IMPRESAPROGETTO
ELECTRONIC JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT
n. 1 – 20219

# Ambidextrous identity in Public Management. The case of Apulia Region

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## Abstract

This research investigates how, in the age of post-bureaucracy, an ambidextrous identity could help public bodies to be efficient and to innovate at the same time. Public governance has undergone a paradigm change with the introduction of a post-bureaucratic system, that is flat, connected and flexible, with individual autonomy as the key to addressing environmental complexity. This new system should balance the trade-off between creativity, innovation and flexibility needed to solve emerging social challenges and efficiency as a basis for sustainable competitiveness. In this scenario, this paper intends to present the static (*forms*) and dynamic elements *(flows*) of an organizational ambidextrous model that must be adopted by public administrations and agencies. The model is designed to optimize four interconnected dimensions: *organizational, individual, inter-organizational* and *decisional*

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Arrivato il 15 aprile 2019, approvato il 27 maggio 2019
DOI: 10.15167/1824-3576/IPEJM2019.1.1180

and has been applied as a pilot test for the Apulia Region. The document contributes under a double perspective: on a theoretical level, expanding the discussion on the implementation and integration of organic and mechanistic models as privileged organizational archetypes in dynamic and collaborative scenarios; at the level of professionals, through the preliminary adoption of a complete technology organizational system for public organizations.

**Keywords:** ambidextrous identity, new public management, Apulia Region.

## 1. Purpose of the research

In the nineteenth century the governance of public administrations was characterized by the affirmation of the Weberian model and its pillars: hierarchical organization, centralized decisions and functional separation (Weber, 1922). This model has showed its limitations because to survive and develop, organizations, including public ones, typically have to face two opposing needs: on the one hand they are called to respond effectively to the demands for change and innovation from the environment, on the other hand they are required to preserve the conditions of efficiency, in the performance of its internal processes. Thompson (1967) argues that organizations are equipped with organs that operate flexibly in order to allow the main activities (which represent the so-called "technical core") to function with the highest level of predictability.

In recent years, public governance is increasingly challenged by two opposing needs: the evolution of society require creative, flexible and innovation-oriented approaches but the economic pressures and budget cuts are forcing governments to adopt models oriented to efficiency, competitiveness and cost savings (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). In order to address the changing needs of public governance, increase citizen participation and adopt transparent procedures (Vigoda, 2002), the new organizational system should incorporate creativity, the capacity for innovation and flexibility needed to address emerging social challenges, as well as the efficiency and effectiveness needed to achieve sustainability and public value (O'Flynn, 2007).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the theoretical framework by discussing organic models as privileged organizational archetypes in dynamic and collaborative scenarios. Section 3 describes research methods and introduces the case of Apulia Region. Section 4 discusses main findings by conceptualizing a proof-of-concept of a comprehensive ambidextrous organizational model for public organizations; this section also reports about model's implementation strategy and highlights the functional requirements for a decision support system to measure regional performance and service quality. Section 5 concludes with insights of theoretical, empirical, and managerial implications and contributions.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The main reference to the ambidextrous organization is the pioneering work of James March (1991), who noted that the most important challenge for an organization consists in the ability to profit from existing resources and activities (exploitation) and simultaneously explore (exploration) new avenues, to prevent changes in markets and technologies from weakening the basis of its competitive advantage.

The balance between exploration and exploitation is the key element of the ambidextrous organization. However, this is a difficult balance to achieve, especially because organizations tend to favor exploitation, as they are associated with certain profits in the short term. On the other hand, exploration is by its very nature an inefficient activity, because it leads to an accumulation of "bad ideas" or unreachable projects. At the same time, a certain amount of exploration is vital to ensure that the organization does not succumb to change.

It has been observed (Tushman, O 'Reilly, 1996; O'Reilly, Tushman, 2013) how many organizations have managed to survive and change through the decades thanks to their ambidextrous character. Starting from this consideration, many researches have subsequently developed on the theme, with the main objectives of: demonstrating the existence of a link between ambidexualism and organizational performance, understanding through which tools an ambidextrous organization can be designed and managed, identifying the environmental conditions in which it is more useful for a company to develop ambidextrous orientation.

The Weberian bureaucracy is mostly a mechanistic organizational structure with a focus on efficiency, rationality and the stability of organizational processes. The model has suffered various criticisms over the years. Merton (1949) has identified the unintended consequences of the Weberian bureaucracy, i.e. the inability to adapt to the new, bureaucratic ritualism and the "spirit of body". The bureaucracy is never a partisan instrument used by an impersonal authority able to guarantee a better governance; on the contrary, it is always the tool that reflects the concerns, interests and intentions of power (Gouldner, 1955). In the same perspective, it was discussed that bureaucracy is not a neutral instrument valid for any use, but is rather characterized by hardness, viscosity and internal resistance (Selznick, 1949). Crozier (1963) affirms that the bureaucracy presents itself as a rigid, inefficient, fussy and unattractive body, but which gives those who know how to exploit these unexpected niches of private independence. The real power is the choice, the initiative, the strategy and the ability to influence the behavior of others outside the planned rules.

The concept of post-bureaucracy was connected to the reduction of the formal hierarchy levels, the emphasis on flexibility, the creation of a more permeable boundary between the internal and external of organizations (Garsten & Grey, 2001). In Johnson (2009), post-bureaucracy is a flat organization, more connected and flexible, in which individuals are necessarily invested by elevated levels of autonomy in order to cope with a high variable environment. In this perspective, information and communication technologies can drive administrative public

processes that are faster, more efficient and transparent, thus strengthening the role of citizens looking after the action of public managers.

The contingency perspective (Burns and Stalker, 1961, Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967) identifies organizational choices as a natural response to the complexity and variability of the environment. This perspective places the organizational forms in a continuum between a model coherent with classical theories, which looks at organizations as mechanical systems, and the one that considers them as "organic" and more flexible systems (typical in highly uncertain contexts).

While mechanistic structures are able to effectively exploit organizational knowledge through the use of structured and standardized operating procedures (exploitation), organic structures are characterized by less formalization and standardization, greater freedom in decisions, which encourages creativity and experimentation. (exploration) new paths of innovation and enrichment of organizational knowledge (Levinthal and March, 1993).

All organizations continually exploit the competitive advantage hidden in their knowledge base and, at the same time, explore new ideas and solutions as a basis for future competitive advantage. These two activities are however usually unbalanced in one direction or another (Raisch et al, 2009). Ambidextrous organizations are capable of accomplishing both these tasks simultaneously. Organizational ambidexterity is an organization's ability to be aligned and efficient in its management of today's business demands and, at the same time, being adaptive to changes in the environment (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004).

Ambidexterity in an organization is achieved by balancing exploration and exploitation, i.e. risk taking, innovation, experimentation and flexibility with refinement, efficiency, selection, implementation, and execution. In the pursue of ambidexterity, it is feasible to keep together these parallel processes, organizational units and cultures under the cohesive guidance of "ambidextrous leaders" (Smith & Tushman, 2005).

The ambidextrous transformation is a potential path for innovation in public administration that follow the evolutionary trend of public governance towards New Public Management (NPM) strategies and approaches to achieve better performance and innovativeness. NPM consists of management methods, devolution, deregulation, market reforms, and customer service, along with adoption of performance indicators, quality system management, contract systems, and deregulation (Christensen and Lægreid, 1999). The theoretical foundation of NPM has been complemented by introducing attributes such as policy analysis and evaluation, rationalization of administrative structures, and extensive use of information technology (Gruening, 2001). NPM can be a way to promote ambidexterity at the individual level and for the single organizational unit, but some difficulties arise when promoting a mix of integration and differentiation approaches and when cross-functional decision making capability need to be achieved (Aagaard, 2011). For the new public service committed to efficiency, there is still a need to find new ways for improving effectiveness to be able to achieve public value (Bryson et al., 2014).

Being ambidextrous has implications on three interrelated dimensions: organizational, individual, decision-making. According to the organizational dimension, it is the central the differentiation or integration between the units dedicated to the exploitation of existing knowledge and those designed for the creation of new knowledge. Since the exploration units are typically smaller, more decentralized and more flexible than the corresponding units dedicated to exploitation (Benner & Tushman, 2003), it is necessary to try to keep them separate. On the other hand, the two processes require a strong integration since, observing the organization from an external perspective, exploration and exploitation represent a continuum of complementary activities (Gupta et al, 2006; Cao et al, 2009).

According to the individual dimension, especially for public managers, it is necessary to develop ambidextrous skills such as the ability of each organization member to make choices between explorative and exploitative activities or to identify organizational conditions that integrate, differentiate, or combine the two perspectives granting sufficient autonomy to set goals and make decisions. It is also relevant to connect the ambidextrous organizational dimension with the individual one to stimulate recognition, socialization, and team building (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1997).

The inter-organizational dimension emphasizes the ability to integrate internal and external knowledge. The new knowledge required to build a sustainable competitive advantage can be gained by exploiting partnerships and strategic alliances with other organizations. This ability depends in part on the managerial skills to build networks of relationships with organizations able to produce value (Hargadon & Fanelli, 2002), and in part on the ability of the organization to recognize, assimilate and apply new knowledge on the knowledge base already existing (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990)

The decision dimension is an extremely important element still debated in the organizational literature. It plays a strategic role in reducing uncertainty by enforcing the application of tools and models that can extract information both from within the organization itself and from the external environment, to offer concrete support to decision-making. Decision Support System (DSS) are among the most effective tools for managing decision processes that are unstructured or semi-structured (Courtney, 2001).

## 3. Research methods

In order to address our research questions, we have conducted a case study analysis (Stake, 2006; Yin, 1993, 2009) adopting a qualitative approach of investigation. Through an exploratory analysis of the case of the MAIA model in Apulia Region, we have investigated the former organizational model, the limitations of the former model, than we have been able to deepen the new techno-Organizational Model proposed in Apulia Region.

## *3.1 The Case of Apulia Region*

Apulia is a region in southern Italy. It comprises 19,345 square kilometers (7,469 sq mi), and it has about four million inhabitants. Apulia Region has an agriculture and tourism-based economy and a growing GDP in industrial sectors such as Aerospace and ICT.

The staff of Apulian Regional Administration is composed of about 150 managers, 2,900 employees and the average employees' age is about 52 years old.

### *3.1.1 Former Organizational Model*

The former organizational model of the Region (called "GAIA: The intelligent Region") was strictly bureaucratic and characterized by a subdivision of responsibilities and decisions to different levels and an orientation towards the functional specialization of skills, with 8 high-level complex units , called coordination areas, 6 coordination areas that work for: rural development; mobility and urban quality; economic development, employment and innovation; promotion of local resources, know-how and talents; promotion of health, people and equal opportunities; retraining, environmental protection and safety and implementation of the main public infrastructures. Two areas of staff working for: organization and administration reform; finance and control.

The Coordination Areas were organized in "Services", the management units responsible for operational planning, implementation and control, further divided into "Offices", the functional units at the base of the regional management system. The services were supported by the personnel and project units of their area, which respectively aim to ensure uniformity, consistency and efficiency in the planning, management and development of technical, financial and human resources and in the implementation of specific time-related and inter-functional objectives. . Furthermore, Integrating Structures ensured coordination between the areas of administrative activity and regional operational programs.

In a subordinate position, 8 regional agencies and 3 subsidiary companies have operated to support the bureaucratic machine's activities in various sectors, rarely carrying out exploratory activities.

### *3.1.2 Limitations of the Former Model*

The GAIA model can be discussed along four dimensions:

D1. *Organizational Dimension*: major organizational limitations lied in the rigidity caused by the high number of Services and Offices forming a highly vertical and centralized organization and by the inability to innovate exhibited by the Agencies, which strategic activities were delegated to. *Exploitation* was hindered by both a

proliferation of units and a limited horizontal coordination. *Exploration* was carried on between internal and external structures, respectively the Coordinating Areas and the Regional Agencies, the latter having the same degree of bureaucracy and therefore being inherently inadequate to develop change processes, despite a significant allocation of resources and a well-recognized role.

D2. *Individual Dimension:* there were no actions in place to support personal growth and empowerment. Only the job rotation of managers within the Coordinating Areas was adopted as a measure to comply with the anti-corruption national law. Organizational development, innovation and change require connectivity, creativity and self-organization, the emergence of new organizational and professional visions that have already appeared in practice communities and professional networks.

D3. *Inter- organizational dimension*: inter-organizational limitations were caused by the lack of a clear strategy in the definition and management of relations with other organizations and third parties that can bring new organizational, technical and scientific knowledge. The strategy pursued by the regional administration to interact with research centers and universities was only partially effective because of the critical mass of skills that can be achieved within this network and the rigid and bureaucratic procedures used for their management. While the most effective approach to research and innovation is trust in relationships and the integration of skills.

D4. *Decisional Dimension:* the process of gathering the information required to support decisions concerning the implementation of new policies and the evaluation of the ones already implemented was fragmented (among Offices, Services, other Structures and the Regional Agencies) and not coordinated. The decision-making process within the organization should shift to a managerial model where the coordination is performed by managers at the top level of the organization. Furthermore, to enable a structured decision-making process, it is necessary to standardize organization, methods and formats of information gathering.

## 4. Main or expected findings

The new organizational model, MAIA, will be implemented through a set of actions aimed at overcoming the limitations described above that will result in an ambidextrous organization.

### *4.1 Plan towards the New Model*

Three actions have been planned to overcome organizational limits (referred to dimension D1):

1. create, in place of the coordination areas, a small number of departments reflecting the strategic objectives and confer power on the regional presidency, through a departmental support unit called the General Secretariat of the Presidency. The skills necessary to optimize the administrative activity and maximize the effectiveness of the action will be concentrated in the departments (with a lower number of Services), called Sections in the MAIA model, thus creating a horizontal organizational model based on the affinity and interdependence of the operational fields.

2. strengthen the exploration capacity by establishing strategic regional agencies that work closely with each of the departments. These dynamic organisms, constructed as matrix-based organizations, will enable us to achieve efficacy and efficiency objectives by guaranteeing high quality standards in the development of distinctive skills and respecting the constraints imposed by the central government's stability law, placing the same emphasis on technical skills and the operational areas of intervention. Staff units operating in departments will be gradually transferred to the corresponding strategic agencies.

3. integrate, coordinate and balance the action of new six departments and agencies through an organizational entity called the Coordination Commission of the departments. A new organizational entity called the Management Board, which will become part of the Directors of the Agencies and Departments, will be responsible for supporting the President in the strategic choices that promote innovation, change and competitiveness.

Three actions have been planned to support organizational growth through individual growth of employees (referred to dimension D2):

1. promoting empowerment by ensuring opportunities of professional growth to those willing to undertake process improvement and innovation. Administration officials will be solicited to propose administrative and technical innovation projects, as well as scientific research projects, with direct and indirect impact on its organizational unit. These projects will be carried on with the support of a service for Project Management (*Project Management Office*) in the context of explorative activities performed by the corresponding Strategic Agency.

2. increasing job rotation practices in order to foster an organizational permeability between Departments and Agencies that allows individuals to increase both sense of belonging and understanding the needs characterizing different organizational areas.

3. endorsing advanced training of personnel as a mean for cultural change in the logic of continuous improvement to help asserting organizational principles of effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability.

Two actions have been planned to enhance inter-organizational relationships (referred to dimension D3):

1. strengthening capabilities of developing international relationships by instituting, within every Strategic Agency, a *Research and Innovation* responsible for creating, according to typical patterns of *network organizations*, a hub able to develop and support networks of relationships on a global scale with a large number

of nodes and for orchestrating the operation of the network up to the solution of a problem.

2. identifying actions and tools for the *Research and Innovation* services to be able to establish relationships with different engagement levels, in order to enable network models designed to support the exchange of researchers between regional, national and international institutions, and to create permanent *listening points* in the region that are connected with global research networks.

Finally, three actions have been planned to develop monitoring and analysis tools (referred to D4):

1. defining a model supporting structured decision-making by establishing, within every Strategic Agency, a *Process Management and KPI* service responsible for developing methods and tools for measuring and monitoring effectiveness and efficiency of the corresponding Department processes in order to assess the overall performance of the system and to identify optimization solutions.

2. developing methods for assessing impact of policies adopted by the regional government. To this purpose, within every Strategic Agency, a *Policy Making* service responsible for identifying and collecting context data relevant to the evaluation of the regional system health status will be established and of the implementation status and results of policies adopted by the corresponding Department.

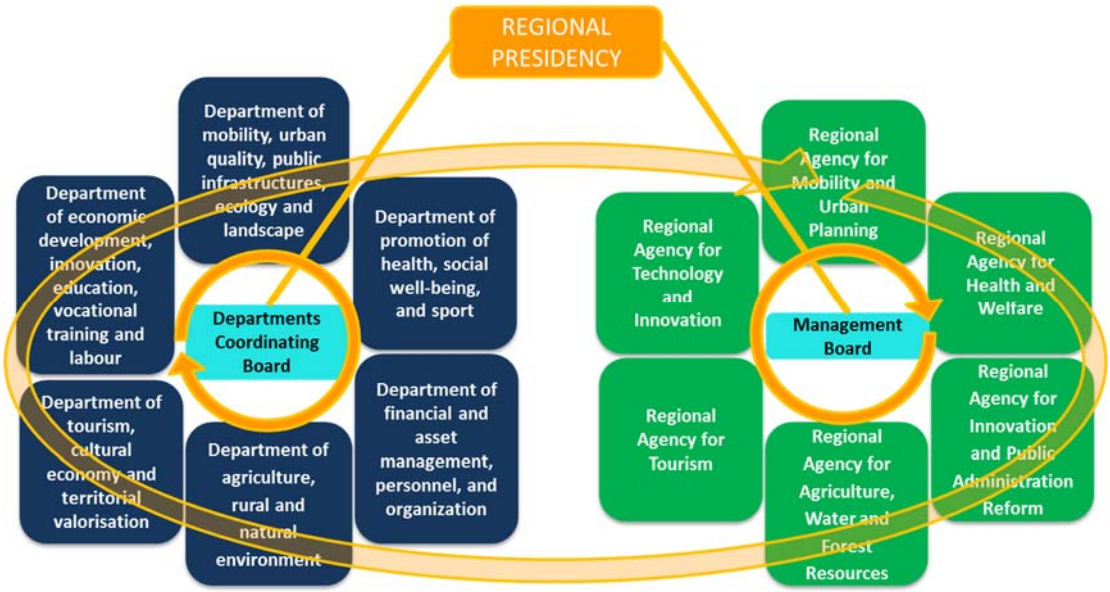
3. develop a decision support tool that allows for access to data (in open format) coming from all the information sources collected and normalized by *Process Management and KPI*, and *Policy Making* services of the Agencies.

### *4.2 Structure of the New Organizational Model*

The MAIA model is based on ambidextrous organizations (the Department and the Regional Strategic Agency), including five high-level units, responsible for the implementation of regional policies and governance of the relevant areas of interest, and a unit of staff dedicated to financial sector and asset management, including staff, and organizational innovation.

A fundamental step towards the construction of the model consisted in perimeter the action of each ambidextrous organization. After careful evaluation, it was decided to concentrate the activities of the ambidextrous structures on the following topics: 1) Promotion of health, wellbeing and sport; 2) Economic development, innovation, education, training and work; 3) Agriculture, development of the environment; 4) Tourism, cultural economy and enhancement of the territory; 5) Mobility, urban quality, public infrastructure; 6) Financial and asset management, personnel and organization.

**Figure 1:** The ambidextrous model – own processing




The main units (to support the Regional Committee and the President) to govern the entire ambidextrous organizational system of MAIA are: the General Secretariat of the Presidency, the Coordination Council of the Departments and the Management Board. The responsibility of the Secretariat is the coordination of strategically relevant sections whose action is directly linked to the prerogatives of the Cabinet and the President of the Region.

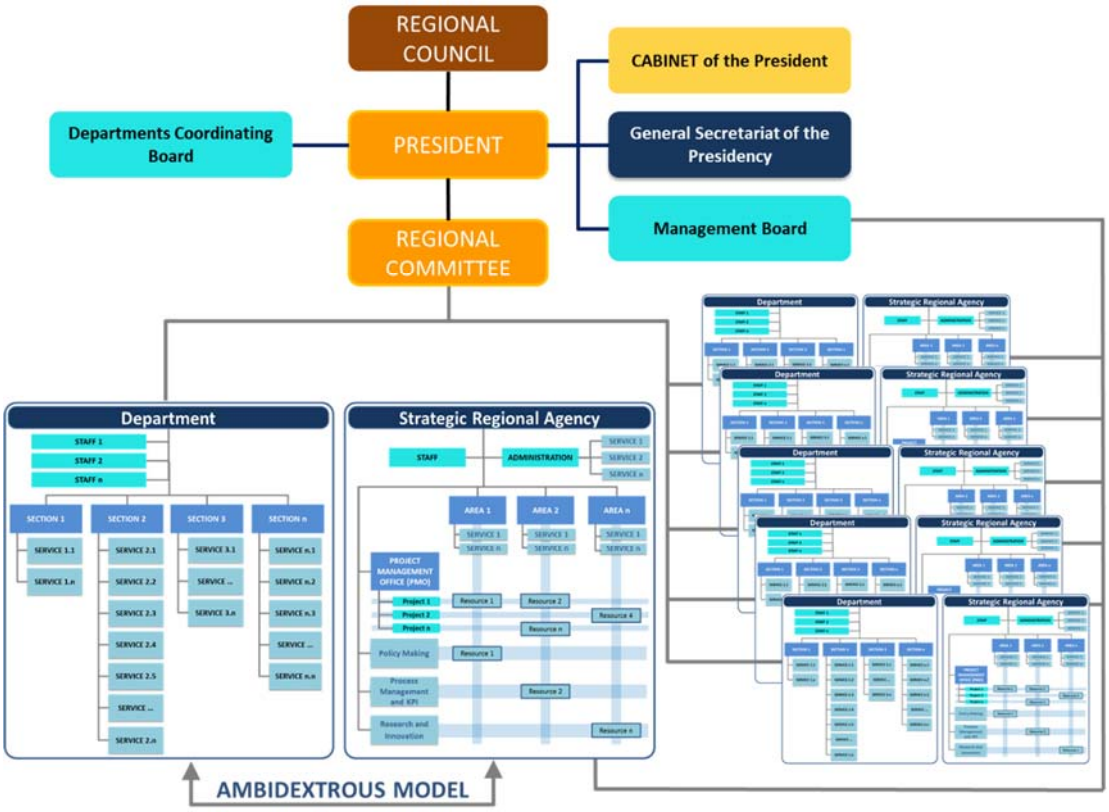
The reorganization criteria also respond to the need for greater effectiveness and efficiency, transparency and traceability of processes and functional consistency. The departments are responsible for exploitation activities, committed to resolving the relevant issues that refer to specific objectives of growth and development of the territory. Within the departments, each of the themes will be dealt with by a specific section and its subordinate services.

The search for greater effectiveness and efficiency in administrative action is pursued by decreasing the number of line units in the various levels and maintaining the Integration Structures, which ensure coordination and unity of processes, Staff Structures, for the unification of skills similar and efficient use of resources and the structures of the project, to achieve specific goals and time.

The reduction in the number of organizational units, together with the expansion of their functions and dedicated staff, allows for cost savings and better coordination. It also allows each business unit to be given greater autonomy and to empower the staff to carry out their tasks. This is widely confirmed in literature (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1999) where it is stated that every organization that is influenced by change must focus attention on the individual dimension by favoring recognition.

As explained above, regional strategic agencies will be established to complete the ambidextrous model. Their role is extremely important, as they are assigned the task of identifying, planning and promoting the development of their sectors of activity. To this end, the agencies carry out exploratory activities aimed at analyzing existing best practices (Jansen, et al, 2009), to undertake improvement initiatives, to involve all types of stakeholders in order to meet specific needs, gain attractiveness and competitiveness with respect to the national and international context.

**Figure 2:** The MAIA Organizational model – own processing




The agencies will have a structure based on a matrix in which the vertical lines represent the operational issues addressed by the executive areas. These areas are at the center of exploration activities because they represent organizational entities that should transmit the ability to develop research paths, identify and experiment with innovation paths.

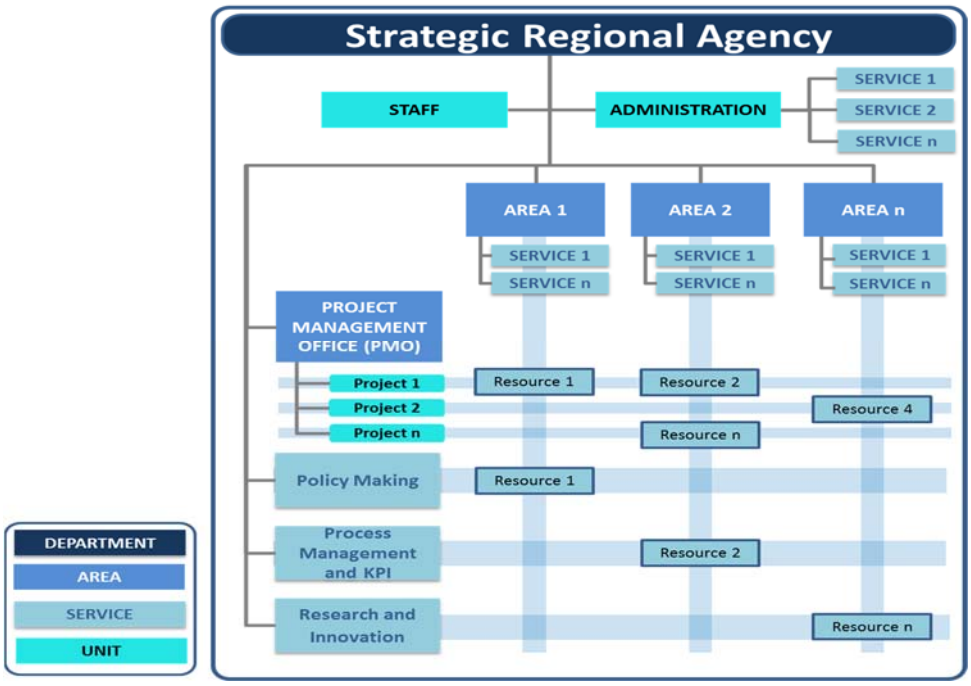
By allowing the activities of the Areas to change dynamically depending on the needs, the organization based on a matrix makes the Regional Strategic Agencies flexible to cope with the sudden changes in the environment in which they operate and to decentralize the decision-making process. At the same time, in the matrix, the sustainable development of strategic skills is made possible by the turnover in the

various areas and by the operation of more streamlined and efficient structures through the sharing of resources.

The horizontal lines of the matrix represent the distinctive technical and professional skills required to develop the activities of each Strategic Agency.

The Project Management Office (PMO) represents the unit that manages the project activities developed for the departmental Sections and the entire portfolio of strategic projects (Kerzner, 2010). The project management office is a strategic tool to operate successfully in a turbulent and constantly evolving environment (Crawford & Helm, 2009). The adoption of a PMO allows the activation of a continuous modification process.

**Figure 3**: Matrix-based organization of Strategic Regional Agencies – own processing




The Process Management and KPI unit goal is to explicitly represent the operation of the Department. The Business Process Management approach (Harmon, 2007) and the subsequent representation of process logic allows for the development of a reliable system for personnel performance measurement, for strengthening transparency and collaboration through the use of ICT tools and raising quality standards of services (Radu et al, 2008).

The Policy Making unit goal is to study and propose new policies to the regional management that are related to the topics of interest of Agency operational areas.

The Research and Innovation unit goal is to monitor the change in cognitive questions expressed by the main context of national and international research that is to manage the know-how necessary to provide professional assistance to the

formalization and development of best project proposals, their control and on-time reporting as well as the promotion of interconnections with regional, national and international organizations operating on issues related to the Agency's operational mandate.

### *4.3 Ongoing evolution of the MAIA organizational model*

The transition to the new model began in November 2015, when most of the directors of the new departments and general secretaries were formed. With the support of the MAIA directors and project team, the government has initiated the reorganization of the departments that is the bureaucratic machine or component of the "exploitation" of the model. The reorganization of the "explorative" component is postponed to a second phase as it represents a more delicate process that requires long time and complex methods.

With regard to the reorganization of the Departments, given the pressure of time to ensure a fully operational machine, it was decided to adopt an iterative approach made of successive cycles of study, implementation and evaluation to obtain an optimal organizational configuration and to allow a progressive alignment. and balance between elements: 1) the point of view of the political and managerial apex of the regional administration, which must exploit the potential and manage the evolution (TOP-DOWN approach); 2) the perspective of employees, the only repositories of organizational knowledge that must be incorporated into the definition of the microstructure of the MAIA model (BOTTOM-UP approach); and 3) the actual needs of departmental organizational units, estimated through quantitative studies of organizational processes.

The causes of the delay can be attributed to a number of reasons such as: a) the pressure of the union component on the decisions of department managers, who have been chosen outside the regional administration; b) the need to establish a link between the political authorities and the administration representatives who must implement the policies; c) adherence to administrative procedures for assigned positions that ensure equal opportunities for employees; d) the existence of restrictions deriving from national and regional regulations (eg environmental supervision for the regional law 31/2015).

### *4.4 Functional Elements for a Decision Support System for MAIA*

As mentioned above, the design and development of a Decision Support System (DSS) are part of the actions to complete the implementation of the MAIA.

The DSS must be developed, on a first level, as an environment for analyzing the data collected within the organization, based on the explicit representation of internal processes and the general quality of service indicators for the benefit of the interested parties. Therefore, the understanding of administrative processes is the necessary starting point for undertaking actions to improve and innovate services.

A second level of the DSS will be dedicated to the analysis of the data coming from the external environment to evaluate the real effectiveness of the bureaucratic machine's operative capacity to face the emerging problems deriving from the change of the economic and social environment.

The third level of the DSS will be dedicated to measuring the perception, by citizens and businesses, of the state of the region and of the administrative capacity to provide services through transparent and participatory processes. This level will use tools to analyze social media and public discussion networks, in a few words the "vox populi" as a primary source (Ang, 2011) and will allow to grasp the level of trust of citizens (Ahn et al, 2007).

## 5. Theoretical, empirical, and managerial implications and contributions

New public bodies should adopt a contingency perspective as a natural response to the complexity and variability of the environment and the challenges of the society.

This paper has presented the static (*forms*) and dynamic (*flows*) elements of an ambidextrous organizational model to be adopted by central administrations and public agencies to optimize four interconnected dimensions, i.e. *organizational*, *individual*, *inter-organizational*, and *decisional*. The paper also introduces the functional requirements for a decision support system aimed to measure regional performance and service quality.

The model is presented as applied in a pilot test on the Apulia regional administration. The MAIA model features ambidextrous organizations built upon a pair of Departments and Strategic Regional Agencies: Departments are in charge of exploitative activities; in the Agencies, explorative activities are carried on in a matrix structure. An Agency specific matrix organization is presented that relies on four specific services able to propose and manage innovation projects, to develop assessments of policy effectiveness and public value, to build research networks and enhance the knowledge base.

The paper contributes by discussing the preliminary adoption of the MAIA techno-organizational model. A limitation of the study stays in the absence of measurement of the real impact of the model. Besides, difficulties in application may derive from regulatory constraints and delays caused by rigid bureaucratic procedures required.

Further research shall thus be addressed to evaluate the real benefits of the new model respect to the existing organizational configurations and the implications following the implementation of flexible models to support dynamic and collaborative scenarios for public organizations. As suggested in literature (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013), the ongoing adoption of the model can contribute to provide managerial insights on the management of interfaces between exploitation and

exploration, on leveraging existing assets, on the role of organizational culture, and on the involvement of the community in the innovation path.

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