ORGANIZATION THEORY

Period: a.y. 2026/27 – I sem.

Class times: SEE CALENDAR

Instructor:

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Dept. of Management & Technology -
Room 4-E2-07

Course overview

This course introduces the theoretical foundations and paradigms in research on Organization Science. The primary objective is to cultivate an understanding of the main theoretical frameworks that shape the field, from classics to more contemporary advances. Through close reading and discussion of influential theoretical and empirical works, we will trace the evolution of key ideas and explore the current frontiers of organizational research.

We will meet once a week and the class will be a discussion format. Each session pairs the foundational statement of a theory with recent work that shows how that theory is still being tested, extended, or challenged today. My hope is that after you complete this course, you will be a more thoughtful user of research on organizations, able to read not only what a theory says, but where it is currently under pressure.

The purpose is to strengthen your ability to use organization science in addressing real and relevant management and organization problems.

Course Structure and Requirements

As a doctoral course, Organization Theory is seminar-based. Along with my lectures on the different topics, the main focus will be on developing an understanding of the material through discussion and debate. As such, it is essential that you come to class prepared, having completed all required readings beforehand. A cursory reading will not suffice, as you will be expected to engage actively with the material.

The success of this class depends strongly on your active engagement with these readings. I will be looking for quality rather than quantity of contributions, and will be seeking out participation throughout the sessions.

For each session I expect students to think of a question they would like to discuss in class regarding the assigned articles. Each student is allowed to submit one question only (not a series of questions) per session. You can focus on a single article, or try to make connections between the current readings and readings from previous sessions. Questions should be sent by email to me and the entire class the day before each class (no later than 5 pm). Questions sent after the deadline will not be discussed and will not be evaluated.

Roles in class

Slides support your talk, they are not what gets graded. The two live roles below use slides only as a visual aid. This helps everyone, especially if you present in a language that is not your first. Most of your grade comes from what you say live, in the classroom, in response to questions. This is the part no one else, and no AI, can do for you.

Role assignments (Author's Chair, Reviewer's Chair) apply only to the readings in each session's Mandatory list.

The one or two papers marked as “**Perspective papers**” in the schedule for each session are useful for showing a theory's recent trajectory and are not assigned to any student. I will lead the discussion on those directly, connecting them back to the foundational readings and into the session's closing tension. No preparation beyond having carefully read them is expected for those papers, though they remain fair game for your submitted question.

1. Author

On the first day, I will randomly assign each student to a paper in the role of author. For the paper assigned, the author will prepare exactly four slides, using the same template for everyone: (1) research question and why it matters, (2) the core theoretical mechanism, (3) evidence and method, (4) one open weakness or limitation. Keep it to a few words per slide, favor diagrams and synthetic schemas. Present for 8–10 minutes, then take 5–7 minutes of follow-up questions from me and from classmates that go beyond what is on the slides (e.g., “what would this theory predict in case X,” “how does this connect to what we read two weeks ago”). Grading weight: slide clarity and accuracy ~30%, live Q&A ~70%. The Q&A is the real test of whether the understanding is yours.

2. Reviewer

Each paper presented by the author will have an assigned reviewer who follows the same model: a short, fixed-template deck (question quality, theoretical soundness, evidence quality, alternative explanations, one point per slide), a 5–7-minute critique, then unscripted follow-up questions. Same weighting: most of the grade sits in how you handle questions you didn't prepare for, not in the deck itself.

Use of AI

You may use AI tools for background research or to check your understanding of a concept while preparing. You may not use AI to draft, summarize, or otherwise generate the content of your slides, or to write any part of your in-class contributions. The point of every graded component in this course is to demonstrate your own engagement with the readings; work that is not your own defeats that purpose regardless of quality. Suspected violations will be referred to the University's academic integrity process, not adjudicated informally in this course.

Annotated paper submission

Along with your slides, you are required to submit by email the PDF of the assigned paper with your own margin notes and highlights, whatever you actually marked up while reading. If you have printed the article and put your notes by hand, just scan it and send it to me. This is not graded for content, but a deck submitted without a genuinely annotated paper behind it will raise questions, and I may ask you directly about specific notes during Q&A.

Closing tension (whole class)

Each session ends with 10–15 minutes on a genuine, currently unresolved tension in that theory, not a review question with a right answer, but an open issue researchers are still arguing about. These are flagged at the end of each session.

Assessment Methods.

Effective class participation includes attendance to sessions and making an active and constructive contribution to the discussion, asking questions, making constructive comments, and having a positive attitude toward learning. There will be a final exam one week after our last class: a set of open-ended questions in which you critically evaluate theories and concepts covered during the course. Closed-book.

Component	Weight
Participation (questions, live roles, closing discussion)	40%
Final Exam	60%

Faculty Bio.

Giuseppe "Beppe" Soda is a Full Professor of Organization Theory & Social Network Analysis at Bocconi University and SDA Bocconi, where he is the director of the Network Innovation Lab research center. He served the University as Dean of SDA Bocconi from 2016 to 2022, as Head of the Claudio Dematté Research Division (2006-2013), and as Head of the Department of Management & Technology (2013-2016).

His research explores how formal organizational structures interact with social networks, with a particular focus on the origins and evolution of organizational networks. His work is published in leading journals, including Administrative

Science Quarterly, Management Science, Organization Science, Academy of Management Journal, Strategic Management Journal, Academy of Management Annals, Journal of Management, Strategic Organization, Organization Studies, Research Policy, Strategy Science, Industrial & Corporate Change, Research in the Sociology of Organizations, and Journal of World Business.

In 2026, he received the Social Network Society Distinguished Scholar Award, which recognizes scholars "whose sustained and exceptional contributions have shaped the intellectual direction of the field and advanced its impact on scholarship and practice." At Bocconi, he has received the Award for Excellence in Research multiple times (2001, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023, 2025, and 2026), as well as the Award for Research Impact (2017).

Prof. Soda holds a PhD in Business Administration from Bocconi University, completed a post-doc at Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh, PA), and has been a Visiting Professor at IE Business School (Madrid) and London Business School.

Course Schedule and Readings

Each session pairs foundational readings with one or two post-2018 papers (Perspective) chosen to show a specific trajectory, an extension, an anomaly that forced revision, or a productive hybridization with another tradition.

Tips on Reading Academic Journal Articles

Reading academic journal articles can seem daunting: dense jargon, complicated statistics, and details that appear irrelevant but usually are not. Keep four questions in mind for every paper:

- ✓ Motivation: Why do the authors think the question matters? What do they regard as incomplete in existing research?
- ✓ Theory: What distinguishes their viewpoint? What causal mechanism(s) do they focus on, and why?
- ✓ Evidence: What evidence supports the argument, and which analyses do you find most convincing?
- ✓ Big Picture: Does this paper make a significant contribution to the larger questions in organization theory? How could it have contributed more?

Sessions

Sessions 1-2, September 7, 2:30-5:45 Room 4-E4-SR01(for these two first sessions, you are not required to prepare any presentation, but to come to class prepared by having read all the mandatory readings carefully)

Behavioral Decision Theory (Carnegie School) & Contingency Theory

Mandatory

March, J. G., & Simon, H. (1958). Organizations. McGraw-Hill (Ch. 6: "Cognitive Limits on Rationality").

Cyert, R., & March, J. G. (1963). A Behavioral Theory of the Firm. Prentice-Hall (Ch. 7: A Summary of Basic Concepts).

Gavetti, G., Greve, H. R., Levinthal, D. A., & Ocasio, W. (2012). The behavioral theory of the firm: Assessment and prospects. Academy of Management Annals, 6(1), 1-40.

Drazin, R., & Van de Ven, A. H. (1985). Alternative forms of fit in contingency theory. Administrative Science Quarterly, 30: 514–539.

Perrow, C. (1967). A framework for the comparative analysis of organizations. American Sociological Review, 32(2): 194–208.

Perspective papers

Levinthal, D., & Pham, D. (2024). Bringing politics back in. Organization Science, 35(5): 1704–1720.

Optional

Levitt, B., & March, J. G. (1988). Organizational learning. Annual Review of Sociology, 14: 319–340.

Cohen, M. D., March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1972). A garbage can model of organizational choice. Administrative Science Quarterly, 17(1): 1–25.

Soda, G., & Zaheer, A. (2012). A network perspective on organizational architecture. Strategic Management Journal, 33(6): 751–771.

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Making fast strategic decisions in high-velocity environments. Academy of Management Journal, 32(3): 543–576.

Gavetti, G., Levinthal, D., & Ocasio, W. (2007). Perspective—Neo-Carnegie. Organization Science, 18(3): 523–536.

Argote, L., Lee, S., & Park, J. (2020). Organizational learning processes and outcomes. Management Science, 67(9): 5399–5429.

Lawrence, P., & Lorsch, J. (1967). Differentiation and integration in complex organizations. Administrative Science Quarterly, 12: 1–47.

Hu, S., Milyavsky, M., Feldman, N., & Shapira, Z. (2024). Motivation and ability. Organization Science, 35(6): 2141–2159. [new]

Closing discussion — unresolved tension

Has the Carnegie School's attention-based, decision-centered view become so diffuse — absorbed into learning, routines, and change research — that it now explains everything and predicts very little? Where should power and politics (Levinthal & Pham) sit relative to bounded rationality?

Sessions 3–4, September 14, 2:30 - 5:45, Room 4-E4-SR01

Transaction Cost Economics

Mandatory

Coase, R. H. (1937). The nature of the firm. Economica, 4: 386–405.

Williamson, O. E. (1981). Economics of organization: The transaction cost approach. American Journal of Sociology, 87(3): 548–577.

Williamson, O. E. (1991). Comparative economic organizations. Administrative Science Quarterly, 36: 269–296.

Ouchi, W. G. (1980). Markets, bureaucracies and clans. Administrative Science

Quarterly, 25: 129–141.

Ghoshal, S., & Moran, P. (1996). Bad for practice: A critique of transaction cost theory. Academy of Management Review, 21(1): 13–47.

Perspective paper

Cuypers, I. R. P., Hennart, J.-F., Silverman, B. S., & Ertug, G. (2021). Transaction cost theory: Past progress, current challenges, and suggestions for the future. Academy of Management Annals, 15(1): 111–150.

Nagle, F., Seamans, R., & Tadelis, S. (2025). Transaction cost economics in the digital economy: A research agenda. Strategic Organization, 23(2), 351-365.

Optional

Williamson, O. E. (1985). The Economic Institutions of Capitalism. New York: Free Press.

Williamson, O. E. (1980). The organization of work. Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization, 1: 5–38.

Hill, C. (1990). Cooperation, opportunism and the invisible hand. Academy of Management Review, 15(3): 500–513.

Academy of Management Review Forum on 'Management Theory and Organizational Economics', 15(3): 394–401, 1990.

Closing discussion — unresolved tension

Do platform and digital-economy firms represent a genuine boundary condition for TCE, or can asset specificity and opportunism simply be re-mapped onto data and algorithms without changing the theory's core logic?

Sessions 5–6, September 24, 2:30-5:45 Room 4-E4-SR01

Neo-Institutionalism

Mandatory

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations. American Journal of Sociology, 83(2): 340–363.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited. American Sociological Review, 48(2): 147–160.

Suchman, M. (1995). Managing legitimacy. Academy of Management Review, 20(3): 571–611.

Edelman, L. B., Uggen, C., & Erlanger, H. S. (1999). The endogeneity of legal regulation. American Journal of Sociology, 105(2): 406–454.

Kraatz, M. S., & Zajac, E. J. (1996). Exploring the limits of the new institutionalism. American Sociological Review, 61(5): 812–836.

Perspective papers

Taeuscher, K., Bouncken, R., & Pesch, R. (2021). Gaining legitimacy by being different: Optimal distinctiveness in crowdfunding platforms. Academy of Management Journal, 64: 149–179.

Optional

Zucker, L. G. (1977). The role of institutionalization in cultural persistence. American Sociological Review, 42(5): 726–743.

Selznick, P. (1996). Institutionalism 'old' and 'new.' Administrative Science Quarterly, 41(2): 270–277.

Rao, H., Monin, P., & Durand, R. (2003). Institutional change in Toque Ville. American Journal of Sociology, 108(4): 795–843.

Zhao, E. Y., Fisher, G., Lounsbury, M., & Miller, D. (2017). Optimal distinctiveness. Strategic Management Journal, 38(1): 93–113.

Hedberg, L. M., & Lounsbury, M. (2021). Not just small potatoes: Cultural entrepreneurship in the moralizing of markets. Organization Science, 32: 433–454.

Closing discussion — unresolved tension

Institutional theory now explains both stability (isomorphism) and change (institutional work, logics multiplicity) with the same basic toolkit. Is this genuine theoretical maturation, or has the theory become unfalsifiable?

Sessions 7–8, September 24, 2:30-5:45 Room 4-E4-SR01

Organizational Change: Inertia, Adaptation, and Transformation

Mandatory

Hannan, M. T., & Freeman, J. (1984). Structural inertia and organizational change. American Sociological Review, 49(2): 149–164.

Tushman, M. L., & Romanelli, E. (1985). Organizational evolution: A metamorphosis model of convergence and reorientation. Research in Organizational Behavior, 7: 171–222.

Amburgey, T. L., Kelly, D., & Barnett, W. P. (1993). Resetting the clock: The dynamics of organizational change and failure. Administrative Science Quarterly, 38(1): 51–73.

Perspective papers

Sarta, A., Durand, R., & Vergne, J.-P. (2021). Organizational adaptation. Journal of Management, 47(1): 43–75.

Luciano, M. M., Watson, M. K., Kabra, A., & Winchester, C. C. (2026). Why and how organizational structures change: An integrative review and framework. Academy of Management Annals, 20(1): 400–450.

Optional

Romanelli, E., & Tushman, M. L. (1994). Organizational transformation as punctuated equilibrium: An empirical test. Academy of Management Journal, 37(5): 1141–1166.

Barnett, W. P., & Carroll, G. R. (1995). Modeling internal organizational change. Annual Review of Sociology, 21: 217–236.

Alexy, O., Poetz, K., Puranam, P., & Reitzig, M. (2021). Adaptation or persistence? Emergence and revision of organization designs in new ventures. Organization Science, 32: 1439–1472.

Closing discussion — unresolved tension

Fifty years after Hannan & Freeman, is genuine organizational transformation actually possible — or does most observed 'change' either get absorbed by inertial forces or simply reflect selection (failing organizations replaced by new entrants) rather than true adaptation? Has this debate been resolved, or just relabeled by each new generation of papers?

Sessions 9-10, October 5, 2:30-5:45 Room 4-E4-SR01

Power & Resource Dependence Theory

Mandatory

Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. (1978). The External Control of Organizations. New York: Harper and Row (Ch. 3-4: pp. 39-91).

Cook, K. S., Emerson, R. M., & Gillmore, M. R. (1983). The distribution of power in exchange networks. American Journal of Sociology, 89(2): 275-305.

Casciaro, T., & Piskorski, M. (2005). Power imbalance, mutual dependence, and constraint absorption. Administrative Science Quarterly, 50(2): 167-199.

Boyd, B. (1990). Corporate linkages and organizational environment. Strategic Management Journal, 11(6): 419-430.

Perspective papers

Sytch, M., & Kim, Y. H. (2020). Quo Vadis? From the schoolyard to the courtroom. Administrative Science Quarterly, 66(1): 177-219.

Jiang, H., et al. (2023). Resource dependence theory in international business: Progress and prospects. Global Strategy Journal.

Optional

Gulati, R., & Sytch, M. (2007). Dependence asymmetry and joint dependence in interorganizational relationships. Administrative Science Quarterly, 52(1): 32-69.

Thompson, J. D. (1956). Authority and power in 'identical' organizations. American Journal of Sociology, 62(3): 290-301.

Hickson, D. J., Hinings, C. R., Lee, C. A., Schneck, R. E., & Pennings, J. M. (1971). A strategic contingencies' theory of intraorganizational power. Administrative Science Quarterly, 16(2): 216-229.

Davis, G. F., & Cobb, J. (2010). Resource dependence theory: Past and future. Research in the Sociology of Organizations, 28: 21-42.

Drees, J. M., & Heugens, P. P. (2013). Synthesizing and extending resource dependence theory. Journal of Management, 39(6): 1666-1698.

Closing discussion — unresolved tension

RDT predicts that interlocks and board composition track resource dependencies, but empirical support for interlocks' causal power on firm behavior is mixed at best. Is RDT best read as a theory of managerial intent (avoiding dependence) rather than a predictive theory of structure?

Sessions 11-12, October 12, 2:30-5:45 Room 4-E4-SR01

Social and Organizational Networks

Mandatory

Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. American Journal of Sociology, 78(6): 1360-1380.

Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. American Journal of Sociology, 94: S95-S120.

Burt, R. S. (2004). Structural holes and good ideas. American Journal of Sociology, 110(2): 349-399.

Zaheer, A., & Soda, G. (2009). Network evolution: The origins of structural holes. Administrative Science Quarterly, 54(1): 1-31.

Soda, G., Tortoriello, M., & Iorio, A. (2018). Harvesting value from brokerage. Academy of Management Journal, 61(3): 896-918.

Perspective papers

Brass, D. J. (2022). New developments in social network analysis. Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 9: 225-246.

Optional

Baker, W. E. (1984). The social structure of a national securities market. American Journal of Sociology, 89(4): 775-811.

Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic action and social structure. American Journal of Sociology, 91(3): 481-510.

Uzzi, B. (1997). Social structure and competition in interfirm networks. Administrative Science Quarterly, 42(1): 35-67.

Iorio, A. (2022). Brokers in disguise. Administrative Science Quarterly, 67(3): 769-820.

Powell, W. W. (1990). Neither market nor hierarchy: Network forms of organization. Research in Organization Behavior, 12: 295-336.

Reagans, R., & McEvily, B. (2003). Network structure and knowledge transfer. Administrative Science Quarterly, 48(2): 240-267.

Hernandez, E., & Shaver, J. M. (2019). Network synergy. Administrative Science Quarterly, 64(1): 171-202.

Closing discussion — unresolved tension

Most network research studies informal ties as if they float free of the organization's formal design — reporting lines, roles, workflows — treating formal structure as, at best, a control variable. But formal and informal networks plausibly shape each other's emergence and evolve together. Can we have a rigorous theory of organizational networks that treats formal and informal structure separately, or has that separation become a methodological convenience mistaken for a theoretical choice?