

## Life as it is: all holons



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Our body, nature, the universe, they are all examples of so-called holarchies, hierarchies of parts that are grouped to form wholes that are greater than the sum of the composing parts and whereby each part in itself is also a whole. Just like a company with its divisions, departments, etc. Or not?

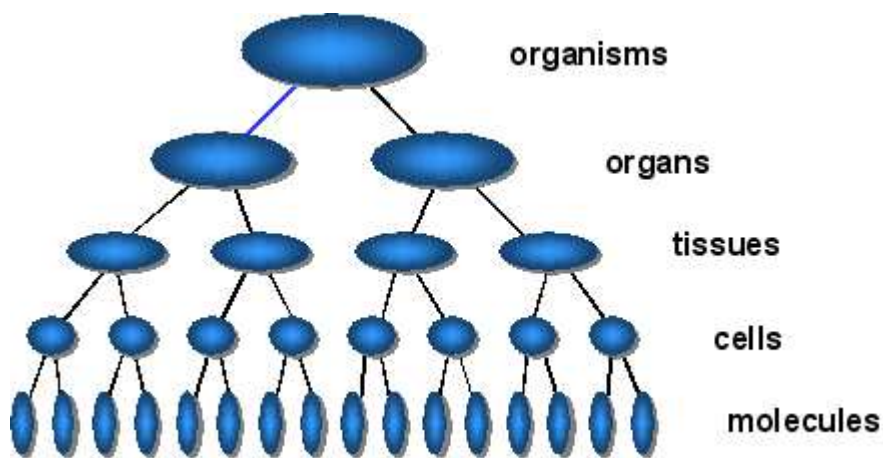
### We are all holons

A couple of days ago, on [Twine](#), someone raised the question whether a holarchy was a viable alternative for the traditional hierarchical structure of organisations.

We weren't familiar with the concept, but a little bit of searching rapidly learned us that it was Arthur Koestler who introduced the concepts of holon and of holarchy in 1967 in his book 'The Ghost in the Machine'.

Thereby, a holarchy is conceived of as a hierarchical structure of holons. The expression holon then is the combination of the Greek "holos", which means "all", and the suffix "-on", which means an "individual part" (as in proton, neutron, etc.)

So, the main characteristic of a holon is this duality of being both an autonomous whole, while also being a part of a larger whole. This larger whole does only exist by the combination and the interaction of the composing parts (holons).



Our body, society, nature, the earth, the universe, they are all examples of holons and of holarchies.

Therefore, it is no great surprise that this concept has found its way into management thinking.

Indeed, at first sight, there are quite a bit of similarities with the organisational structure of a company, grouping divisions, departments, partnerships, etc.

However, that is not the main reason. The more important aspect is the promise of this "grouping of parts to form wholes that are greater than the sum of the composing parts".

This grouping of parts to create (in a better way) larger wholes is indeed an interesting concept for businesses that is already adopted in various ways. Examples of this are the recent [SOA](#) hype and more in general, the drive towards more partnerships and outsourcing.

Thereby, the main advantages that are searched for are more flexibility, configurability, resilience to change and a greater innovation capability. So, these are perceived as the main promises of the holarchical organisation.

## Is a holarchy a better organisational form?

So, comes the inevitable question whether a holarchy is the better organisational form. It should be since nearly everything in this universe is structured as holarchies.

Well indeed, we do think that such approach has clear advantages. Still, when looking at our present society, it certainly does not avoid all growing pains.

In addition, if we really want to adopt this paradigm as the preferred organisational form for the enterprise, then we must be well aware of the reality that this enterprise can no longer be the same.

This has little to do with this grouping of holons in the larger whole that we call the enterprise, but it has everything to do with the autonomy of the composing parts. Like it or not, the latter is an absolute requirement to get to the advantages of flexibility, configurability, resilience to change, etc.

However, how can you allow and even foster this autonomy, without fundamentally rethinking all aspects of control, authority and decision power within the present organisation?

As an illustration, just think about a more traditional "semi-virtual" organisation where parts of the activities are outsourced or handled via partners. To some extent, this is very similar to the concept of a holon within an enterprise.

In such semi-virtual organisation, all participating companies will share a common interest, common vision and objectives. However, there will be no unique, uniform vision and objectives. Every participant will have his own variant of this common vision. Sometimes very similar, sometimes more fundamentally different, but with enough common ground to make it a workable alliance.

The same goes for the holarchy. All holons will share the "general" vision of the enterprise, but never in an absolute way since they all have a different context. For the 'top management' holon, shareholders might be a primary concern, but for the 'production' holon, priorities might be quite different.

This seems a disadvantage, but in reality, this is the basis for the higher value a holarchy can provide since these differences create the "creative tension" that is needed to push the whole to a level that exceeds the sum of the parts.

Can this really be done within the walls of a single company?

Difficult to say. At least, we will have to make some brave choices. Grouping these holons within a single whole while allowing and stimulating the autonomy of the composing parts can only be possible when we are willing to fundamentally rethink the roles, the relationships and the responsibilities of all parties involved.

Ourselves, we really think that an economy that is based upon the principles of holarchies would result in a better, more equitable and, in the long term, also more productive society. However, this will require a fundamental shift of power, privileges and financial reward. Today, it is completely unclear to us whether we can hope for such a shift.

Perhaps we just have to wait for an even bigger financial crisis.

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SOA: Service-Oriented Architecture (SOA) is a software architecture whereby the real application (the whole) is created by the interaction of a number of (often web-based) components (services) that all deliver specific functionality. Such component (e.g. a credit check) can exist autonomously, providing its service to multiple applications, even of different companies.

## About the author



Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.


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