsibility at any occupational level. Sufficiently solid "core" work skills are particularly required if firms, having adopted modern types of organization of work, aim at performing effectively. In this specific regard, stronger skills can for sure represent a basis for better performance. Moreover, modern organizations need "a system that integrates cyberspace and physical space. [. . .] knowledge assets are the central structuring elements for sustainable development" [40].

The evolution of corporate behavior is hence based on truly living the corporate culture, which defines behaviors, approaches and instruments. Agile and lean thinking, as well as design-thinking methodologies, are behavior-enabling strategies [41], which are in turn part of the evolution of human resource management [42]. In fact, as reminded by [43], "HR is also uniquely positioned to engage firms in cross-functional transformational change efforts, as its work is embedded in every business function within an organization".

1.3. Methodological Aspect of the Research

In our research on the innovative concept of *Organiblò*, we employed a methodology centered around utilizing primary sources: this approach allowed us to involve individuals and organizations engaging circular practices and social sustainability initiatives. By accessing primary sources, such as interviews and surveys, we aimed to gather firsthand insights, experiences and opinions regarding the implementation and impact of *Organiblò* to gain a comprehensive understanding of how *Organiblò* could foster engagement among people within circular organizations and contribute to the promotion of social sustainability. Incorporating primary sources not only provides us with authentic and up-to-date information but also facilitates a deeper exploration of the practical implications and challenges associated with the adoption of *Organiblò* and—more generally—of all circular organizational structures [44].

The data collection was split into two different formats: a survey aimed at middle management, which is more structured and qualified, which would allow us to gain a comprehensive overview of large numbers and in a short time. The middle management of companies from different sectors was specifically chosen as the reference target, as both the potential figure of the future "wheel manager" and people who could interact with this new figure can be identified at this level. The second part of the data collection was aimed at top management and was structured with one-to-one interviews to better understand how the *Organiblò* approach could be applied and strategically accepted. The top level governs strategic thinking whose central focus is today mainly defined by the theme of social sustainability as an element that impacts and interacts with every single level or activity of the organizational structure. In the strategic context, the *Organiblò* approach helps to develop flexible and adaptive systems that are able to support continuous learning thanks to the function of the "wheeler manager" who facilitates the flow of value generated in the various groups and/or system interactions, which is duly codified. Through this methodology, we were able to capture diverse perspectives and generate valuable findings contributing to the advancement of knowledge in this emerging field.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. An Analysis from the Perspective of Top-Level Governance

The companies contacted as part of the "direct interview" format represent the target territory in a homogeneous way as they are cross-category (e.g., they come from the following sectors: fashion, machinery, industry, the automotive sphere, transport, innovative technologies and electronics). Moreover, 60% of the interviewed companies are multinationals, while 40% of them specifically operate in the Swiss Italian Region. This allowed for more heterogeneous angles of view supporting greater adherence to the real situation. Questions were addressed to CEOs and top managers of each company in order to demonstrate the point of view of those who should have a clear vision of the relevant organizational system. All participants in the study were provided with informed consent forms and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

The aim of the research was to collect feedback about the need to introduce models of systemic and sustainable agility in modern organizational structures. To investigate the extent to which companies can embrace a "circular" organizational structure, we therefore adopted an interview format involving managers who were sufficiently representative (despite the limited sample of companies (11)) in terms of typologies of commodities produced, cross-sector categories and different company dimensions. More specifically, the interviews were aimed at gaining relevant insights into what managers belonging to different companies in the Italian-speaking Swiss region (i.e., Ticino) think about the adoption of "circular" organizational structures. The responses to our interviews provide a rather "nuanced" picture in terms of the feasibility and implications of "circular" organizational frameworks existing in traditional versus startup company environments.

2.1.1. Transparency

Based on our findings, 6 of the interviewed companies (more than 50%) identified transparency as an essential factor enabling the spreading of the company's mission. An active role for employees is sometimes facilitated by rewards, while with regard to the format adopted for the dissemination of information, such as strategic business goals ranging from "typical" periodical meetings to coffee breaks, intranets, etc. [45], it was noted that "competency development opportunities, team interdependence, and group rewards were the most significant determinants of interpersonal trust". In this specific regard, transparency is fundamental for 40% of the interviewed companies and it creates an open and sincere working environment encouraging mutual trust and respect. Some of the topics experimentally identified so far are going to be implemented in the interviewed companies. Among them are the following:

- Clear communication: decisions, policies and procedures of companies have to be communicated in a clear and understandable manner to employees;
- One-to-one meetings: by organizing them on a regular basis, managers encourage employees to freely address problems. This approach contributes to the creation of an "open" work environment where communication is circular;
- Accountability: a higher level of transparency also implies taking responsibility for each action. Furthermore, it becomes unavoidable to recognize mistakes, resolve them and learn from them;
- Data: sharing company data among employees is likely to promote transparency through all communication channels.

2.1.2. Culture of Feedback

Based on our survey, 4 companies (less than 40%) believe that feedback is essential to grasp the nuances characterizing individuals or groups and to obtain an overall picture in support of the top management. Moreover, to be effective and responsive, companies shall adopt mechanisms to collect, analyze and respond to information in real time. Furthermore, it emerges that feedback activity takes place through the following:

- Regular surveys covering a wide range of topics ranging from levels of customer satisfaction to employee sentiment about internal issues;
- Open feedback channels like customer service hotlines, online forums and social media are among the instruments promoting a pervasive culture of feedback;
- Data analytics tools to track and analyze trends in customer feedback and market behavior are also particularly necessary;
- Regular reviews and updates on strategies and processes should be collected to integrate them, with feedback being given on them;
- Ongoing training and investing in training is crucial to ensure that employees understand the importance of feedback and are able to respond effectively.

2.1.3. Diversity

Based on our sample, 7 of the interviewed companies (more than 60%) stated that they are starting to recognize the benefits of promoting an inclusive workforce. Among these advantages are greater creativity and innovation, a better understanding of global markets, a greater ability to attract and retain talent, as well as a better corporate reputation. Despite the growing awareness of how relevant diversity is, the sample of surveyed companies are still struggling to create truly inclusive workplaces. Some frequent obstacles include biases and stereotypes, lack of support from company leaders, and non-inclusive hiring and promotion policies and practices. To promote diversity, the interviewed companies also highlighted the need to implement a variety of strategies, including diversity training, mentoring and networking for under-represented groups, as well as reviewing hiring and promotion policies and practices to ensure equity as well as the promotion of a corporate culture valuing and celebrating differences highly. This is relevant insofar as [46] widely demonstrated that "managers started to seek the best strategies to effectively run this mixed environment and implement the leading diversity management policies for human resource management sustainability, which is also considered as very constructive in boosting employees' performance, motivation, satisfaction, as well as their work engagement".

2.1.4. Decision-Making System

Based on our findings, 7 of the interviewed companies (more than 60%) stated that the decision-making process appears to be quite fluid because organizational leaders tend to decide in almost all cases. Nevertheless, the interviewees recognize that a collaborative process involving different hierarchical levels might provide even better results.

In fact, among the most relevant critical considerations is precisely the limited amount of democracy in decision-making processes due to resistance from management-level decision makers (who might easily perceive such cultural change in their company as a threat to their authority). In fact, as highlighted by [47], "[i]nnovation is a complicated and high-risk mental process, where in each stage employees' innovative attitude and behavior will be affected by the varying behaviors of their direct leaders". Moreover, it also emerged that a clear streamline in terms of responsibility and accountability is crucial to make sure that decisions are implemented effectively. In this specific regard, it appears to be encouraging that the majority of interviewed companies declared that they regard circular organizational methods, but also operative autonomy, clear communication, well-defined streamlines of responsibilities and a strong commitment at all levels to adopt inclusive approaches, with optimism. By doing so, organizations could develop a high grade of democracy, which is in turn necessary for a good balance between innovative organizational forces.

The interviewed managers generally also expressed optimism about the potential of circular models, while they highlighted their positive impact in terms of the quality of the goods and services to be offered and of collaborative relationships among team members. Finally, a recurring theme also emerged: the challenge of integrating circularity into established, "silo-like" structures which prevail in several organizations. The challenges identified in our interviews are comparable to those highlighted by other research. For sure,

cultural aspects represent the major challenge for any change effort within organizations, and this matter of fact is particularly challenging for circular organizational structures.

2.2. An Analysis from the Perspective of Middle Management

The survey aimed to investigate the perceptions of local graduate students currently holding executive or middle-management positions in different companies regarding the adoption of a round organizational structure. A total of 60 potential candidates were contacted via LinkedIn: 46 out of them responded within a two-week timeframe, and 45% of the interviewees were aged between 26 and 30 years (38 of whom also completed the questionnaire). The sample was diverse in terms of company sizes, locations and seniority levels. The distribution of company locations also revealed a notable concentration in the Canton of Ticino (61% of the sample), followed by other Swiss cantons (32%) and companies located abroad (8%). This distribution underlines—once again—the significance of the Swiss business landscape in the context of the study, especially for the Canton of Ticino, representing 14% of the Swiss population and 18% of the Swiss GDP [48]. The interview questions were formulated based on the challenging aspects we feel that the shift from "taller" to "flatter" organizational structures should entail taking into particular consideration.

Moreover, the sectors represented by the surveyed companies provided a diverse snapshot of the economy, with manufacturing (29%), services (26%), transportation and logistics (13%), as well as IT (8%) sectors being predominant. Such diversity suggests that the findings could be applicable across various industries, enhancing the generalizability of the study's results. According to [49,50], the services sector has consistently represented the largest portion of the Swiss GDP in recent years, accounting for around 74%, while the manufacturing sector follows by accounting for approximately 25% of GDP. The transportation and logistics as well as the IT sectors contributed to a lesser extent (8% of GDP) but are still significant for the Swiss economy [51]. Furthermore, the fact that 55% of respondents work in medium–large companies (defined as those with over 100 employees) indicates a focus on organizations with substantial resources and potentially complex management structures in a territory in which large companies represent less than 1% of Swiss companies and employ almost 45% of the workforce. The decision within this analytical environment to create a structured survey on organizational dynamics among middle management and executive professionals stemmed from a strong research interest in understanding workplace structures, decision-making processes and sustainability in modern companies. We decided on this to provide further, useful insights into the current state of the organizational culture in these companies. In the next pages, we provide the statistical results obtained for some particularly meaningful questions:

- Question 4: "Is the company you work for open to accept suggestions from collaborators?"

Interestingly, our survey revealed a positive trend (Figure 2), and all respondents declared that their companies are more or less strongly receptive to suggestions from employees, which in turn fosters an environment open to communication and the sharing of ideas, "help[ing] the firm to improve its competitive position in the market through the development of employees' innovative behavior" [52]. However, it is relevant to note that openness to suggestions is not synonymous with a truly open or fluid decision-making process (Figure 2), as demonstrated by the fact that only 26% of the respondents declared that their company is characterized by a truly open or fluid decision-making process. This outcome suggests that there is still a significant gap between the rhetoric of several companies and the reality of how decisions are made. In fact, a truly open or fluid decision-making process would allow employees to participate meaningfully in decision making (i.e., regardless of their level in the organization). In this specific regard, the essence of circular organizations could contribute to fill this gap and could shed further light on improving organizational effectiveness.
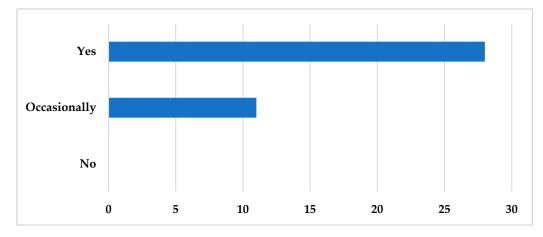
Figure 2. The openness of companies to the suggestions of employees.

- Question 8: "Are feedback methodologies or is a culture of regular feedback in use?"

Moreover, 54% of respondents declared that their company uses a regular feedback system for employees (Figure 3), which provides another meaningful signal suggesting that these companies are committed to providing employees with feedback on their performance.
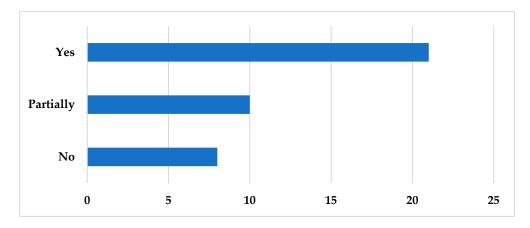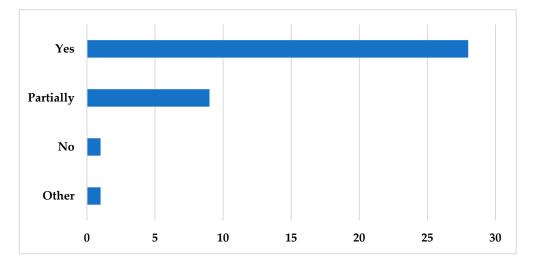

Figure 3. The existence of a "feedback culture".

- Question 9: "Do you think that the adoption of a "circular" organizational chart (i.e., a more agile and sustainable organizational chart, focused on sharing responsibilities, fluidity of information and continuous innovation) could be useful?"

One of the most significant findings is that 95% of respondents declared that they believe it could be useful for their company to adopt a circular organizational structure (Figure 4). We interpret this result by thinking that there is a strong desire among employees for more agile and sustainable organizations. A circular organizational structure is, in fact, mostly based on key principles such as sharing responsibilities, fluid information flows and sustainability. The findings of the survey show that neither seniority within the company and industry sector nor the size of the company itself significantly influenced the responses of the professionals. This result implies that trends and preferences identified are not confined to specific demographic or organizational characteristics, which in turn suggests a universal interest in more progressive, sustainable and collaborative organizational structures. Based on these findings, further recommendations can be made to improve the organizational culture in modern companies. The main takeaway policy recommendation is, nevertheless, addressed to companies which should establish truly open decision-making processes allowing employees to participate meaningfully in their different management processes. Shared responsibilities, fluid information flows and continuous innovation are,

in fact, at the core of circular organizational structures because they affect "employees' social responsibility-related behaviors" [53].

Figure 4. "Circular" organizational structures in the future and their usefulness.

Regardless of their individual characteristics, the respondents' views were remarkably similar: they significantly believe that adopting a "round" organizational structure could be beneficial, as it would promote a more agile and sustainable organizational structure focused on shared responsibilities, information fluidity and continuous innovation. These findings also suggest that there is a strong interest in change among professionals in executive and middle-management positions. In fact, they are seemingly open to new ideas and believe that "round" organizational structures could be an effective way to develop in today's rapidly changing business environment, with no specific caveats depending on sectors, products or markets.

3. Research Limitations and Future Perspectives

3.1. Research Limitations

Clearly enough, our study is only exploratory in nature and has several limitations, such as the following:

1. The sample size was relatively small (38 interviewees completed the survey);
2. The sample was not representative of all local graduate students;
3. The data were self-reported and may be subject to corresponding biases.

Future research should address these limitations by using a larger and more representative sample and by collecting data through a variety of other methods. Despite its limitations, this study provides valuable insights into the perceptions of executive or middle-management professionals regarding the adoption of new "round" organizational structures.

3.2. A New "Circular" Organization Called Organiblò

As already mentioned, there have been several studies that have found that circular organizational structures can lead to benefits, such as sharing and collaboration as well as better decision making. Moreover, research does not gloss over the fact that there remain several challenges which should be addressed before circular organizational structures can be successfully implemented [54]. Circular organizational structures require, in fact, a significant shift away from traditional hierarchical structures, which can be difficult for people who are accustomed to working in a top-down environment [55]. Summing up, we can easily state that leadership is a critical factor in the success of circular organizational structures and that leaders need to be committed to the relevant principles of social sustainability, which include the adoption of practices that value and include people of diverse backgrounds, genders, ethnicities, abilities and sexual orientations. Actually, they need to

be able to create a culture within the organization supporting these principles. By taking up these challenges, we believe that companies would create a more productive, sustainable and rewarding work environment for their employees and improve the probabilities of success.

In this specific regard, *Organiblò* aims at merging the main characteristics of a circular organizational structure (i.e., "organigram") and a porthole (i.e., the Italian term *oblò*) to acquire a more profound view of a company's mission and its to-be-pursued objectives. If we embrace this metaphor, a company's mission can be seen through the *oblò* from many perspectives, contributing to a strongly mission-centered approach (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Oblò*: mission-centered view.

Organiblò is an organizational approach particularly useful to ignite force from the organization's core, allowing employees to be more involved and to identify themselves as part of the organization's common mission. There is, in fact, no doubt that employees actively participate in increasing economic benefits and in improving working well-being. One common thread is that tools like *Organiblò* can facilitate the transition to a new type of organizational approach, but they are not standalone solutions when a more profound cultural shift is necessary for the successful adoption of circular frameworks. This makes it all the more indispensable to cultivate agile mindsets and openness to change as fundamental prerequisites for a smooth integration process.

"Organization chart" (*organigramma*) and "porthole" (*oblò*) are two words that are terminologically very distant but which have profound meanings which interconnect perfectly. In fact, scopes, corporate beliefs and visions are at the core of *Organiblò*. The porthole is the opening both outwardly and inwardly, thus generating depth and importance for each employee and task. Both towards customers and employees, this approach gives everyone the opportunity (and freedom) to express his/her point of view. Moreover, it encourages employees as well as managers to think outside the box. Within this framework, each element has its place and contributes to the balance in the organization itself. Circularity also implies mobility within the company, with mixed groups of employees periodically visiting various departments to find and discuss improvements, but also constructive criticism and solutions (e.g., Gemba walks). Each employee should feel free to grow personally and professionally while contributing to a healthy and competitive work environment.

In this specific regard, every item of information (thanks to centrifugal forces) should reach every part of the organization. This organizational approach allows for greater

flexibility and ease of adaptation to changes because it involves employees and encourages creativity. Moreover, the strength of *Organiblò* are its own parts:

- Its "center", which represents the objective to be commonly achieved in the organization;
- Its "glass" is synonymous with transparency;
- Its "frame" symbolizes a corporate's path;
- Its "bolts" represent stability while taking fundamental steps;
- Its "window" has to be seen as an opening towards the outside;
- Its "handle" has to be perceived as security;
- Its "zip" also stimulates further opening;
- Its watertight and -proof "seal" metaphorically helps organizations to survive in difficult times.

Organiblò therefore represents an innovative and powerful organizational approach that places the corporate's objectives and/or beliefs at the center while facilitating openness and different points of view. The flexibility of adapting to changes, combined with the active involvement of employees, can make *Organiblò* highly effective, both for small and medium-sized businesses as well as for large enterprises. Hence, we believe that *Organiblò* is the perfect synthesis of stability and openness and that it will allow companies to achieve their objectives and visions.

Within such a complex and rapidly evolving environment, the growth perspectives of small, flat organizations especially seem to depend on trust and credibility in the workplace [56], which represent a crucial element according to a recent study [57], which found that, "based upon research of 410 companies across 8 industries, highly aligned companies grow revenue 58% faster and are 72% more profitable". Moreover, there seems to be a sufficient consensus on the fact that small companies—especially startups—are better able to cope with "flat organizational structures, minimal hierarchy, self-management, and an emphasis on empowerment" but struggle to maintain such an approach when growing in dimensions [58].

In parallel with this, millennials are often—and significantly more than previous generations—driven by social values rather than by more stable positions or higher salaries [59]. In this specific regard, ref. [60] highlights some keywords particularly relevant to these generations: (1) "friendly working atmosphere"; (2) "flexible working hours"; (3) "opportunity to integrate with the team"; (4) "independence in decision-making"; (5) "possibility to work in different positions (rotation)". Perhaps because of this they are more in tune with circular organizations than tall ones [61]. In fact, circular organizational structures allow employees to act around a shared, previously commonly identified corporate mission to fulfil their tasks by avoiding a hierarchical chain of command but by keeping functional areas related to individual competences in order to achieve holistic outcomes [35]. *Organiblò*'s circular organization is indeed more open, collaborative and innovative and aims at being more likely to succeed in the long run.

3.3. The Role of the "Wheeler Manager" in Organiblò

More than just representing an expiring facilitator, a "wheeler manager" has to lead employees belonging to different departments and to make them work towards the same vision and the company's sustainable mission. In fact, "[c]ompanies want their employees industrial goals set by the managers" [62]. Based on our findings, a circular organizational structure best describes the rolling mobility of managers who would normally belong to different functional units. A rolling leadership is therefore promoted by changing functional areas while exerting managing skills. Moreover, the "wheeler manager" can be somehow compared to a well-known figure such as the project manager, but with the great difference that they perform additional, more multi-faceted tasks precisely because they interact with all the departments in the organization.

In achieving the company's mission, workers are encouraged by the "wheeler manager" to make social sustainability real by sharing responsibility among people of diverse backgrounds, genders, ethnicities, abilities and sexual orientations. Probably, this is a good

way to mitigate the burdensome responsibility of managing corporates and to respond to the requests expressed by GenZ to be professionally enhanced, included, empowered and skilled [63]. It turns out that the "wheeler manager" plays a temporary leadership role among different functional units, making possible corporate sustainability within the whole corporate management system.

Metaphorically, the company's mission may be recognizable through the *oblò* (i.e., the "porthole"), and the "wheeler manager", appointed through collaboration between the management and the corporate's commission, acts as a facilitator in the introduction of innovations, with all organizational areas being turned around by him/her (Figure 6). Moreover, he/she should be democratically replaced, for instance, every six months during regular meetings involving all employees. The objective is to achieve a corporate culture, security and common motivation among collaborators, as well as a new way of thinking and acting. He/she would remind and encourage employees to pursue the common goal, which might be at the core of the corporate's mission but is often forgotten in daily practice because of the frenetic conditions of modern production processes (not necessarily in tune with it).
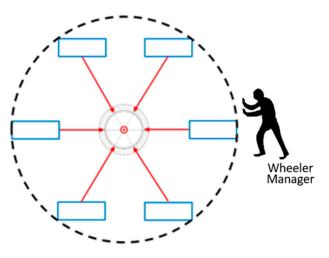

Figure 6. The mission-centered approach of the managing system *Organiblò.*

Clearly enough, the "wheeler manager" should be appointed among employees on a voluntary basis with the agreement of the ownership and the top management. The selection would be made among volunteers available to take on this role, and the occupant would be regularly replaced. The company's ownership should preferably opt for "wheeler manager" selection based on a bottom-up approach. Specifically, the recruitment process will be made possible by exploring in depth the profiles, tasks and skills of each suitable employee. In fact, ref. [64] reminds that "[d]ecentralized decision making in a setting characterized by high degrees of complexity and interdependence usually fails to produce some stable outcome, but if combined with the exercise of some authority it can on the contrary produce a variety of outcomes, increasing the possibility of both coordination and learning". Therefore, *Organiblò* with its "wheeler manager" does not imply the absence of hierarchy and/or a clear organizational structure.

Additionally, the "wheeler manager" should convey to all employees a bond of trust, leading to improvement of the corporate's organization and relationships. He/she would be also in charge of pushing the corporate staff at all levels to share common objectives. By orienting all collaborators toward sustainability goals, he/she will also need to periodically visit different departments to discuss improvements, make constructive criticisms and find solutions. As primus inter pares, the "wheeler manager" facilitates the dissemination of skills and information. He/she should be in tune with the corporate's sustainability policies, making particularly productive employees and the tasks fulfilled by them even

more efficient, promoting relocations according to employees' career plans and suggesting where layoffs might be necessary.

The objective remains the achievement of an entrepreneurial mindset but also a new corporate culture and a common sense of motivation among collaborators, as well as a new way of thinking and acting in daily corporate activities. Actually, the role of managers is continuously changing, and the current trend is towards reducing supervision but increasing collaboration [65].

Applying this "circular" or "round" organizational structure enables the launch of projects referring to social sustainability, such as those of the 17 UN objectives [37], for example, high-quality education, health and well-being, gender equality, responsible consumption and production, reduction in inequalities, and sustainable industry, innovation and infrastructure, but also decent work and economic growth, clean and accessible energy, peace and justice, and—especially—collaboration for common goals. Clearly enough, the processes described could also be "dangerous" because weaknesses in organizations could be uncovered (even in advance). At the same time, redeployments, internal movements of employees between departments and dismissals might help to overcome such potential drawbacks.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The experimental nature of introducing "circular" or "round" organizational structures characterized by a high level of social sustainability was acknowledged by some of the managers interviewed, who mostly viewed it as an intriguing venture potentially able to lead to greater or lesser structural improvements. Moreover, the present research highlights that companies need to undergo a major cultural shift to give social sustainability the right priority. Furthermore, our study deepens "circular organizations" as a potential solution along with a new type of leader called the "wheeler manager". Because circular organizations are designed to be transparent, open and collaborative, we believe that this structure fosters social sustainability and is better suited to today's complex and rapidly changing world. However, we have emphasized that the transition to a "circular" organizational model requires significant commitment and deep cultural change, which are essential for any successful transformation.

Our research—including interviews with CEOs, young middle managers and executives in different companies in different markets—supports this approach, although not all surveyed organizations fully embrace circularity and sustainability. By combining both sets of survey results, a (mis)match of managing practices has been also discovered. The benefit of having conducted a survey using two different formats—top-down direct interviews (with CEOs and top managers) and bottom-up indirect interviews (with employees and executives)—is that it allows us to observe the results through a bidirectional lens. Both categories identified autonomy as a leitmotif for turning tall organizational structures into "flatter" organizations. Proponents advocate the appointment of a dedicated person in charge of setting clear objectives and quantifying outcomes while providing a well-structured approach to the transition. More specifically, our findings highlight that a "facilitator" would be particularly helpful to guide participants through new management practices and ensure a smooth transition to a "round" organization without negatively affecting routine activities. In this sense, the suggested introduction of an "ambassador" role (as effectively implemented by one of the interviewed companies) represents a potential approach to foster better communication and collaboration.

Finally, we firmly believe that more sustainable management would be incentivized by appointing a key manager as a "wheeler manager". By taking over the leadership temporarily, this manager in charge will be able to "go around" all functional areas of the organization and foster cross-functionality while promoting an intergenerational, updated mindset sensitive to social responsibility. Even more innovatively, the radius of action of the "wheeler manager", by expanding and deepening the corporate's mission, will be enforced by *Organiblò*. SMEs seeking for a somehow revolutionary "round" organization

will find in *Organiblò* a way to promote transparency, openness, autonomy and proactive participation of employees while creating a work environment that particularly encourages social sustainability.

Put into action by the "wheeler manager", *Organiblò* represents a particularly innovative and powerful organizational approach aiming at placing a corporate's mission at its center, facilitating openness, sharing responsibilities and exploiting in-depth visions through all its participants as well as different points of view. Ultimately, *Organiblò* can generate awareness and engagement among all involved employees in pursuing social sustainability.

Appendix A

The following appendix presents the remaining, less relevant (though insightful, because they deal with more specific aspects) questions asked to middle managers.

- Question 1: "Is the organizational system of the company you work for sufficiently dynamic (i.e., capable of responding quickly to changing needs)?"
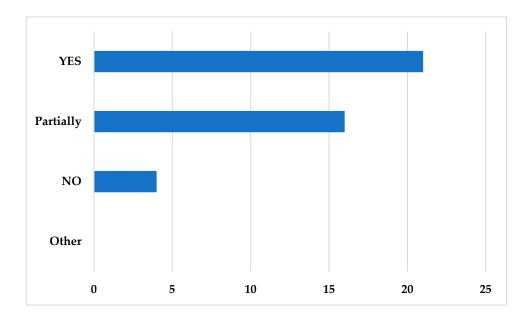

Figure A1. The ability to respond (quickly) to changing needs.

- Question 2: "Is organizational communication transparent towards collaborators (i.e., are communications clear, complete and timely)?"
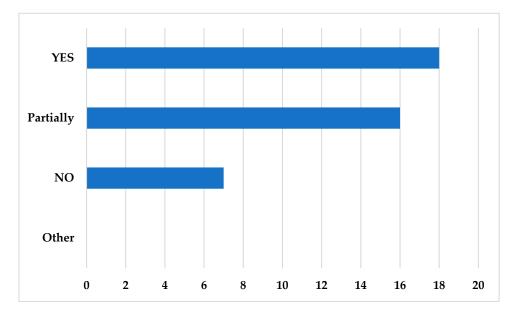
Figure A2. The transparency of organizational communications.

- Question 3: "Which communication channels are used most in your company?"
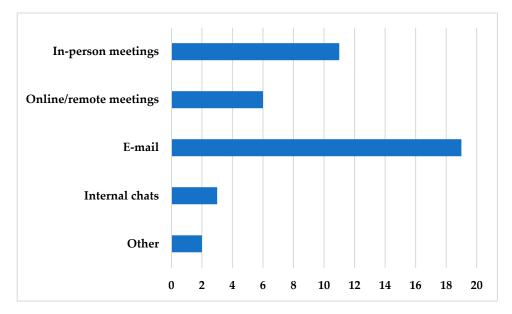

Figure A3. The communication channels in companies.

- Question 5: "In your opinion, does the hiring policy in your company take place on a discretionary basis?"
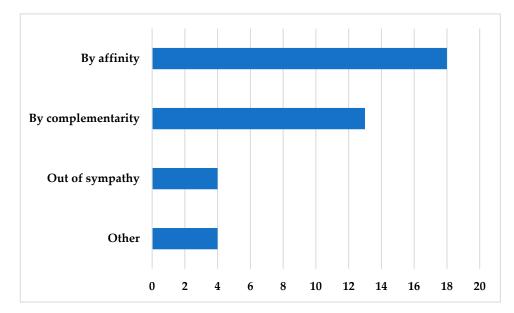
Figure A4. Hiring policy and discretionality.

- Question 7: "Does the organization involve collaborators by providing trust, autonomy and easing the sense of control?"
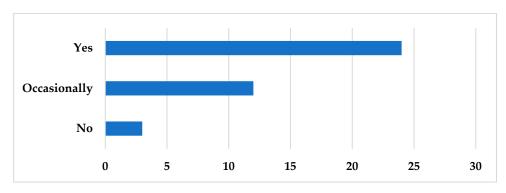

Figure A5. Involvement of collaborators.

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