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SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

Agile Performance Management in Romanian NGOs:
*Catalyst for a transformative shift towards a more
vibrant third sector or
a forced adaptation of a for-profit construct?*

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Summary of doctoral thesis

Keywords: non-governmental organizations, performance management, objectives, key results

In the context of great importance being associated to data and performance, the thesis aims at understanding how Romanian non-governmental organizations relate to the trend and the way such practices are being deployed by the Romanian third sector. Considering the entirety of the NGO sector in Romania is understudied at the moment, the paper also serves the purpose of identifying gaps in the existing literature and take a step towards bridging such gaps.

The topic of performance management applicability in Romanian NGOs is studied from two standpoints. Firstly, the researcher focuses on the stage of performance management practices deployment in the sector together with learning about the challenges faced and the specific needs NGOs have from a performance management system (PMS). Following the findings, a suitable PMS is developed, rooted in widely recognized current performance management systems, by merging the needs of NGOs together with the latest practices in performance. The intervention's purpose was to gain in-depth understanding on how performance systems can work in the sector, as well as regarding possible limitations that might arise during the deployment or usage of such practices.

The thesis is divided into eight separate chapters, debuting with an **introduction** that places the research in the current context, thus showcasing the relevancy of the paper. The introduction's purpose doubles as an explanation towards the researcher's interest in the topic of both performance management, as well as its application in Romanian NGOs. The interest is rooted in the researcher's extensive experience in the field of performance management and its study together with her involvement with various non-profits as a volunteer.

For a better positioning of the topic, the literature review is presented in the following four chapters, with the main themes addressed being: Romanian NGOs in chapter two, performance management in chapter three and four and performance management in the NGO sector with a focus of Romanian literature in chapter five. All chapters are further divided to detail critical aspects on each sub-theme. Thus, chapter **two**, aims at providing a comprehensive of the Romanian NGO sector, which provides insightful context for the paper's performance related theme. The first issue tackled is the definition of the sector, which can prove a challenge in itself, given its diversity and heterogeneity, followed by a brief explanation on its evolution since the fall of the communist regime and lastly, the way it evolved into what it is today. There is clear evidence on the fact that the sector is understudied, not only from the perspective of performance management, considering that finding updated data or basic information, such as the number of active organizations, can be futile. The existing studies are more often than not outdated, and, while an updated study is currently being deployed, its publishing date is still to be determined. With regard to the current state, Romanian non-profits are facing chronic lack of resources, both financial and non-financial, for example the volatility of human resources, which affects their long-term focus, replaced by a fight to survive.

Chapter **three** brings in the forefront the performance management discipline, with sub-themes ranging from its definition to the emergent practices or notable systems to the current trends that influence the development of the discipline. Defining performance management has proven similarly challenging as defining the NGO sector, due to fragmented understanding of the concept and the lack of one definitive view accepted by the literature. Considering that the emergence of performance management and its most notable performance management system was dependent on the evolution of organizations, the development of the discipline is hardly linear, but rather fragmented with various trends developing in parallel, that mature at different times. Furthermore, the evolution of society, has greatly influenced the discipline. Currently

performance management is forced to develop once more from a construct with a higher degree of rigidity and a systematic deployment, into a simpler and more flexible framework. Such changes are facilitated by an accelerated globalization, a fast changing environment, especially related to digitalization, as well as by the fact that sustainability, beyond the financial perspective, has become the center of attention of most organizations. Furthermore, the evolution of the managerial style and employees' expectations are also fundamental to the changes identified in the field of performance.

Chapter **four** continues the performance related theme, but focuses on a different perspective, namely the describing the current agile focused state of performance, the most noteworthy performance management system that is representative for the agile approach, the Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) framework, its deployment and its limitations. To match the current needs of organizations agile performance management focuses on adaptability by merging a long-term and a short-term perspective, a trial and error approach by using a network of empowered teams and rapid decision cycle (Darino et. al., 2019, p. 3). As a proxy to agile performance management, OKRs, are driven by a series of guiding principles, namely simplicity in defining the concepts and implementation, flexibility, agility, collaboration, transparency, people-centricity.

Chapter **five** unites the two themes and focuses on understanding the existing literature on performance management in NGOs, as well as provide relevant case studies of NGOs using PMS, or, more specifically OKRs. The researcher observes that the narratives around performance in the non-profit sector is characterized by disproportionate sub-themes, among which we note a disagreement on the need of performance management in NGOs, with authors claiming that non-governmental organizations are mission-drive, thus, due to their moral high ground, should not be associated with for-profit practices. Furthermore, there is a relentless pursue to only use frameworks specifically created for NGOs, while the literature is saturated

with adapted versions of for-profit PMS marketed for the exclusive usage of non-profits. Another distinct narrative is the need for prescribed objectives and metrics that can be used across the sector, as opposed to searching for integrated practices, all while emphasizing on the heterogeneous feature of the sector.

With regard to case studies on NGOs that utilize performance management, while limited, they focus more on the international scene, with few looking at national NGOs. The ones that do look at Romania conclude that the practices are seldomly used, and even in those cases the usage is limited, without a holistic approach, but focused on operational or financial performance or project management. The literature provides no indication of a Romanian NGO that uses OKRs, but grey literature explores the usage of OKRs in more than 10 international NGOs and all these users confirm that the above mentioned guiding principles of OKRs support the development of non-governmental organizations.

Chapter **six** pivots from the literature to the research study, describing in detail the research design employed for the thesis, together with the three qualitative research methods, as well as the data analysis process represented by manual coding.

The study revolves around the main research question: *Is agile organizational performance management a practice that can be successfully employed by Romanian NGOs in order to improve their organizational development and become more effective?* In order to answer to such a complex question, the research employed three complementary qualitative research methods, split into the two phases described above. Additionally, the researcher also employed observation as a complementary research method during all interactions with NGO professionals, but without recording the observations in a formal manner. In order to prepare for the interviews and focus groups, the researcher analyzed all relevant documents related to strategy and performance available online for each represented organization. The population

of the study was selected from Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca, since the two were identified as the biggest NGO hubs in Romania.

During the first research phase two focus groups took place, one in Bucharest on the 12th of February 2021 with 5 participants and one in Cluj-Napoca on the 11th of February 2021 with 4 participants. Due to the low number of participants to the focus group, which can be seen as one initial limitation of the study, the researcher conducted more one on one interviews in diverse organizations, from the perspective of size and activity domain, to ensure sufficient data was gathered during this phase. The number of interviews with Bucharest participants was 15, while in Cluj-Napoca the number was 22, thus having a total number of 37 interviewees.

The questioning route designed for focus groups was also followed during interviews, to ensure that the data can be analyzed in parallel, and thus yielding the same types of conclusions. The questioning route consisted of 6 topics, namely the current state of Romanian NGOs, strategy planning process, performance management, challenges in performance management, features of a performance management and the OKR system.

This phase of the study also focused on three additional research questions:

- *What is the stage of performance management systems and goal-setting methodologies usage within the Romanian NGOs?;*
- *What are the main challenges encountered in implementing a performance management system within Romanian NGOs?;*
- *Which are the main characteristics that a performance management system should have in order to meet the particularities of NGOs?.*

The second research phase consisted of 4 interventions, in three national NGOs and one international, that have different sizes, different maturity level from the activities point of view and activate in different fields for diversity purposes. The proposed stages of the intervention were the following:

1. *Needs assessment and documents review;*
2. *Agreement on tailored system and implementation timeframe;*
3. *OKR system deployment- workshops;*
4. *On-going support with progress review (if needed).*

Similarly to the first research phase, there are few additional research questions followed:

- *Is the OKR framework suitable for Romanian NGOs?;*
- *What are the main benefits and challenges of implementing the OKR system observed in the testing phase?;*
- *How did the OKR framework help the organization achieve its goals/main results or how did it hinder this process?;*
- *What should be changed or improved in the OKRs-based approach?.*

All data collected, was transcribed and later analyzed manually, due to multiple reasons, especially the fact that utilizing a software can provide a narrower perspective due to missing subtleties and the fact that all data was in Romanian and translating it would have been both time consuming and would have increased the risk of aspects getting lost in translation.

The research design chapter is followed by chapter **seven**, Results and discussions, where results emerged from the data are presented and discussed in context, in order to ultimately provide an answer to the research questions. While in the paper each research method has its own sub-chapter, only the main results yielded by each phase will be presented here.

The focus groups and interviews confirm several findings from the literature, such as the chronic lack of resources, the diversity of the sector, its lack of tradition in utilizing strategy planning and execution tools, as well as the fallacious surmise that because NGOs are mission driven, not profit driven, anything that originated in the for-profit sector should be seen as below par. Other conclusions revolve around the fact that metrics are seen as proxy for

performance management, therefore a lot of effort should be spent on finding the perfect indicators, ideally resulting in a standard list that can be utilized by the entire sector. This approach surely does not match the sector's narrative regarding diversity.

Regarding the performance management system, once again, Romanian professionals confirm the findings from the literature and express the need for a simple, therefore not resource intensive, performance framework that assists organizations in their quest to prioritize better, be more transparent, introduce a collaborative, participatory, team empowering and accountability inducing tool. In a rather paradoxical way participants were reluctant to agree to OKR implementation in their own organization, while reckoning OKR in a system that matches the need of Romanian NGO.

One major difference between the literature and the study's findings is the fact that, while the literature showcases a similar state of performance management across NGOs at international level, the study identifies a difference between Romanian NGOs and international NGOs working in Romania, with the latter group displaying better and more integrated performance related practices.

With regard to the interventions, the only successful one was the one where members decided to implement OKRs by themselves following the cycle provided by the researcher and only consult with the researcher when needed. The other three implementations were stopped during the deployment for various reasons: overdependence on one person that was no longer able to take over the process or left the organization, lack of appropriate culture and leadership style and lack of members' engagement and ownership or time to continue working with OKRs outside the researcher's involvement. This only shows that the success of any performance management system is firmly rooted in members' accountability and their willingness to continue working with the framework.

While the thesis emphasizes on some pain points regarding performance management in Romanian NGOs and even pain points outside the usage of performance, chapter **eight**, Conclusions and recommendations, presents a series of recommendations that can support the development of NGOs organizational capacity. The most important recommendation that resurfaced several times during the study is the dire need of education on the topic. It is of the utmost importance for NGO professionals to explore what performance management is and gain in depth understanding on the topic in order to counterbalance some biased knowledge they currently have. This can be an individual endeavor of each professional but could also be an aspect driven by universities or specialists in the field to integrate such aspects in courses designed for the NGO professionals.

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