

Case Study: Wigwam

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Purpose: We conceive and design effective communication for a just and self-determined life for all on a healthy planet

Design Trait: Governance

Innovative Practice: Self-Organisation-Based Governance Design

Key Facts

Wigwam eG is a communication agency based in Berlin that conceives and designs effective communication for a just and self-determined life for all on a healthy planet. To achieve this goal, the company advises and supports actors from civil society, politics, culture, education and business with a social focus. As both a cooperative and a democratic laboratory, it operates and works in a self-organised manner.

Seat: Berlin

Established: 2009

Founders: Sandra Diana Trögl, Ole Seidenberg, Daniel Kruse

Ownership: Registered Cooperative

Legal Form: Registered Cooperative

Employees: 28

Webpage: <https://wigwam.im/>

Purpose, Business Model & Objectives

Purpose: “We conceive and design effective communication for a just and self-determined life for all on a healthy planet.”

Wigwam eG is a communication agency based in Berlin, consisting of around 30 team members. It operates as a worker cooperative with a self-organised governance design. *Wigwam*'s purpose is shaped by a strong commitment to distributive and regenerative principles. Its mission extends beyond designing and creating impactful communication that supports a fair and self-determined life for all on a healthy planet; it also aims to promote the well-being of its members, which is reinforced by its chosen legal structure and ownership design. Furthermore, at *Wigwam*, social goals often take precedence over financial ones, with a focus on fair compensation and supporting flexible, self-managed working methods. Rather than seeking growth or hiring to increase revenue, the cooperative focuses on working effectively with the current team.

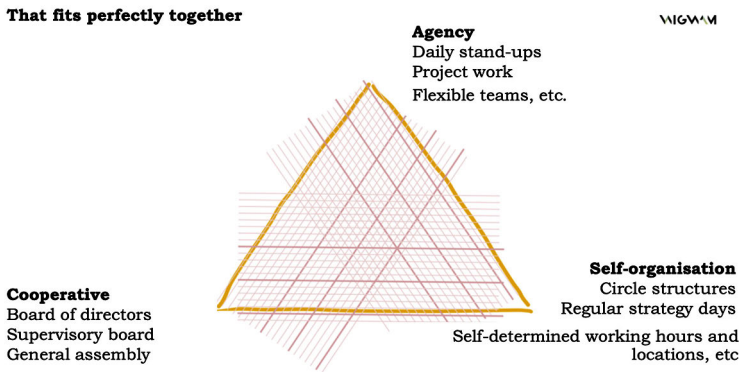
Since 2016, *Wigwam* has operated as a cooperative, meaning the business is owned equally by all its members, who share responsibility for its success. Unlike many traditional businesses, *Wigwam* does not rely on external investors. Instead, it is primarily funded through the projects it undertakes. Members also contribute a cooperative share, but it provides only limited financial benefits to the business. *Wigwam*'s membership is divided into two categories: active members and investing members. Active members are those who have permanent employment contracts with the cooperative and therefore have voting rights. This means they have a direct say in the decisions that shape the future of the business. Investing members do not have voting rights, and consequently, their role is more limited.

Insights into the Self-Organisation-Based Governance Design

Wigwam's governance structure is distinctive for its innovative combination of self-organisation, the cooperative legal form, and the day-to-day work of their agency, all working in harmony (see figure 1). This structure is supported by a unique salary model, known as the wish salary, along with other key aspects such as flexible time management, role rotation, and their approach to leadership and goal-setting, all of which embody the principles of what *Wigwam* describes as *New Work*.

The term *New Work* was coined in the 1980s by the social philosopher Frithjof Bergmann to describe the reorganisation of work towards meaningful and individually designed work. Today, the term is used to describe structural changes in the world of work (Hackl et al. 2017). At the company level, it can be concretised through the following fields of action, among others *Individuality*, such as participation in company processes and decisions; *Leadership*, through the development of a democratic leadership culture in which managers tend to take on the role of moderators; *Agility*, through fast decision-making processes in flat hierarchies, open learning and a positive error culture; *Flexibility*, in terms of the type and location of work, such as job rotation, flexible working hours and remote working (Hackl et al. 2017: 72–77).

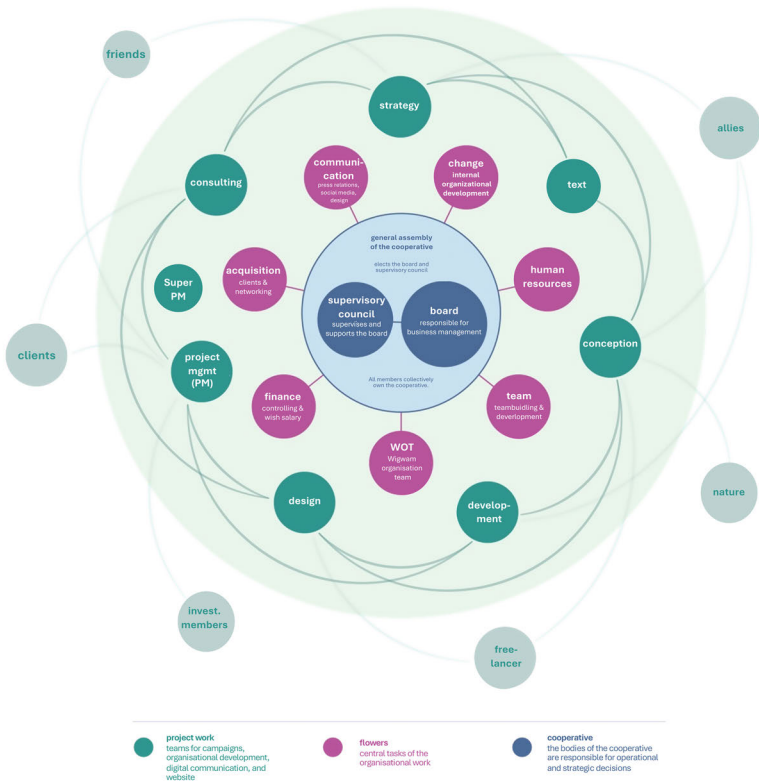
Figure 1: Wigwam's Governance Structure



Source: Modified design based on Wigwam 2020.

The members of *Wigwam* collectively lead and own the company following cooperative principles which are structured as follows: The organisation has a board composed of four members responsible for managing the business. In accordance with cooperative structure, a supervisory board oversees the board's activities. The members democratically elect both the board and the supervisory board during general assemblies, which are held at regular intervals at least once a year.

Figure 2: Wigwam's Organisational Chart



Source: Modified design based on Wigwam 2024b.

Wigwam is organised into various circles, such as finance, acquisition, human resources, organisational development, team development, and communication circles. Decision-making processes are designed to allow individuals within these circles to make decisions independently. To guide individuals and enhance their comfort during decision-making, a budget is also created. Circles or individuals can make independent decisions within this budget. If the budget is exceeded, others from the team or the board are consulted to ensure the decision has broader support. Collective decisions are particularly important when it comes to company management, strategy, or profit distribution. For organisation-wide decisions,

Wigwam often adopts a resistance inquiry method. When a group is working on a specific project and asks for objections or concerns, minimal or no resistance from the broader team is seen as a green light to proceed with the work. This method allows for decisions to be implemented without requiring full consensus, ensuring that progress is not hindered by the need for complete alignment. Such an approach not only speeds up decision-making but also empowers individuals to take initiative, knowing that their ideas can move forward as long as they do not encounter significant opposition.

Role rotation occurs regularly within the cooperative. This process happens through self-organisation, where roles can be reassigned. Regular elections for the board and supervisory board ensure that many members get the opportunity to serve in these positions, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the responsibilities involved. Individuals elected to the board are chosen based on the trust of other members, who believe in their ability to drive or implement certain initiatives. *Wigwam* encourages its members to engage in areas where they feel confident and interested. In the self-organised setting, members can also switch to different areas if their skills can be better utilised elsewhere.

As part of their approach of self-organisation, *Wigwam* uses a variety of meeting formats designed to deepen discussions, achieve team-wide collaboration and ensure transparency regarding the organisation's financial matters. These include daily stand-up meetings, which provide quick updates on ongoing projects and tasks, ensuring that everyone is on the same page. These brief, focused meetings are a key part of *Wigwam*'s agile approach to work, allowing the team to stay connected and aligned on a day-to-day basis. In addition to daily stand-ups, *Wigwam* holds carefully structured monthly meetings called "Rundlauf" that provide a comprehensive overview of the cooperative's financial status, project progress reports, and organisational performance metrics. These meetings are an important part of *Wigwam*'s governance structure, offering a regular opportunity for reflection, assessment, and strategic planning. By keeping everyone informed about the cooperative's financial health and other critical aspects of the business, these meetings help to maintain transparency and accountability within the business and pave the way for the wish salary model.

Strategy days are another important meeting format used by *Wigwam*. These are dedicated to making collective decisions about clients, projects, and organisational structures. Strategy days provide a space for in-depth discussion and planning, allowing the team to consider the bigger picture and make decisions that will shape the future of the cooperative.

All these meetings and sessions also serve as an opportunity for members to bring forward new ideas, discuss challenges, and collaborate on solutions. *Wigwam* also holds monthly "Hörnchen" rounds, which are informal, mixed-group meetings (meaning they mix people from various circles), where members can share personal

needs, concerns, and experiences. These rounds are a part of *Wigwam's* commitment to foster a supportive and inclusive environment, where members feel heard and valued. The informal nature of these meetings encourages open and honest communication, helping to build strong relationships within the team and ensuring that everyone's needs are considered.

Due to the self-organisation, there are few hierarchies and no traditional leadership roles at *Wigwam*. Leadership naturally emerges when individuals take the initiative and are ready to drive change. It is crucial that those who take on leadership roles receive support from the rest of the team and are not hindered by unnecessary barriers. This approach to leadership ensures that initiatives are driven by those who are most passionate and capable.

Self-organisation also allows for flexible time management, tasks, and work locations. Members have a great deal of autonomy in structuring and executing their tasks, including in choosing the projects they work on. To manage the distribution of tasks among the members, while personal preferences are considered, there is also a task distribution system, which is based on three components: competence, motivation, and time. Competence refers to whether a person has the necessary skills to handle a specific task. Where this is lacking, support can be sought from other members. Motivation assesses whether the person is genuinely interested in and excited about the task. Lastly, whether the member has sufficient time is also considered. Ideally, all three components should align, but it is sufficient if at least two are met.

Wigwam offers highly flexible working hours but recognises the value of clear availability for the team's benefit, ensuring overlap and seamless communication. This creates a healthy balance, allowing everyone the freedom to work in the way that suits them best. Some individuals are more productive in the mornings, while others may need uninterrupted focus time to work effectively.

In line with its commitment to self-organisation and cooperative principles, *Wigwam* has introduced an innovative salary model known as the wish salary. This model is a defining feature of their governance structure and reflects their dedication to transparency, fairness, and inclusivity.

According to Lotte Harlan, Member of *Wigwam's* Management Board,

"We came from a salary model like this: Junior, Senior, and Managing Director. So, there were three levels, and nothing in between. And the reason it didn't quite work was because, in the end, there were too many special agreements. For example, Lotte gets a Junior salary, but we pay for her phone because she calls clients, or we pay for the public transport ticket. [...] Then it became chaotic. Some had this salary, others had that, and somehow many were dissatisfied."

After a long process of considering different salary models, the company came up with the wish salary. Every employee at *Wigwam*, from the executive board to the

cleaning staff, participates in the model. After completing their probation period, each team member is invited to join this unique salary system.

The wish salary model empowers team members to independently state their salary wishes based on personal circumstances, without the need to justify their requests to others. There is no upper limit on the amount one can request, fostering a sense of autonomy and respect for individual needs. However, this flexibility is balanced by a strong organisational culture of transparency and frequent communication. All members are fully aware of the cooperative's overall budget and have access to view each other's salaries, ensuring that everyone makes responsible and fair salary requests that align with the organisation's financial reality.

To further promote fairness, a minimum salary is set. This safeguard prevents self-exploitation and ensures that even those who might otherwise undervalue their work are compensated fairly. The introduction of the wish salary model in 2016 coincided with *Wigwam*'s transition into a cooperative, symbolising a shift away from traditional salary negotiation models that often rely heavily on individual bargaining power. Instead, the wish salary model is rooted in the cooperative's values of self-organisation and mutual accountability.

How the Self-Organisation-Based Governance Design Enables Regenerative and Distributive Dynamics

One potential factor that supports *Wigwam*'s distributive purpose is its positive company culture. The culture promotes looking out for one another, even though it is acknowledged that this does not always work perfectly. Additionally, the desire to implement change is viewed positively within the business, and there is an awareness of how changes in one area can affect the broader team. As Lotte Harlan explains,

“We are constantly evolving. So, I can definitely say that we are always optimising. Currently, there are four of us on the board. In the beginning, there were six, then five. When we realised that we don't need as many people or that adjustments would make more sense at that moment, and so we adapted accordingly. I would say we're pretty good at that.”

The flexibility in work design and time management mentioned earlier at *Wigwam* is also seen as a potential that allows everyone the freedom to choose their working conditions. Lotte Harlan explains,

“I know, for example, that someone once said — he's almost never in the office, he programs — and he said: 'I can very well appreciate that *Wigwam* doesn't try to persuade me to come to the office, although it would probably

be good for others now and then. But I actually can't work there at all.' And [...] parents also really appreciate that they can be flexible, adjust things, or work from home when their child is at home."

The business also aims to encourage everyone to work on projects they are passionate about. To support this, information about incoming project requests is shared openly and early. Every request is visible, and team members are encouraged to respond. For example, a designer might express interest by saying they have always wanted to work on the *Berlin Against Nazis* project, by adding a brief comment to the shared document. This approach helps teams form naturally based on interest and motivation.

The broad participation of all team members is another significant strength. From the moment someone joins the team, they are given a voice—not only in board elections but also in influencing the strategic direction of the business. This means individuals can propose ideas and are encouraged to do so. If others agree, the idea can be presented to the entire business through various meeting formats, potentially even changing the business' direction. This high level of empowerment and support, even within a relatively small team of around 30 members, plays a crucial role in fostering innovation and ensuring that each individual recognises their contribution to the cooperative's success. Another notable potential at *Wigwam* is the high level of transparency, particularly in financial matters, which encourages the self-responsibility. This openness enables all members to engage with and understand the business' finances at any time. By making financial information accessible and providing updates during the monthly "Rundlauf" meeting, *Wigwam* encourages members to learn more about financial management and even take on financial responsibilities, thereby fostering a deeper sense of ownership and involvement across the cooperative. Lotte Harlan notes, "[...] when we hire new people, and I say, we are completely transparent, even regarding finances. Everyone always says: yes. But afterwards, not always, but often, the reaction is: yeah, okay, but I didn't realise we were *this* transparent."

Challenges Arising from Designing Governance around Self-Organisation

Wigwam faces several challenges, particularly those that personally affect its members. The freedoms inherent in self-organisation, which empower members to make autonomous decisions, can sometimes lead to individuals feeling isolated and overwhelmed in their decision-making. The pressure to meet expectations can amplify this feeling, creating the impression that everything must be managed alone, even when support is needed.

Balancing individual and group needs in time management and task allocation presents another challenge. In a self-organised work environment, it is crucial to consider how one's actions fit within the broader team context and to consider the needs of other members.

Members also face personal challenges when setting their wish salaries, primarily due to the lack of experience and skills with such salary models. Salary positioning within the group can be difficult, as the salary wishes of others influence one's own expectations. Comparing oneself to others can trigger strong emotions, such as insecurity when feeling inferior or discomfort when feeling overly demanding, which complicates the decision-making process around salary. Lotte Harlan also notes that it is particularly challenging to convey to new members that salary negotiation is not required and that freely determining one's salary is encouraged. This challenge stems from the fact that most people come from hierarchical organisations where salary negotiation is the norm.

To address these challenges, *Wigwam* emphasises regular exchange rounds, agreements, and mutual support among members. For instance, specific exchange formats have been established to assist in setting desired salaries. Additionally, *Wigwam's* positive corporate culture plays a crucial role, as it is important to look out for one another and maintain open communication.

Interactions with Other Design Traits

Network Design

The governance approaches implemented, along with the cooperative ownership design, positively influence *Wigwam's* relationships with its external stakeholders. According to Harlan, *Wigwam's* governance practices and legal structure contribute to being perceived as authentic and credible. This perception is especially noticeable among clients, many of whom become interested in *Wigwam's* governance structure and legal form, often leading to collaboration.

The cooperative's network extends beyond its immediate members, encompassing a diverse group of freelancers, partner agencies, friends, former employees, and clients. This network is not just a collection of business contacts; it is a community of like-minded individuals and organisations that share *Wigwam's* values and vision for a better world. Business partners often include non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and foundations, which align closely with *Wigwam's* mission. These partnerships are crucial for the cooperative, as they enable *Wigwam* to extend its reach and impact, collaborating on projects that have the potential to bring about meaningful social and ecological change. *Wigwam's* emphasis on collaboration is also reflected in their approach to networking, exemplified by their regular organisation of a net-

working event called *reCampaign*, which serves as a platform for discussing relevant topics and fostering connections among participants with similar goals.

Ownership Design

The success of the self-organised governance structure, including the wish salary system, is largely influenced by the cooperative ownership design. *Wigwam*'s ownership structure is highlighted as one of the greatest factors for successfully implementing this governance model. Lotte Harlan emphasises, "I would say that's the biggest factor". While *Wigwam* originally started as a limited liability company (German: GmbH), they later transitioned to becoming a cooperative. Lotte Harlan explains, "We also had to take a very pragmatic approach and buy the company from the GmbH, because that's just how things are in Germany". The cooperative structure ensures that everyone is both an employee and an employer, meaning all members participate in economic activities and share responsibility collectively. "Only by adding the democratic principles of the cooperative can the methods of self-organisation and New Work fully realise their positive impact on the organisation and the people within it" (*Wigwam*, 2020). This distribution of responsibilities enhances motivation and strengthens mutual trust among members.

Another advantage of the cooperative ownership design is the role rotation facilitated by regular board elections, which helps foster mutual understanding. Members, who have served on the board gain first-hand experience of the responsibilities and challenges involved, enabling them to better empathise with the decisions and actions taken by the board. This shared experience contributes to a stronger sense of solidarity and collective responsibility within the organisation.

Recommendations for Adopting a Self-Organisation-Based Governance Design

Lotte Harlan emphasises the importance of recognising that the wish salary model may not be directly replicable in other organisations, especially those lacking the specific conditions that contributed to its success at *Wigwam*. Three factors were crucial for the successful implementation. First, the strong interpersonal relationships within the team, as Lotte Harlan explained, "we all knew each other," which facilitated the open and honest communication necessary for discussing sensitive topics like salary transparency and redistribution. Second, the availability of extra financial resources was essential for the first introduction of the wish salary model. As Lotte Harlan noted, "I don't believe that redistributing money works if you only have the same amount, because that means I'm actively taking something away from you" and could lead to dissatisfaction or perceived losses among employees. There-

fore, having additional funds allowed the model to be implemented fairly, ensuring that no team member felt disadvantaged. Finally, the supportive and collaborative structure of *Wigwam* provided a solid foundation for the wish salary model to function effectively, offering support and opportunities for exchange for anyone who is struggling or in need of assistance.

Another critical factor for the success of the self-organisation and such formats as the wish salary was the adoption of a cooperative ownership design, which naturally supported the principles of transparency, mutual accountability, and shared ownership. This structure is particularly conducive to fostering a fair and equitable workplace, making it a strong recommendation for businesses looking to implement similar models.

Inspiring Redesign Beyond the Business

It is essential to have models that demonstrate how cooperatives can be more than just groups of people working together. They can be stable and successful businesses that deliver quality work, offer fair wages, and effectively navigate everyday challenges with the support of a well-functioning governance model. While cooperatives have a long history, it's crucial to show that this model can also flourish in modern settings, proving that alternative approaches are viable and can achieve success. Considering their salary model, Lotte Harlan emphasises, “[...] there always needs to be role models that show it's possible. And even though I would say our salary model isn't perfect, I believe it's important to see that things can be done differently”. Examples like *Wigwam* are important for encouraging others to explore and adopt new ways of designing businesses and doing business. These examples can demystify cooperatives, self-organisation, innovative salary models and leadership models, aiming to inspire and educate others about these alternative approaches to business and governance. To support others interested in their governance design, *Wigwam* offers consultation and workshops, while also sharing key insights and experiences on their public blog.

References

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Note: Shortly before the publication of this book, Wigwam announced its dissolution at the end of 2025. The reasons include reduced project budgets, increased price competition from large advertising agencies and the rapid transformation driven by AI. More information is available at: <https://wigwam.im/>