Distributed Agility: Artist Co-management in the Music Attention Economy

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Introduction

This article investigates the relationship between the concept of attention and reputation building mechanisms in the "new music industries" (Hughes et al. 2016), with a specific focus on artist co-management. In relation to the concept of lack of attention (Simon 1971), this article addresses the following question: How can artists and artist managers design artist-led organizations that operate effectively and efficiently in a world in which attention is increasingly scarce? The argument is made that agile artist co-management practices are becoming more and more useful due to the plunging costs of experimentation in the increasingly globalized music industries.

This article develops the notion of distributed agility in what will be called, following Hughes et al. (2016), the "new music industries." This theory of distributed agility is derivative of agile project management and stems from the fact that the specific networks and mechanisms of recognition in the music field have changed in the digital age; artist managers and other intermediaries have become more reactive to hard evidence that an artist's work is receiving audience attention, instead of investing time and money in what they assume (often, according to their own tastes and preferences) will receive attention from audiences. In order to explore these issues, interviews were held with 22 artist managers from a number of different, albeit only anglophone, territories of the international music industries, and some associated industries such as dance and film, including those in New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Melbourne. The findings highlight both the challenges and the opportunities facing artists and artist managers in relation to the specific deal structures that can facilitate distributed agility.

The article builds on Hughes et al.'s (2016) notion that there has been a paradigm shift from linear to circular career development in what they refer to as the new music industries, and it examines artist co-management across geographic territories in relation to this shift. Hughes et al. note that, from the perspective of the artist, there has been a fundamental shift in the process of garnering attention and building reputation, a shift so fundamental that they refer to the "new" music industries. Until quite recently, for artists or "music makers" the process of gaining attention was twofold. First, they sought attention from industry gatekeepers (managers, talent scouts, record label A&R staff, radio programmers, etc.); then, if successful in this, they were given a chance to gain attention from audiences or fans by being promoted by and through the gatekeepers/intermediaries and the entities they represented. This is what is meant by *linear* career development (artist–industry–industry–industry–fan).

Circular career development is an inversion of this process. It features the artist sharing his/her music online with potential fans/consumers. If this first exposure resonates with these early adopters, they will begin to share it widely with other potential fans. It is only at this stage that more traditional intermediaries will start to pay attention: "A blogger might notice that reaction and draw the song to the attention of more

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people. As a result of the consequent uptick in organic plays, the tune might be included on a widely heard Spotify playlist or receive its first spins on tastemaker radio stations. This upward spiral of artist–consumer–industry interactions can continue to unfold in many ways and at a dizzying pace where a 'remarkable' new song explodes from its first play to millions of plays within days. The key point is that the first steps are usually directly from artist-to-fan; most gatekeepers now typically *follow the fans* when it used to be the other way around" (from a Foreword by John Watson in Hughes et al. 2016, viii).

The onus, for circular career development, is therefore initially on the artist, and his/her manager if s/he has one, because the initial attention-garnering process that triggers the circular artist–fan–industry–artist–fan–industry career development process involves the initial direct artist-to-fan relationship. Transaction cost theory (Coase 1937) and agency theory (Eisenhardt 1989) will be used to examine the extent to which this shifts much of the initial risk for career development onto the artist, in terms of the investment of time and money. This article therefore focuses on artist co-management. It asks whether artist co-management agreements provide a solution concerning the increase in labour that artists need to trigger, and subsequently manage, circular career development processes, and the accompanying risk that has been externalized to them within the digitized music attention economy.

Literature Review

The concept of the attention economy first emerged in the early 1970s. Simon (1971) articulates the idea in a remarkable piece that resonates with the premise of this article more than 40 years later: "In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it . . . In an information-rich world, most of the cost of information is the cost incurred by the recipient" (pp. 40–41).

Simon's (1971) work paved the way for research on the attention economy and for work examining the extent to which "attention transactions" will replace financial transactions (see Franck 2002; Goldhaber 1997). The above quote by Simon is particularly interesting in the context of this article, because it predates the paradigm shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting and the numerous publications arguing that during the broadcast era there was an abundance of audience attention due to the scarcity of distribution outlets for content, whereas the Internet heralded an inversion of this: there is now a scarcity of audience attention because there is an abundance of distribution outlets for content (see Anderson 2007, 2009; Collins and Young 2014; Kusek and Leonhard 2005; Leonhard 2008). The basis of Anderson's (2007) long tail theory is that business entities might generate

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the relationship between the concept of attention- and reputation-building mechanisms in the new music industries, with a specific focus on artist co-management. It addresses the following research question: How can artists and artist managers design artist-led organizations that operate effectively and efficiently in a world in which attention is increasingly scarce? The argument is made that agile artist co-management practices are becoming ever more useful due to the plunging costs of experimentation in the increasingly globalized music industries. In order to explore these issues, interviews were held with 20 artist managers from a number of different territories of the international music industries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. The findings highlight both the challenges and the opportunities facing artists and artist managers in relation to the specific deal structures that can facilitate distributed agility.

KEYWORDS

Artist co-management, music industries, agile, lean

more revenue from the aggregate of many niche or "micro" hits because the Internet's infinite shelf space means that much previously inaccessible (and now simply niche) content is accessible to consumers, and may have more resonance for them. Elberse (2008), in contrast, argues that what consumers purchase online is much the same as what they purchased in stores with limited shelf space (i.e., they still gravitate to "hit" content) and therefore commercializing the long tail of content is not feasible.

Either way, while attention may always have been scarce to a certain extent (Simon 1971), the digitization of information has had a dramatic impact on the attention of human beings. On the one hand, Borreli (2015) cites a recent study by Microsoft Corporation which found that digital lifestyles make it difficult to stay focused.[1] On the other hand, Alter (2017) notes: "In recent years, media and technology have perfected the lucrative art of gaining and holding our attention. This extraordinary feat has changed the behaviour of billions of people, and especially the young: by current medical standards, we are experiencing an unprecedented, global pandemic of addiction – to our screens" (p. 5).

The digitization of content has facilitated two extremes: while some products suffer from decreased human attention spans, others are garnering so much consumer attention that we are experiencing a pandemic of addiction to digital content, and to the devices that disseminate it. So if the digitization of content is having such a dramatic impact on human attention in the digital age, what exactly *is* attention?

With regard to the psychology of attention, Pashler (1998) cites one of William James's most famous statements: "everyone knows what attention is" (p. 1). However, Pashler himself takes a more empirical and sceptical tack, assuming instead that no one knows what attention is and that there may even not be an "it" there to be known about. There is thus a schism between what Pashler calls "folk psychology" and the work of attention researchers. This is because the word "attention" is commonly used in ordinary language and people understand each other well enough when they use it. To this end, Pashler reflects on what most people *think* they know about attention: "Two primary themes or aspects characterize the phenomena people allude to with the term attention: selectivity and capacity limitation. Selectivity is apparent in a number of undeniable facts about human experience and behaviour. One is that conscious perception is always selective. Everyone seems to agree that, at any given moment, their awareness encompasses only a tiny proportion of the stimuli impinging on their sensory systems. The second fact is that this selectivity holds not only of conscious states of mind, but also of the impact of stimuli on behaviour" (p. 2).

Pashler (1998) notes that whether we are walking, driving, playing tennis, choosing which book to pick up or deciding which music to listen to, the stream of behaviour we produce reflects only a small subset of the sensory stimulation, and typically only a subset of the stimuli, that could potentially guide the same types of behaviours. Therefore, in terms of this "common sense" definition of attention, the mind is continually prioritizing certain pieces of sensory information over others, and this selection process makes a profound difference in both conscious experience and behaviour. This partly explains the increasing interest in mindfulness training and mediation in the digital age (Gelles 2015) as a way of dealing with information overload and paying attention to the present moment.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la relation entre le concept de l'attention et les mécanismes de construction de la réputation au sein des nouvelles industries de la musique, en portant une attention particulière aux artistes et aux agents en cogestion. Il se penche notamment sur la question suivante : comment les artistes et les agents peuvent-ils concevoir des organisations dirigées par des artistes qui fonctionnent de manière efficace dans un monde où l'attention est de plus en plus rare. L'auteur fait valoir que des pratiques *agiles* en matière de cogestion sont de plus en plus utiles en raison de la chute spectaculaire des coûts d'expérimentation dans des industries de la musique de plus en plus mondialisées. Afin d'explorer ces enjeux, des entretiens ont été réalisés auprès de 20 agents d'artistes issus de différentes régions associées aux industries internationales de la musique, notamment en Australie, au Canada, aux États-Unis et au Royaume-Uni. Les conclusions font ressortir à la fois les défis et les opportunités auxquels font face les artistes et les agents d'artistes en ce qui concerne les types de contrats spécifiques qui leur donnent accès avec agilité, à une variété de modèles de distribution.

MOTS CLÉS

Cogestion des artistes, industries de la musique, gestion Agile, gestion Lean

In this article, a common-sense definition of attention will be used, with the understanding that the psychology of attention is far more complex and that by using this definition we are engaging in "folk psychology." Davenport and Beck (2001) define the concept of attention thus: "Attention is focused mental engagement on a particular item of information. Items come into our awareness, we attend to a particular item, and then we decide whether to act" (p. 20).

It is in this context that agile management (Highsmith 2010; Medinilla 2012) and "lean" management (Ballé and Ballé 2009; Ries 2011) are useful for understanding the relationship between the concept of attention and reputation-building mechanisms in the new music industries of the digital age. In relation to the lack of attention concept (Simon 1971), this article addresses the following question: How can artists and artist managers design artist-led organizations that operate effectively and efficiently in a world in which attention is increasingly scarce? Agile management is relevant to the attempt to answer this question, for two reasons.

First, agile management is characterized by the close monitoring of customer feedback and each iteration of the developing product is designed to obtain and test such feedback (hence the release of minimal viable products [MVPs] that trigger the build–measure–learn feedback loop early on). In this way, product development is informed not by assumptions about what customers will want, but by what they actually need, or what they have demonstrated they will pay attention to, and subsequently (it is hoped) purchase. This approach therefore reduces the risk involved in product development and is suited to the processes of circular career development in the music industries discussed in the Introduction.

Second, one of the key principles of agile management is self-organization. The principle of self-organization is relevant to artist co-management across different international territories because the music value chain is complex and it changes from country to country, with the type of music, the profile of the artist (well-known, emergent, medium), and whether the music is live or recorded. The manager's role is not the same in every market because each market is different and requires a different build–measure–learn feedback loop in relation to circular career development. In discussing self-organization as a principle of agile management, Medinilla (2012) notes: "In their search for hyper-productivity, agile pioneers from Nonaka-Takeuchi to Poppendieck, Sutherland, or Beck found that teams reaching this kind of state were absolutely not micromanaged or told what to do and how to do it. Instead, these teams had a goal and a purpose, and they collaborated to find the best ways to reach that goal" (p. 53).

In analyzing artist co-management, this article develops the notion of distributed agility within the music attention economy. Agile management and Lean management are often used as a means of addressing uncertainty; rather than release products based on assumptions about what will gain attention in a marketplace, these approaches rely on "the plunging cost of experimentation" (Highsmith 2010, 5) in many industries, enabled by the digitization of aspects of the industry. Indeed, experiments relating to which artists and/or pieces of music audiences will pay attention to are evident in the circular career development model in the music industries (introduced at the beginning of this article), a model that has arguably developed as a way of addressing uncertainty.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se explora la relación entre los mecanismos que fortalecen la atención y la reputación que gozan las nuevas industrias musicales, poniendo un enfoque particular sobre la gestión conjunta de artistas y de gerentes. La pregunta por investigar es: ¿cómo artistas y gerentes pueden diseñar organizaciones dirigidas por artistas que funcionen de manera eficaz y eficiente en un mundo con creciente carencia de atención? Se sugiere que las prácticas ágiles de gestión conjunta son cada vez más útiles en vista de la abrupta disminución de los costos de la experimentación en industrias musicales cada vez más globalizadas. Para ahondar estos temas se llevaron a cabo entrevistas con veinte gerentes de artistas de industrias musicales internacionales, incluyendo Australia, Canadá, los EE. UU. y el Reino Unido. Los resultados muestran las oportunidades y los desafíos que representan para los artistas y los gerentes, las estructuras de los acuerdos tomados específicamente con el fin de facilitar la agilidad de distribución.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Gestión conjunta de artistas, industrias musicales, ágil, lean

Cultural production is an uncertain process because artistic creativity is open-ended. While there is a spectrum of uncertainty in the arts, what Madden and Bloom (2001) refer to as the range from weak creativity (creation simply as production) to hard creativity (creation as invention), it is difficult for artists, artist managers and intermediaries to gauge whether a consumer will be moved emotionally by an artwork. Such uncertainty is encapsulated in Carey's (2005) definition of art: "A work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that one person" (p. 29). Therefore, managing careers within the music industries – industries in which the core product is defined in this way – is an extremely uncertain process. The experimentation enabled by agile management addresses this uncertainty.

However, the question for musicians working in the new music industries is this: Who is going to help me experiment and demonstrate that I can attract and hold an audience's attention so I can secure further investment in order to build and maintain a sustainable career? The initial answer to this question in the digital age is, arguably, no one. As discussed above, in the new music industries the initial onus for circular career development is on the artist, because the attention-garnering process that triggers this circular artist–fan–industry–artist–fan–industry career development process involves the direct artist-to-fan relationship. Within this process, artist managers can be conceptualized as "early stage" investors of time, although many managers will not become involved at the very early stages of career development, because, like record labels, bloggers and song publishers, they too have become more reactive to evidence of attention transactions in the music attention economy. According to Hughes et al. (2016), such attention transactions need to be evident before these actors will become involved.

Transaction cost theory (Coase 1937) and agency theory (Eisenhardt 1989) are useful here. Coase argues that when the transaction costs that are external to the firm are higher than those that are internal to it, the firm will grow, whereas when the external costs are lower than the internal ones, the firm will downsize. The dominant firms in the "old" music industries were arguably record labels. In discussing the new music industries, Hughes et al. (2016) note that in some instances major record labels have externalized many of the previously internal costs to the artists themselves. In line with transaction cost theory, record labels have downsized by streamlining their operations through a focus on providing marketing and distribution services. Now, the start-up costs are often borne by the artist. If successful, the artist is in a better position because s/he may retain ownership of copyrights and can negotiate more favourable terms than would be possible in the old music industries. If unsuccessful, however, the artist incurs the losses (at least during the early phase of development).

The circular model of career development in the new music industries therefore involves an externalization of risk to the artist during the start-up phase of development. Agency theory (Eisenhardt 1989) is useful here for understanding the risk, shared risk, delegation, conflicts of interest and contractual relationships that arise in this environment when artists invest in themselves in an attempt to build a sustainable career. In discussing the origins of agency theory, Eisenhardt notes that it developed during the 1960s and 1970s as a way of examining risk sharing between individuals or groups and was subsequently broadened to include the "so-called agency problem that occurs when cooperating parties have different goals and divisions of labour" (p. 58). The metaphor of "contract" is used to describe the relationship that forms when one party, usually "the principal," delegates work to "the agent," who subsequently may or may not perform the work to the principal's satisfaction. Eisenhardt continues: "Agency theory is concerned with solving two problems that can occur in agency relationships. The first is the *agency problem* that arises when (a) the desires or goals of the principal or agent conflict and (b) it is difficult or expensive for the principal to verify what the agent is actually doing . . . The second is the problem of *risk sharing* that arises when the principal and agent have different attitudes toward risk" (p. 58).

The desires and goals of the record label and the artist typically conflicted in the old music industries simply because the record label was primarily in the business of generating "hits," which are by definition short term, whereas the artist (or his/her manager) was interested in building a sustainable career. In other words, the label wanted "to sell 10 million records in one year and then move onto the next big thing, whereas a manager is more likely to want to sell one million records every year for 10 years as they often make their money from the other revenue streams that revolve around these sales" (John Watson, quoted in Morrow 2006, 172). This is essentially what is meant by the "star system" in the record business. Major record companies used to recover from a success rate of less than 10% because of the overwhelming success of a minority of their artists (Frith 2001, 35), or "stars." Also, it was difficult for the record label (the principal) to know what the artist (the agent) was actually doing with their money/investment, because of the uncertainty of artistic creativity and the question of whether an artist's work will resonate with an audience. The new music industries can be defined as being "new" because of the new contracts between artists, labels and other intermediaries. Artist co-management will be examined in light of these new relationships or "contracts," the shifting relationship to risk and the new conflicts of interest that have emerged in the new music industries.

Research Design

This article reports on a subsection of a research project concerning artist management in the creative and cultural industries carried out in New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Melbourne between 2009 and 2017. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 artist managers and self-managed artists working in the music industries, as well as with some artists, producers and managers working in associated industries such as film and dance. This method was supplemented by analysis of a keynote presentation at BIGSOUND, an Australian industry conference, trade show and showcase event held in Brisbane in September 2013.

Since all interviewees agreed to take part on the basis of anonymity, persons and organizations are not identified. In terms of the selection of participants, the study was undertaken using a qualitative approach. The aim was to capture an aspect of the creative and cultural industries – artist management – as it is experienced, and interpreted, by the participants. To this end, this project employed an "intensive" rather than an "extensive" (Harré 1979) research design; it investigated artist management practices in a small number of cases in order to generate explanations of the development of artists' careers and of the experiences involved in artist and manager relationships. Measures were also taken to ensure a degree of representativeness, in terms of the participants, so that as wide as possible a range of experiences were examined within the scope of this project and its limitations.

The project began with an examination of the extent to which the international music industries have decentralized, and whether this has shifted commercial control from monopoly companies, such as major record labels, to small artist/manager teams. This article reports on the early-stage interviews concerning the music industries that form part of the project. The primary research questions for these early-stage interviews were as follows: What is it like to manage artists in the music industries? If you are a self-managed artist, what is it like to manage your own career? Are agile management strategies used in the music industries? Can agile methodologies be used for managing artists in the music industries?

The project employed an innovative approach by putting a number of different analytical fields into mutual dialogue. The music industries, and the creative and cultural industries in general, have most often been theorized and studied within media, communication and cultural studies. This project also used this lens. A particular focus in this field is the literature on creative labour (Cloonan 2014; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Stahl 2013). The second area of concern was creativity research; theories of artistic creativity and group creativity were critically applied (Amabile and Pillemer 2012; Catmull 2008, 2014; DeZutter 2011; Sawyer and DeZutter 2009). In particular, the notion of how group creativity emerges from, and is therefore a characteristic of, the group, rather than the individuals involved, was used to analyze the artist management "group." Furthermore, artistic processes are considered to be non-linear, dynamic, intuitive and contextually dependent. Therefore, theories relating to these processes were linked to a third analytical field: organizational, business and management studies (Anderson 2007; Highsmith 2010; Ries 2011). Specifically, literature relating to agile project management, hypothesis-driven entrepreneurship and start-ups was used in order to develop an understanding of how artistic creativity and the careers stemming from it are managed.

Five sub-research questions emerged: Does artist co-management involve "distributed agility"? In the music industries, what is the nature of the relationship between artist start-ups and cultural intermediaries? Can a new project within an existing arts organization be considered a start-up? Is artist management more "creative" than management in other sectors? Does working in an agile way require a different mindset to that currently dominant in the creative and cultural industries?

When selecting participants, an effort was made to achieve a gender balance. However, an even split was not achievable due to the fact that the sector of focus, the music industries, is still male-dominated; in terms of the creative and cultural industries overall, Henry (2009) reports that "the same gender-related barriers that exist within other industry sectors are just as prevalent, if not more so, within the creative sector" (p. 143). Henry highlights the need for empirical research on this issue across the various sectors that constitute the creative and cultural industries. However, this was beyond the scope of the present project. In total, four women and 18 men were interviewed. Balance was also sought on the following dimensions: those well-established in the industry, newcomers and mid-career workers; older and younger participants; those working for large artist-management companies and freelancers; and those working in New York and London (both centres of Western cultural production) and those working outside of these cities. While these guidelines were followed during recruitment, the most was also made of serendipitous opportunities for interviews provided by some of the participants.

Findings: Artist Co-management

Artist co-management in the music industries takes many forms. It literally means that more than one person manages an artist, though the nature of the co-managers' relationships to their client can vary in a number of ways (Rogan 1988). One manager may have a master management agreement with the client and then they have a separate co-management agreement with another manager in which the co-manager commissions 50% of the percentage outlined in the master agreement: typically, between 15% and 20% (Simpson and Munro 2012, 88). One of the main differences between co-management agreements is the territory covered (Simpson and Munro 2012). There are two main types of management and co-management agreement: (a) agreements that are for the world; and (b) split territories co-management agreements. In "for the world" artist management, the co-managers are each responsible for the artist's career across all territories/countries. In split territories co-management, one party manages the artist's career in one country or territory and the other manages the artist's career in a different country or territory.

These arrangements – for either artist co-management for the world or split territories co-management – often involve separate entities, whether individual managers who are sole traders or have their own companies, or the co-management agreement is between larger management firms. However, as evidenced below, another way to define artist co-management is co-management within a single firm. One company may manage artists for the world, though technically the artists are being co-managed, because there is more than one manager with whom they work within the one company.

A number of participants reported positive experiences co-managing artists. "Well, I currently co-manage . . . with another gentleman . . . in Chicago . . . It's my first experience co-managing and I'd say it's been nothing but a fantastically positive experience." When asked what in particular was positive about the experience, this interviewee continued: "We're getting more done in a shorter period of time and therefore being more effective, because we're able to divide up tasks based on things like our regions. He's in a major market in Chicago and I'm in a major market in New York . . . We both have particular strengths, so often he or I will take the lead on a task if it's one of our strengths and the other will either be a support in it or do something else. It's also very effective and helpful to have somebody to process things with – a plan, a goal, an approach – and it doubles your resources and contacts."

These comments reinforce the notion that in a co-management relationship the input of each of the manager's ideas, knowledge structures or "particular strengths" and perspectives at particular stages of the management process are helpful for planning an artist's career.

The particular co-management relationship to which the above interviewee is referring can be classified as artist co-management that involves separate entities who are co-managing one artist. Another New York-based participant conceptualized co-management as taking place within a single firm: "Every artist is different, that's one thing I can say without equivocation. Some artists have somebody in their life who has a particular skill set – sometimes it's somebody who goes on the road with them and has a greater role than just the road manager, who is [an] appropriate co-manager sometimes – you know, I look at some of the people who work here as co-managers of artists, because it's a team effort, and as people develop seniority here they get financial incentives that are the equivalent of being a co-manager."

However, a New Jersey-based participant debated whether this is in fact co-management at all, because it is within one firm: "That's not co-management; that's just getting someone to do shit for you." In any case, the New York-based participant uses the concept of co-management as an extrinsic motivator within his firm, in that if employees do well they share a percentage of the commission of the client's income that the firm receives. Further, this New York-based participant frames co-management as an increasing necessity generally: "I think management is more and more a team effort [rather] than just an individual effort, because the services you have to provide are in most instances hard for one individual to do. However you characterize it . . . all of our clients in one way or another are co-managed in the sense that they're not just dealing with me, they're dealing with five other people. In some instances this is officially as a co-manager. I think the idea of a management company is more pertinent to most careers than just the lone manager. Again, at the beginning of a career, that's not the most practical option for an artist, but over time I think that's a model that works, especially when dealing with international careers . . . it's hard to be in two places at the same time in different time zones. It's really very difficult for one individual to do it all."

According to this participant, the need for co-management solutions is particularly nuanced when his firm is managing an artist's international career. In terms of co-management options, as outlined above, one of the main differences between co-management agreements concerns the territory covered (Simpson and Munro 2012, 88). Both of the participants quoted above are discussing "for the world" agreements. In both cases, co-management involves collaboration across all aspects of the client's career in all territories where they are active. In contrast to this way of operating, in split territories co-management the world is carved up between managers.

While co-management is being touted as a potential solution regarding the increased supply of labour artists need to manage the risk that has been externalized to them and to make headway at a time when audience attention is scarce, a number of interviewees outlined some of the pitfalls of artist co-management agreements. A New Jersey-based manager comments: "Co-management is a really, really interesting thing, because, for example, if a New Zealand, Australian or British manager comes to America, they might not know how things work here, or they may need help with 'on the ground' stuff for a band, and they might have other clients back in Australia who they have to deal with, and so they go back and forth and the co-management thing is very difficult because if you've got a baby band, or even a burgeoning band that comes to America, unfortunately a lot of the time you see that if they go to a big management company they'll get the lowest guy on the totem pole who has just come out of college."

In addition to the issue of prioritization (or lack thereof) through split territories co-management, this same interviewee notes that there can be communication issues within and through artist co-management: "Co-management is such a difficult thing. We had one situation where we had three managers involved. We had a west coast guy, an east coast guy and an Australian manager, and it turned out to be a disaster because nobody knew who was doing what and things were just falling through the cracks all the time. It's a really difficult thing . . . especially for bands that are coming from overseas. You almost always need one, but so often I've seen that it doesn't work."

In fact this participant was so negative about split territories co-management that when asked whether it works at all, he said, "Not in my experience . . . It might barely work, or work in a dysfunctional way. A band that had three managers – that was a nightmare. Even if you have two, an Australian one and an American one, then you've got a business manager here as well, and so you need that three-way communication, and the hardest thing is communication across these people. I mean, e-mail works, but when you've got more people involved, you know what it's like: you come to work and if there's a particular question about something there'll be 15 e-mails on that one particular thing. Then, by virtue of the time change, you'll answer something and then that will contradict someone else – you know, that type of thing. So you spend a lot of time spinning your wheels, and so the communication aspect is the hardest damn thing to run."

This participant said that, in addition to communication issues, there can be conflict between managers regarding direction and decisions, and remuneration as well. He also reported that there are issues with leadership, such as who makes the ultimate decisions. According to this interviewee, a better option than a commission-based co-management structure would be to have one management firm that manages clients for the world and pays someone to be "on the ground" in other territories. However, while this may work for established artists who are already generating significant income, it would not work for emerging artists, who necessarily opt to work with managers under commission-based agreements because they cannot afford to pay a salary or an hourly rate (Simpson and Munro 2012, 88). Artist management agreements typically operate on the principle of deferred remuneration; therefore, artist managers are speculatively investing time in projects in the hope of generating commissions in the future.

Thus, for artists who need management services but cannot afford to pay a salary or an hourly rate, commission-based management and co-management may be the only option. Yet the interviewees characterized artist management

– let alone artist co-management – as very delicate and difficult. While international co-management networks have great potential for addressing the lack of management services identified by the interviewees, the paradox is that the decentralized or distributed nature of co-management has a number of pitfalls. A London-based artist manager commented: “On the one hand it sounds like a great idea, but on the other hand what you’re at risk of ending up with is what I like to call ‘a race to the bottom.’ For instance, if you are negotiating something and the people who are doing the negotiating know that the manager over here is much more of a soft touch, then they’ll end up negotiating with the manager they feel they can get the best deal out of, and also, from a commissioning point of view, there’ll be an incentive [for] each manager to get the deal done, because they will almost certainly commission what they bring in. And, unfortunately, to get the deal done you work to get it done quicker if you make the offer cheaper. So . . . you get ‘a race to the bottom,’ of having five or six different managers and the artist ends up getting the cheapest deal.”

Of the two artist co-management structures under discussion – artist co-management for the world and split territories co-management – this interviewee is referring to the latter. Artist co-management for the world is quite different in that the co-managers share the commissions from all territories. Theoretically this has the effect of providing an incentive for the co-managers to do the best deals for the artist internationally because they share, and profit from, the same global vision.

Implications for Management: Distributed Agility

In relation to the lack of attention concept (Simon 1971), it can be argued that artist co-management contracts and relationships, whether internal or external to artist management firms, are becoming more and more necessary for artist-led organizations to operate effectively and efficiently in a world where attention is growing increasingly scarce. Agile artist co-management practices are becoming more and more useful due to the plunging costs of experimentation in the increasingly globalized music industries, and are even necessary for the timely sourcing of the management/creative labour needed to service rapidly growing, changing and globalizing careers. John Watson[2] comments on the challenges that artists and artist managers face in the contemporary environment and the increasing applicability of agile management methodologies: “The challenge now is that because people’s appetite is so voracious and their access to new forms of entertainment is so vast, it’s harder and harder to sustain interest. So the cycle from discovery to moving on just keeps speeding up and speeding up and speeding up. And so the challenge for artists, and those who are empowered with trying to help them, is to keep finding new ways to fascinate, new ways to be remarkable; not just that song, but the next song, and the next song and the one after it, and the next album after that and the next tour after that.”

In counterpoint to the understanding that it is becoming increasingly difficult for artists to sustain an audience’s interest, Watson suggests that there is a greater need for both artistic and managerial creativity, because an increasing amount of agility is needed to continually attract an audience’s attention. As shifting attention spans exacerbate the fragility of careers, there is an increased need for idea generation relating to the processes artists and their managers can engage in to continually fascinate an audience. In line with the ideas, methods and processes stemming from agile management and lean management, these ideas need to be informed by audience feedback generated through various build–measure–learn feedback loops and experiments. This will help artists and their managers manage the risk that has been externalized to artist-led organizations due to the contractual and relationship changes in the new music industries as outlined in this article – changes that transaction cost theory and agency theory have helped us to understand. Watson continues: “More of the control is now in the artist’s hands, and the manager’s hands as a consequence . . . Whether that’s a good news story or a bad news story depends on how good you are with actually doing something with it . . . the majority of artists now are having to bring a lot more innovation into their career, and that’s a good thing. And the pace of change is huge . . . stuff’s moving really fast and so you have to be mindful of that and have a plan to be constantly remarkable. Not just on day one, but on day 10, 20, 100 and all the way through the life cycle of the project.”

Because artists and artist managers have more responsibility and control in this environment, agile co-management is a potential solution not only for the increased supply of labour that artists need to make headway at a time of digital abundance, but also as a way to service the need to generate innovative ideas that will help to perpetuate careers.

Conclusion

This article has developed the notion of distributed agility in what Hughes et al. (2016) label the "new" music industries. This theory of distributed agility is derivative of agile project management and stems from the fact that the specific networks and mechanisms of recognition in the music field have changed in the digital age; artist managers and other intermediaries have become more "reactive" to hard evidence that an artist's work is receiving audience attention. Agility in this context stems from the reactive approach; artist managers have to be agile in order to react quickly enough to help artists seize opportunities in the digital age and to help them manage the risks that have been externalized to them. The notion that such agility is distributed relates to this article's focus on artist co-management. Instead of investing time and money in what they "assume" will receive attention from audiences, artist co-managers, particularly those working across different international territories, need to deploy distributed agile methods. The music value chain is complex and changes from country to country, with the type of music, the profile of the artist (well-known, emergent, medium), and whether the music is live or recorded. The manager's role is not the same in every market; each market is different and requires a different build–measure–learn feedback loop in relation to circular career development.

One of the key principles of agile management is self-organization, and distributed agility in the new music industries involves multiple self-organizing teams. Areas for further research therefore include idea generation processes within distributed agile and self-organizing teams, possibly using DeZutter's (2011) notion of distributed creativity (see also Sawyer and DeZutter 2009), and the issue of trust within and between self-organizing agile artist co-management teams, possibly conceptually transferring ideas and findings from the software industries to the creative and cultural industries (see Dorairaj and Noble 2013).

Notes

1. According to Borreli (2015), the human attention span has decreased from 12 seconds to eight seconds in just over a decade.

2. Unless otherwise attributed, comments by John Watson are from a keynote interview at the BIGSOUND conference in Brisbane, Australia, in September 2013. John Watson is a high-profile Australian artist manager, entrepreneur and record label owner.

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