Scaling Parallel Structures: The Spotify Guilds' Story
by Darja Šmite

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Basic organizational structures:  

- **Squads**  
- **Chapters**  
- **Tribes**

Teams at Spotify are called **squads**, which should “feel like mini-startups”, be self-organized and cross-functional, and ideally consist of 5-7 people.

All squads are organized into **tribes** containing 30-200 people each. Tribes have a clear mission, set of principles, a senior experienced leader, and all skills needed to engineer working software features end-to-end.

**Chapter** is a group of engineers who have the same manager (Chapter Lead) and is focused on personal growth and skills development. Engineers in chapters share knowledge, learn from each other, and discuss common challenges.
Organizational growth

Number of employees

2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018

- 0
- 1000
- 2000
- 3000
- 4000

- 6 R&D centers
- 3 countries
How to deliver consistent user experience?

Across devices, across platforms, across versions, across products
An answer to knowledge sharing and alignment issues

Basic organizational structures:  
- Squads
- Chapters
- Tribes
- Guilds

**The USA office**

**The UK office**

**The Swedish office**

A **guild** is a group of people with similar skills and interests that share knowledge, tools or code across Spotify.
CoPs are everywhere

Community

Welcome to your community! It’s the perfect place to share stories, photos, videos and advice with other moms and moms-to-be just like you. Join a group or Birth Club to make friends with others who’ll know just what you’re going through, because they are too!

Sign up to create your profile and start posting!

Need help getting started? Check out our handy guide! Use our cheat sheet for abbreviations and acronyms.
Parallel structures are permanent or temporary structures that are established to supplement the regular organization by performing functions that it does not perform or is ill-suited to perform well.

Modern examples:
- quality circles
- communities of practices / guilds
- task forces

Communities in the cave times  "Corporations" of craftsmen in ancient Rome  Guilds in the Middle Age
Communities of practice / Guilds

- Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in an area by interacting on an ongoing basis
- “Knowledge systems” that aim at improving practice building on the collective experience of members
- Ideal social structure for “stewarding” knowledge
- Related topics:
  - Wisdom of crowds,
  - Clan theory,
  - Sociocracy a certain practice
CoPs members interact and share knowledge through various forms of scheduled and unscheduled social interaction

- Hallway/water-cooler conversations
- Meetings
- Conferences
- Brown bag lunches
- Newsletters
- Teleconferences
- Shared web spaces
- Email lists
- Discussion forums
- Synchronous chats

Obviously, not all activities scale
Guilds at Spotify

- Cycling guild
- Photography guild
- Coffee drinking guild
- ... 
- Web development guild
- Backend development guild
- C++ engineering guild
- Agile coaching guild
- ...
"Work” guilds
C++ guild

Members:
80% C++ engineers,
20% Infrastructure, client engineers

Repertoire:
Annual unconferences
Bi-weekly meetings
Q&A support (Slack)
What if members are distributed across countries?
Members:  
80% agile coaches,  
20% POs, chapter leads, few engineers 

Structure: 
Two regionally divided sub-guilds 

Repertoire: 
Annual unconferences  
Bi-weekly regional lunch&learns  
Coaching circles  
Q&A support (Slack)
Web guild

Members:
90% Web end engineers,
10% Backend engineers

Structure:
Two regionally divided sub-guilds

Repertoire:
Annual unconferences
Monthly/bi-weekly regional meetings
Quarterly joint meetings
Q&A support (Slack)
Members:
Backend engineers

Structure:
Centralized, virtual guild

Repertoire:
Annual unconferences
Quarterly academies
Quarterly meetups
Q&A support (Slack)

Approx. 40:55:5

305 members

—

attend meetings

66%

attend unconferences
What have we learned?
All guilds are different

“Open source society”

“Soporte de línea”

“Book club”

“Comité de normalización”
Everyone cannot be active...
• Detachment
• Fragmentation
• Difficulty to find common interests
• Possible solution: regionally divided guilds
Engagement at Spotify is cultivated through

- Yearly unconferences – infrequent co-located gatherings of all guild members
- Slack channels – electronically-mediated support forums
- Requests for comments – electronically-mediated opinion elicitation
The Spotify Guilds' Story

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