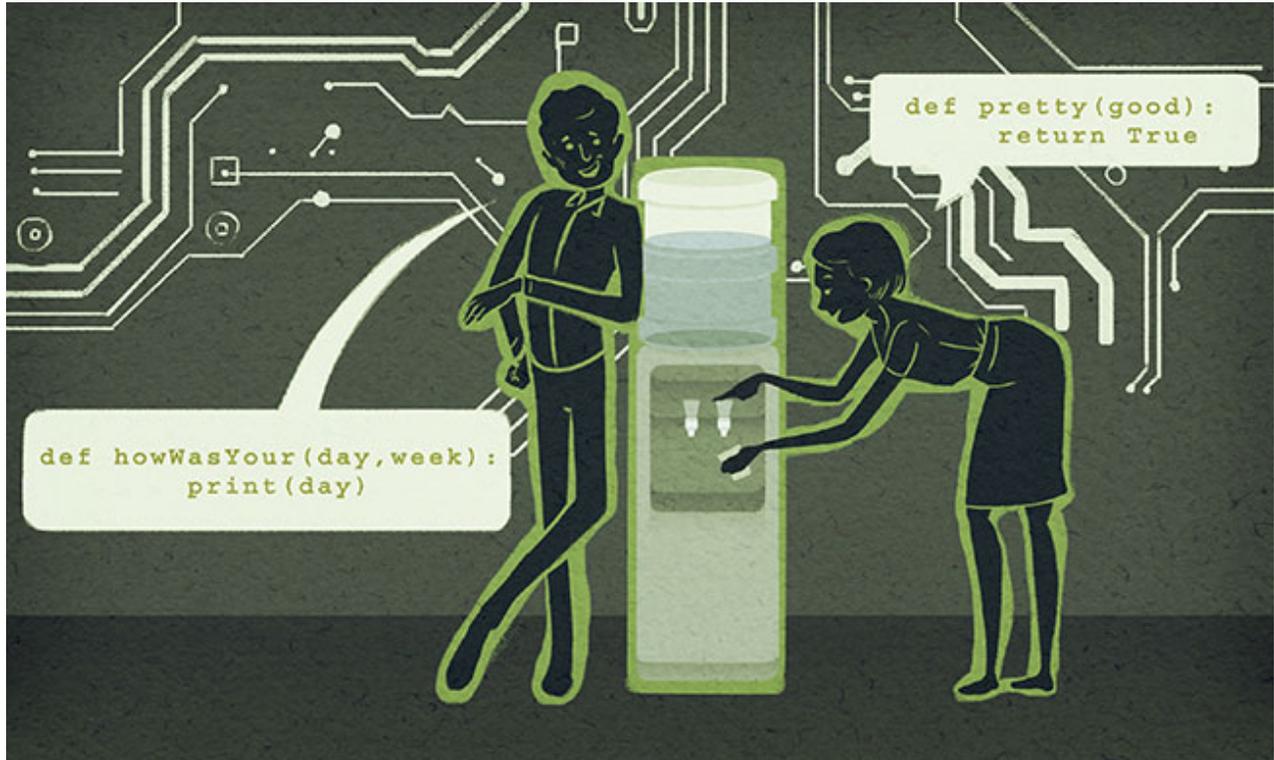


A Techie New Management Fad Gives Workers More Power—Up to a Point

Holacracy aims to liberate workers from micromanagement by replacing bosses with code-like rules modeled on computer programming.



YES! illustration by Jennifer Luxton.



Nathan Schneider posted Sep 30, 2015

For a week last year, I visited the unMonastery, a multinational community of techies led by a 27-year-old English museum curator who wears a black robe. They had gained access to an Ethernet-equipped complex of hillside caves in Matera, Italy, where they were trying to adapt the sixth-century Rule of St. Benedict, which governs most Catholic monasteries, for the secular age of

open-source software. The experiment was both poignant and fraught—poignant in how it dramatized some ways that technology transforms the practice of community, and fraught in the participants' inability to agree on what their rules would actually be.

The idea has already been implemented at firms like Zappos, GitHub, and Medium.

As if I might do better, I left with an irrepressible impulse to start drafting rules of my own. And rather than the Latin chapters and verses of Benedict's rule, I wrote mine in a programming language called Python.

Something about living in synchrony with code felt good, beautiful, and true.

Code is precise, needing no interpretation except how the computer reads it. No corruptible judges or juries; perfect transparency. To give you an idea, here is a routine for adding a new member for the imaginary community.

```
### addMember
### person - name not in the list MEMBERS
### votes - number of votes approving membership of person
def addMember(person, votes):
    if len(MEMBERS) == votes:
        MEMBERS.append(person)
```

For those new to Python, the lines beginning with “###” are just human-readable comments. The lines below them define a function, `addMember`, that, upon being fed the name of a person and a number of votes, adds that name to the membership list when the number of votes equals the number of names already on the list. Simple, but pure.

One of the words I first heard floating around the unMonastery's breathless conversations about the future, and which I've heard many times since in my reporting on tech culture, was “Holacracy.”

At the time I probably nodded and pretended I knew what it meant. But when I saw that the first and only book on the subject was about to come out—Brian J. Robertson’s *Holacracy: The New Management System for a Rapidly Changing World*—I decided to figure out what it was for real. Back when I started my little rule, it turns out, I had already learned some Holacracy by osmosis.

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Borrowing its name from Arthur Koestler’s concept of the holon—“a whole that is part of a larger whole”—Holacracy proposes to replace the top-down hierarchy of the industrial corporation with a more collaborative, decentralized structure fit for the

Internet age. The idea has already been implemented partly or fully in many corners of the tech industry—for instance, at Zappos, GitHub, and Medium. Holacracy, capitalized, is a registered trademark of Robertson’s company, HolacracyOne.

There is still hierarchy in Holacracy, but it is spread out among nested “circles.” Rather than a single job description, each worker can hold any number of carefully specified “roles,” within which the worker has full authority to make relevant decisions, whether the CEO likes them or not. For bosses used to command and control, Holacracy means giving up the power to micromanage. They have to trust the process—and the code-like rules that define it.

Every age models its ways of organizing work on the dominant means of production. Feudal farmers measured plots of land according to how much a mule could plow in a day. Factories turned their workers into another cog in the machine. Holacracy, in turn, makes explicit the conquest of the computer’s metaphors. “I liken Holacracy to a new operating system,” Robertson explains. He describes it as something a company can “install,” along with various optional “apps” featured on his company’s website. He

writes about how a role “inherits” features from its circle, a usage that geeks will recognize as a basic concept of object-oriented programming. Follow where the metaphor leads, and—you guessed it—the people are more or less programmable objects.

Perhaps this is a problem. Robertson seems at times to enjoy the degree to which Holacracy’s logic effaces the humanness of the human beings caught up in it. “Your responsibility is not to support or take care of people,” he advises in a passage about facilitating meetings. “Done well, the process feels profoundly impersonal.” Although Holacracy grants even the lowliest employees autonomy in their domain, that autonomy must always accord with the rules of the game, and with the overriding purpose of the institution. The purpose is everything, and there can be no Holacracy without one. You, the worker, exist in the system only to serve it.

“I often say flat out: *Holacracy is not about the people,*” Robertson writes, or seems to boast.

The managerial types inclined to read a book like this might not bat an eye around such language—I don’t know. My own inclination is to hope that the future of work to come will be one in which we can bring the fullness of our moral, emotional, communal, and individual selves wherever we go. When we suppress those things for the sake of process and purpose, don’t we run the risk of becoming the worst kind of bureaucrats, obsessing over the efficiency of our logistics regardless of whether they carry bags of rice into disaster zones or Uzis into elementary schools? Today, it is this kind of suppression that makes oil executives so eager to unsee the evidences of climate change, or weapons manufacturers inclined to regard selling tanks to small-town police forces as a good idea.

Where this reviewer sees cause for alarm, however, Robertson sees human potential. “Far from suppressing the personal and interpersonal dimensions,” he writes, “Holacracy actually releases

people to be more fully themselves and more fully together.” Basically, when you cut the drama and emotional bullshit out of work, you can save that stuff for other domains of life. Holacracy, he continues, “keeps human values out of the organizational space, which also keeps the organization out of our human-value space.” The more we become programmable holons at work, the more woo-woo human we can be everywhere else. A benefit of having more distributed authority and less micromanagement, too, is that executives can go on vacation without worrying that everything will implode in their absence. The code, and its human hardware, will carry on.

Robertson is satisfied with keeping the real power to a small cluster of founders and investors.

For a society that fancies itself free and democratic, it’s remarkable how fully under the thumb of rigid hierarchies most of us remain in our productive lives. Holacracy is an anarchist utopia in comparison—and, better yet, it actually seems to work. It takes to heart the principle of subsidiarity, which holds that decisions should be made locally and

autonomously whenever possible. Robertson has a point, too, when he describes Holacracy as “evolutionary”; it has the potential to free up the life force in each of us to seek creative adaptations and mutations that no chief executive could ever think to dictate from above. But to what ends?

Robertson is cautious and ambivalent on what I judge to be the most important question in the book: whether the decentralizing tendencies of Holacracy should extend to boards, to governance, and to ownership. He has done this to some degree with HolacracyOne, but he doesn’t encourage others to rush into it, or to worry about it at all. He’s satisfied with what has become fairly common among up-and-coming tech companies—organizing projects in a collaborative and easygoing way, but keeping the real

power (and wealth) to a small cluster of founders and investors. I don't think that's good enough.

If workers have no power to define the purpose of the organization to which they submit themselves, they're all the more in danger of having no opportunity or expectation for connecting their moral lives with their productive work.

This is not good. This stunts us. Just as we need to harness collective creativity, we need to practice collective ethics and collective stewardship. If workers can meaningfully and appropriately shape the purpose of their organizations, they don't need to check their values at the door in order to be good holons. They can help write their own code. And they can keep being human.

Holacracy or not, this is where the battle lines for the future of work should be drawn—over who writes the code and who defines the purpose.



*Nathan Schneider wrote this article for [YES! Magazine](#). Nathan is the author of, most recently, *Thank You, Anarchy: Notes from the Occupy Apocalypse*. Follow his work on Twitter [@nathanairplane](#) and on his website, [TheRowBoat.com](#).*



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