Decision-Making Processes in Community-based Free/Libre Open Source Software Development Teams: An Extension to Decision-Making Theory

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Abstract:

FLOSS teams are an extreme example of distributed teams, prominent in software development. At the core of distributed team success is team decision-making and execution. The lack formal organizational structures to guide practices and the reliance on asynchronous communication might be expected to make decision making problematic. While there is a paucity of research in how organizations make IS development decisions, the research in FLOSS decision making models is limited. Decision-making literature in FLOSS teams is limited to the investigation of the distribution of decision-making power. Therefore, it is not clear which decision-making theories fit FLOSS context best, or whether novel decision-making models are required. Despite these challenges many FLOSS teams are effective. We adopted a process-based perspective to analyze decision-making in five community-based FLOSS teams. We identified five different decision-making processes, indicating FLOSS teams use multiple processes when making decisions. Decision-making behaviors were stable across projects despite different type of knowledge required. We help fill in the literature gap due to the lack of investigations the extent to which FLOSS decision mechanisms can be explained using classical decision-making theories. Practically, community and company leaders should use these decision processes to infrastructure that fits best with the FLOSS decision-making processes.

Keywords: Decision making; Decision process; Free/Libre Open source software development; Decision Types

1. Introduction

As an essential component of team behavior (Guzzo & Salas, 1995), decision making has been extensively studied. Understanding decision-making processes in teams is important because the effectiveness of decision-making processes can have a large impact on overall team performance (Hackman, 1990). Decision making is of particular interest in information systems research because these processes are often supported and influenced by advanced information and communication technologies (ICT) such as expert systems and decision support systems (Huber, 1990; Shaikh & Karjaluoto, 2015).

Researchers are interested in investigating FLOSS as an important phenomenon in its own right and as a potential influence on the larger IS information systems domain (Niederman, Davis, Greiner, Wynn, & York, 2006b). FLOSS provided many benefits and challenges to the software developers and users compared to the off-the-shelf software. Its benefits include higher reliability, improved security, and low cost, whereas the challenges include the lack of deadlines, not being as well-established in some areas, and including high barriers to entry for non-technical users (Almarzouq, 2005). FLOSS allows small businesses and users to play a role in democratized business software innovation within the business ecosystems (Allen, 2012). Nelson, Sen, and Subramaniam (2006) identified that “a significant opportunity exists for studying the evolution of coordination mechanisms in FLOSS projects” (p.278). Given that the decision-making structures in the FLOSS teams are dynamic and consensus-driven (Nelson et al., 2006), we will take Nelson et al. (2006) recommendation of investigating the extent to which FLOSS decision mechanisms can be explained using classical theories from organizational structure (p.278). Our interest in understanding the decision-making process in FLOSS teams was motivated by three distinct characteristics of the FLOSS context that we expected would pose barriers to effective decision-making, requiring novel decision-making processes.

First, FLOSS teams are generally virtual, as developers contribute from around the world, meet face-to-face infrequently if at all, and coordinate their activity primarily by means of ICT (Crowston, Wei, Howison, & Wiggins, 2012). The extensive use of ICT changes the way members can interact and so how they make decisions (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992). A lack of shared context and numerous discontinuities in communication faced by virtual team members can hamper decision making (Watson-Manheim, Chudoba, & Crowston, 2002). In FLOSS teams, not only is the communication technologically mediated, but so too is the work itself. In fact, FLOSS numerous team members have managed to not only overcome these communication challenges, they went on to be exemplars of open innovation (Eseryel, 2014). Yet, which decision-making processes FLOSS use to successfully overcome the challenges of ICT-mediated communication is not known. Therefore, members of virtual teams that are similar to FLOSS cannot replicate these decision-making processes. A further complication is that prior research has suggested that information technologies can affect the decision-making mechanisms (Kiesler and Sproull, 1992). Asynchronous communications make it difficult for the participants to catch various clues in communication that are available in synchronous media such as voice tone, speed, and body language. The lack of such cues creates barriers to decision-making process since sense-making and understanding become more difficult for the participants. We do not know to which extent asynchronous decision-making may allow for the use of novel decision-making processes versus known processes.

Second, given the distributed nature of the work over different time-zones, potentially uniquely different decision-making processes may be required in order to enable participants from all around the world to contribute despite time-zone differences. Decision-making processes adopted by the team members are asynchronous in nature. FLOSS teams in particular rely on information technologies, such as team email lists, discussion fora, websites, bug trackers and source code repositories, for communication, coordination and discussion of alternatives, what Barcellini et al. (2014) term discussion spaces. The asynchronous collaboration provides an additional unexpected benefit. In FLOSS development teams, the knowledge base for the decision and the decision-making actions are widely accessible and those interested can contribute with their opinions and knowledge with minimal barriers, which might lead to different decision-making processes. In comparison to traditional organizations, it has been found that more people in FLOSS development can share power and be involved in team’s activities (Crowston et al., 2012). The more participants and more discussions are involved in the decision-making processes, the more knowledge is accessible and transparent to many others, which in turn, enables participants to work on their own, and contribute what they have done back to the FLOSS development teams.

Third, unlike organizational teams, community-based FLOSS teams are generally self-organizing, meaning that leaders are not externally appointed. Indications of ranks or roles are materialized through interaction rather than external cues, meaning that there is no hierarchical source of decision authority[1]. In these teams, leadership is emergent and fluid in that individuals gain or lose leadership through their actions over time) (Eseryel & Eseryel, 2013). FLOSS members, similar to most members in engineering settings, value technical contributions over all else and are said to eschew positional power. Eseryel & Eseryel (2013) found that the leaders provide action-embedded transformational leadership, which means that they "emerge as leaders through their consistently noteworthy contributions to their team over extended periods of time and through the inspiration they provide other team members" (p.108). This makes decision-making in this setting even more important, as decisions are likely to contribute to leadership emergence, and provide the basis for organizing.

Niederman et al. (2006b) suggest a multi-level approach to investigating FLOSS, namely, at the group, project and community levels of investigation. Further, they recommend the study of mechanics for artifact creation. In this article, following their advice, we are investigating the mechanics of decision making for software creation. Examination of how decision-making processes are adapted in the face of these characteristics will extend our understanding of team decision making. Furthermore, understanding how the technological systems that support and constrain virtual work affect decision-making processes should be informative for many kinds of knowledge work, which becomes increasingly virtual. At a more specific level, knowledge of FLOSS decision-making process can be informative for organizations or firms collaborating with FLOSS teams (Santos, Kuk, Kon, & Pearson, 2013). FLOSS impacted the software industry significantly and many organizations develop and/or use FLOSS (Ven & Verelst, 2011). As organization's engagement in FLOSS development is not passive (Colombo, Piva, & Rossi-Lamastra, 2014), understanding the decision-making processes in FLOSS is critical for organizations hoping to extract the most values from their interactions with these communities. Our investigation on FLOSS decision making is in line with (Feller & Fitzgerald, 2000) recommended research agenda which should focus on the development processes of FLOSS communities based on the traditional reporting questions such as who, what, where, when, why and how.

While decision making has been recognized as an important function in FLOSS teams (Crowston et al., 2012), prior FLOSS decision-making studies examine decision making primarily by examining governance, leadership and authority. For example, studies have examined the distribution of decision-making power (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2006; German, 2003) and found that participants nearer to the core have greater control and discretionary decision-making authority compared to those further from the core. Research has further categorized different governance mechanisms and approaches to leadership in different FLOSS teams. A connection has been observed between hierarchical governance structure and centralization of decision-making processes (Gacek & Arief, 2004). The centralized decision-making process in Linux Kernel (Moon & Sproull, 2000) has been characterized as a benevolent dictatorship (Raymond, 1998). In contrast, the relatively non-hierarchical GNOME team has a decentralized decision-making process involving task-forces (German, 2003). Finally, roles and decision-making structures have been observed to be dynamic (Nelson et al., 2006; Raymond, 2001; G. Robles, 2004). Fitzgerald (2006) suggests that early in the life of a team, a small subset will control decision making, but as the software grows, more developers will get involved.

To sum up, the FLOSS research on decision-making has to date examined the general governance of FLOSS, specifically who has decision-making power. However, there is a lack of empirical research that opens up the black box of FLOSS decision-making process. This gap is illustrated in the lack of coverage of the topic in published FLOSS review and research framework articles (Aksulu & Wade, 2010; Crowston et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2006; Niederman, Davis, Greiner, Wynn, & York, 2006a; Scacchi, 2007; von Krogh & von Hippel, 2006). To fill this gap, we explore how decision-making processes are structured in community-based FLOSS development teams More specifically, based on the contingency model of

[1] This characteristic might not apply to projects in which company or foundation participants shape adopted practices, hence our focus on community-based projects in this study.

decision-making processes (which will be discussed in detail in section 2), we answer the following research question:

RQ1: What decision-making processes emerge in community-based FLOSS development teams?

To answer this research question, we analyze decision episodes from five FLOSS teams to identify distinct decision-making patterns.

2 Theoretical Background

To investigate decision-making process, it is important to clarify what constitutes a "team decision" in FLOSS settings. We define FLOSS team decisions as those explicit and implicit consensus decisions (Kerr & Tindale, 2004) that bind the team and the external users of the software as a whole to a future course of action, e.g., decisions about which bugs to fix and how or which features to add, as well as more strategic decisions related to social, organizational, strategic and legal aspects of development.

Explicit consensus refers to a case where all or most of the team members participate in the decision process and explicitly state their agreement with the decision (e.g., by voting). Implicit consensus refers to occasions where one or more members make the decisions in a public forum, meaning that all team members can observe the decision due to the openness provided by the ICT, but where there is no explicitly expressed agreement or disagreement from others. The idea of implicit consensus reflects the fact that in FLOSS teams, communication and work rely on open broadcast media, and so are transparent to all. Thus, any teamwork that is shared and not rejected by others has been implicitly agreed to by the rest of the team. Of course, apparent implicit consensus may also be a result of non-participation in the process, but repeated non-participants have essentially ceased to be team members, meaning that implicit decisions still reflect a consensus of the active team participants.

In this section, we review prior theories on team decision-making processes as a basis for identifying decision-making process in FLOSS teams.

2.1 Phasal Theories of Team Decision-Making Processes

A number of frameworks have been proposed to describe the phases of team decision-making processes. A phase is defined as "a period of coherent activity that serves some decision-related function, such as problem definition, orientation, solution development, or socio-emotional expression" (Poole & Baldwin, 1996). Early studies proposed normative models to describe how decisions are made in a unitary sequence of decision phases (Poole & Roth, 1989), which suggest that teams follow a systematic logic to reach decisions (Miller, 2008).

However, Poole and his colleagues suggest that the normative models are not adequate to capture the dynamic nature of decision-making sequences, and propose another class of phase models, multiple-sequence models (Poole, 1983; Poole & Roth, 1989). In these models, teams might also follow "more complex processes in which phases repeat themselves and groups cycle back to previously completed activities as they discover or encounter problems. Also possible are shorter, degenerate sequences containing only part of the complement of unitary sequence phases" (Poole & Baldwin, 1996). Based on a study of 47 team decisions, Poole and Roth (1989) identified 11 different decision processes that fell into three main groups: unitary, complex and solution-centered sequences. The sequences in these processes typically emerge spontaneously during the decision making, rather than being planned by the team ahead of time.

Multiple-sequence models of decision making are advantageous because they not only capture the complexity of the decision-making process that may vary due to factors such as task structure (Poole, 1983), but also provide a systematic approach to studying the dynamic decision-making processes (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976; Poole & Roth, 1989). Further, multiple sequence models provide guidance for practitioners to adapt to changing demands (Poole, 1983; Poole & Baldwin, 1996) by providing a framework for structuring analyses of decision processes, terminology and a basis for comparison between diverse processes. We therefore adopted this approach in this paper.

As a starting point for our analyses, we use the extant literature on sequence models and the studies which identify decision-making process phases based on team communications analyses (Mintzberg et al., 1976; Poole & Baldwin, 1996). Specifically, we adapted the Decision Functions Coding System (DFCS) developed by Poole and Roth (1989) to the FLOSS context to identify different decision-making processes in FLOSS context. The details of our adaptation are discussed below in section 4.2.

3 Research Method

We turn now to the design of a study to address our research questions and test our three hypotheses. Given the exploratory nature of our research and the complexity of the research question, we designed a two-phase multi-level (team level and decision-process level), multi-method (qualitative and quantitative) study. We collected 300 decision episodes from five FLOSS projects and content analyzed the episodes to identify distinct decision-making processes.

3.1 Case Selection Decision to Control for Unwanted Systematic Variance

We sought to choose projects that would provide a meaningful basis for comparison across the three contextual factors. As previously noted, FLOSS business models are diverse. To control unwanted systematic variance, we chose community-based projects that were roughly similar in age and in potential market size, and that were all at production/stable development status. Projects at this stage have relatively developed membership and sufficient team history to have established decision-making processes, yet the software code still has room for improvement, which enables us to observe rich team interaction processes. Acknowledging that the development tools used might structure the decision-making processes, we selected projects that were all hosted on SourceForge (www.sourceforge.net), a FLOSS development site popular at the time of data collection that provides a consistent ICT infrastructure to developers.

In investigating decision-making processes, it is important to take into consideration that the dynamics of decision-making in community-based FLOSS projects develop over time due to the nature of participation among voluntary community members. Benbya and Belbaly (2010) show that both the type of participation and the level of effort by the individuals differ based on their motivation to gain knowledge on a specific area. Further, the type of individual's participation to the decision-making process may change based on how much knowledge they have in an area. Therefore, we picked two different types of software, where the participants' knowledge about the software differs, which may in turn influence the patterns of interaction and decision-making. We selected projects that developed Instant Messenger (IM) clients and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems, expecting that these two types of projects would result in different decision-making processes due to the following differences among them:

ERP software development includes an understanding of different functional modules, such as accounting, finance, marketing, sales, production planning, to name a few. Each of these areas require unique domain knowledge in the areas of accounting, finance, marketing, and so forth, in addition to technical knowledge. Modules in the ERP software have high software code interdependencies and many external knowledge constraints such as accounting rules and legal reporting requirements. ERP software developers also need to consider how the software can be engineered to fit the needs of diverse companies. In contrast, IM clients can be more generic, and thus the knowledge that the developers need may be purely experiential based on their own use, in serving the needs of many. Therefore, it is possible that the IM projects have relatively simpler decision processes, where fewer individuals' inputs are needed, for example. To sum up, we expect that due to the differences in the types and variety of knowledge needed between ERP and IM software, we expect the decision-making processes in ERP projects to differ from those in IM projects.

We initially chose 3 cases for each project type: Gaim (currently known as Pidgin), aMSN and Fire from IM projects, and Compiere, WebERP and OFBiz (currently known as Apache OFBiz[2]) from ERP projects. However, during data analysis we came to realize that Compiere was not a community-based project like the others, since it was started by a company and now has both community and commercial aspects in its

2 At the time of the study, OFBiz was not under the Apache umbrella but was a community-based FLOSS project like the other selected projects.

development. To avoid possible bias introduced by this project, we decided to remove this project from our study, resulting in 5 (3 IM and 2 ERP) projects in the final design.

In the following sections, we describe the research method in each phase and report the findings in detail. Specifically, section 4 describes the qualitative design to identify different decision-making processes and the corresponding results.

4 Identification of the Patterns of Decision-Making Process

4.1 Data and Unit of Analysis

To find evidence of decision-making processes, we analyzed the email discourse on the developers' email lists or fora, which are the primary communication venues for the members of these FLOSS teams. Data were obtained from the FLOSSmole website (http://flossmole.org/). The teams used the email lists/fora as the main communication tool for development, meaning that such off-list discussions would be invisible to numerous developers as well as to us as researchers. Furthermore, our analysis of the mailing list interactions did not reveal references to such off-line discussions, suggesting that this data source provided a complete view of the decision-making process, at least for the decisions made here.

As our primary unit of coding and analysis, we selected the decision episode, defined as a sequence of messages that begins with a decision trigger that presents an opportunity or a problem that needs to be decided and that includes the required acts of issue discussion and which possibly ends with a decision announcement (Annabi, Crowston, & Heckman, 2008). To give an example, a decision trigger may be a feature request or a report of a software bug. A decision announcement may be either a statement of the intention to do something or an actual implementation of a fix. Note that some decision processes did not result in a decision that was announced to the group, while others had multiple announcements as the decision was revised. The messages in an episode capture the interactions among team members that constitute the process of making a particular decision from start to finish.

Decision episodes were identified from the continuous stream of available messages through an initial coding process done independently by two of the authors. We started the analysis by reading through the messages until we identified a message containing a decision trigger or announcement. Once we found a trigger or announcement, we identified the sequence of messages that embodied the team process for that decision. We observed that teams generally organize discussions in a thread, occasionally initiating new threads with the same or similar subject line. Therefore, we developed a decision episode by combining one or more discussion threads that used the same or a similar subject line as the initial message and that discussed the same main issue. Our explorative evaluation of the threads showed that any such follow-ups were typically posted within the following month, and in more extreme cases within 3 months. We therefore searched for messages on the same or similar content up to three months after the posting date of the last message on a thread. Since we were analyzing the messages retrospectively, we could collect all of the messages related to the decision over time.

The process of identifying messages to include in each episode proceeded iteratively, as the two researchers collected messages, shared the process they used with the research team, and revised their process as a result of feedback from the team. The pairwise inter-coder reliability reached 85% and 80% respectively on decision triggers and decision announcements. All differences between coders were reconciled through discussion to obtain the sample of episodes for analysis.

Sampling of decision episodes was stratified by time: we chose 20 episodes from the beginning, middle and end periods of each project[3] based on a concern that the decision-making process might be different at different stages of the software development (e.g., initial collaboration vs. a more established team). However, χ^2 tests on the coded data (described below) showed no significant differences ($\chi^2 = 4.288$, df=4,

[3] For each project, the beginning and the ending periods were the first and last 20 decision episodes found as of the time of data collection (i.e., from the start of the project's on-line presence to the most recent period). The middle period for each project consisted of 20 episodes surrounding a major software release approximately halfway between the beginning and ending periods. We chose to sample around a release period because making a release is one of the key team decisions for a FLOSS project.

p=0.368) in decision processes across the different time periods, so we combined all episodes for each project for our analysis.

The result of this initial coding process was a collection of 300 decision episodes, each including a number of messages with a trigger and (when present), one or more decision announcement(s). The sample size was chosen to balance analysis feasibility with sufficient power for comparisons. With 60 episodes per project, we have reasonable power for comparison across projects while keeping the coding effort feasible.

4.2 Coding Scheme Development for Decision Processes

Once we had a sample of decision episodes, we content analyzed them by coding the segments of text that embodied the decision-making steps to identify decision-making process in each episode. The coding scheme was developed deductively in two steps. First as noted above, we adopted the Decision Functions Coding System (DFCS) developed by Poole and Roth (1989). This coding system uses as the primary unit of coding the "functional move", which is defined as "the function or purpose served by a particular segment of the conversational discourse" (Wittenbaum et al., 2004). Functional moves have been used extensively to understand the nature of interaction in both face-to-face and computer-mediated environments (Herring, 1996; Poole & Holmes, 1995; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985). However, few studies have used functional move to analyze complex, asynchronous, text-based environments such as email, bulletin boards or threaded discussion fora. We used functional moves to identify the function of messages in each episode. Note that a single message might include zero, one or multiple functional moves.

In DFCS, functional moves for decision making include steps for problem analysis and problem critique; orientation and process reflection; solution analysis, design, elaboration, evaluation and confirmation; and other conversational moves such as simple agreement. To use the DFCS for decision making, we first sorted the decision activities according to Mintzberg, et al.'s (1976) proposed decision-making process. The result is an "IDEA" framework with four overall phases, namely decision identification (I), development (D), evaluation (E) and announcement (A). Each phase includes one or more specific functional moves.

Second, the scheme was revised to adapt to the FLOSS setting. To adapt the scheme, we pilot coded a sample of 20 episodes and discussed how the scheme applied to the data. As a result of these discussions, we removed from the coding scheme the functional moves that seemed to not be applicable to the FLOSS context (such as "screening issues" and "authorizing decisions") and identified and added levels of detail that are unique to the FLOSS content that had not been seen in previous studies. Using the revised scheme, we then coded a further 20 episodes and discussed the results until no new patterns emerged. The details of the revision and the final revised coding scheme are given in Appendix 1.

According to this coding scheme, when the coders observed a perfectly rational decision-making process, the decision went through all of the four phases represented by the following sequential activities:

(**I**) In the **identification stage**, the FLOSS team members first identify an opportunity for decision-making (I-1), such as determining a need for a fix. The team members exchange information to understand the underlying problems (I-2).

(D) The **development stage** may start by discussing how such problems are generally resolved (D-1). Team members either look for existing solutions (D-2) or try to design a specific solution for the problem (D-3).

(**E**) At the **evaluation stage**, team members evaluate the options identified in the previous stage, either by sharing their general evaluative opinions (E-1) or by testing the solutions and reporting the outcomes (E-2). Sometimes a team member initiates voting to determine the final solution or asks confirmation for a proposed solution (E-3).

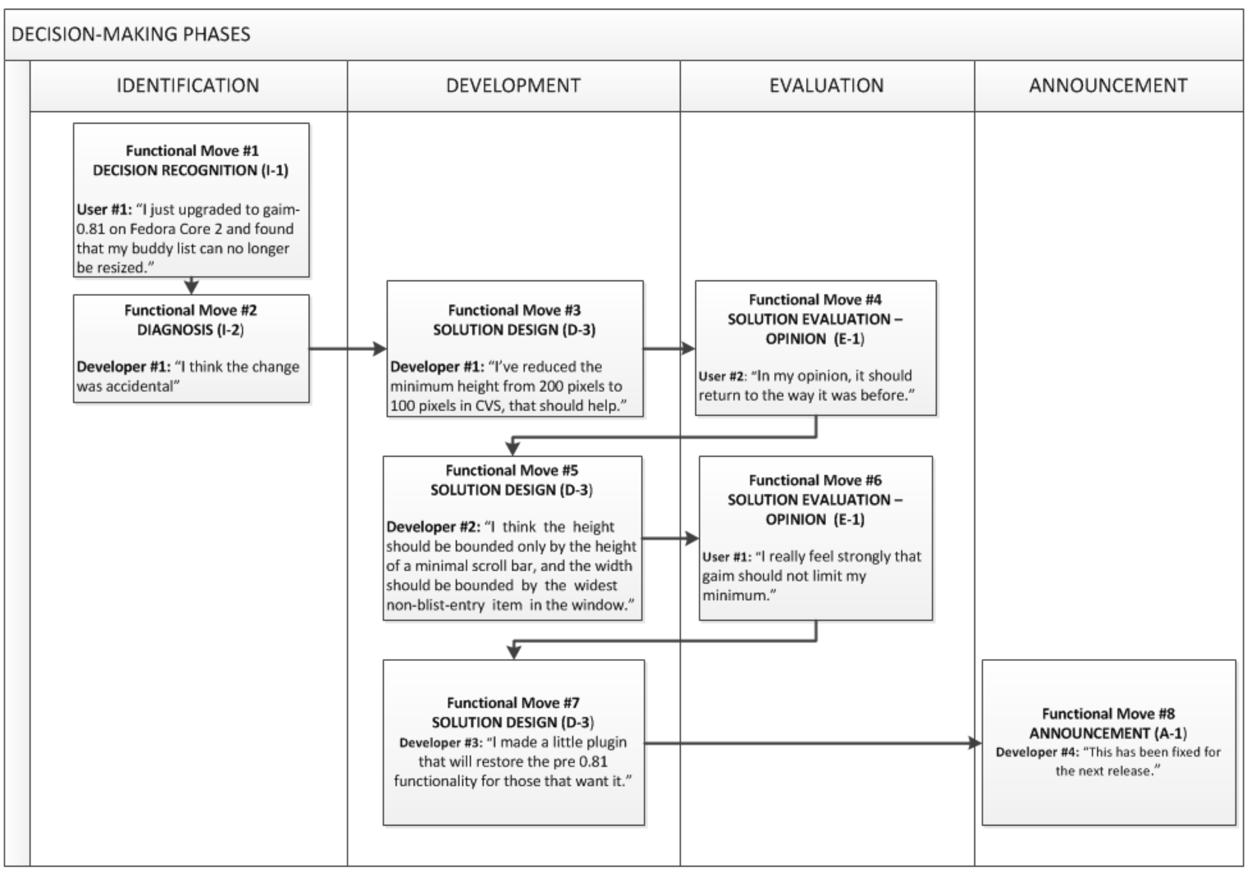
(**A**) Finally, in the **announcement stage**, the final team decision on how the issue will be solved is presented to the group (A-1).

Figure 1 provides an example of how these functional moves were coded based on an example from the Gaim project. This process went through all four phases of identification, development, evaluation and announcement consecutively, however making loops back twice from the evaluation stage to the previous development phase. While many dynamic decisions loop back almost at every stage, for simplicity, we chose to show an example where only two loop-backs happened.

Once we had a coding scheme established, two analysts independently coded the functional moves in the collected decision episodes, and then compared their results. The initial coding revealed about 80% agreement. Discrepancies were discussed until the analysts fully agreed on each code. After all disagreements were resolved, the coding was repeated until the analysts fully agreed on all coded segments. This iterative coding process took about one month. The pairwise inter-coder reliability reached 85% and 80% respectively on decision triggers and decision announcements.

A problem in analyzing process data is that at the most detailed level, processes can show great variability, making it hard to find theoretically meaningful patterns. To address this problem, we clustered the 300 coded decision episodes along the following two dimensions based on the sequences of moves represented in the episodes. The first dimension is the coverage, referring to the extent that theoretically-identified decision-making phases are observed in the public process. The second dimension is termed as cyclicity, i.e., whether the decision episodes progressed linearly through the phases as in a normative model or looped through phases repeatedly as suggested by researchers such as Mintzberg et al. (1976). From here on, we refer to these two categories as linear and iterative decision-making processes respectively.

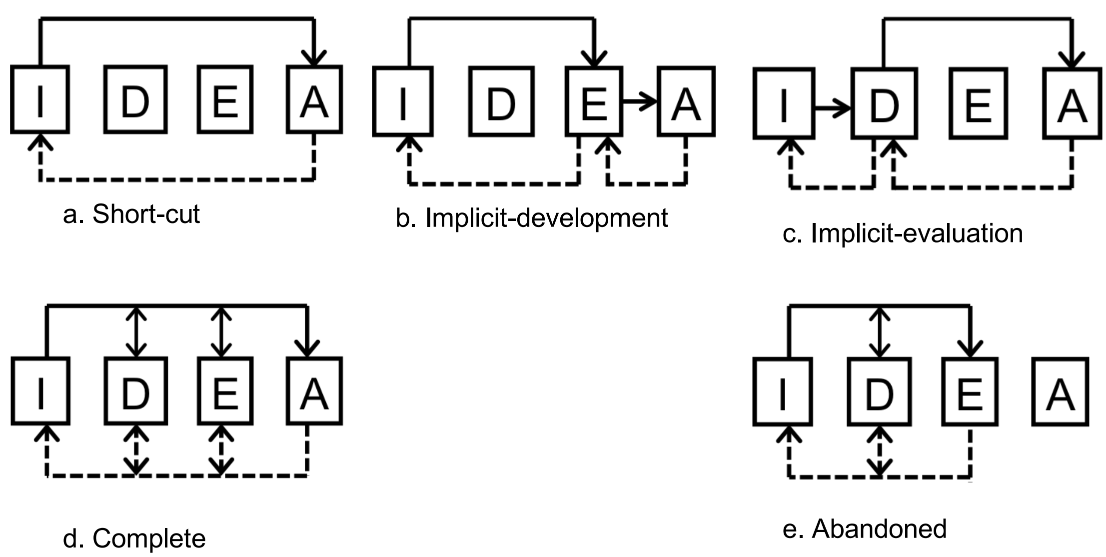
Figure 1. An Example Illustrating How a Decision Episode is Coded for Functional Moves



4.3 Findings: Qualitative Analysis of Decision-Making Patterns

Following the procedure described in section 4.2, we sorted the 300 decision-making episodes into 5 clusters according to the number of phases. We labelled these processes as short-cut, implicit-development (implicit-D), implicit-evaluation (implicit-E), complete, and abandoned decision processes (i.e., lacking a final decision announcement). Figure 2 depicts the patterns of the five processes. The dashed lines in the figures indicate points at which there might be loops, leading to iterative decision process. The loop from decision announcement to previous phases indicates that one or more intermediate decisions were announced before the decision was finalized.

Figure 2. Five Decision-Making Processes Identified based on the Data



Short-Cut (Figure 2a). This process represents the simplest pattern, in which a decision is made right after opportunity recognition and perhaps a brief problem diagnosis, with no explicit solution development or evaluation. Examples of this kind are often observed in the bug report or problem-solving discussions in software-modification decisions. For example, in one decision episode in the WebERP project, a user reported a bug (code I-1, Decision Recognition), which was quickly followed by the response of an administrator that he "*just fixed it*" (A-1, Decision Announcement), with no further discussion or evaluation. While there is an absence of team input, we argue that these decisions are still team decisions, for two reasons: 1) Since all team members can view the bug fix and reverse it if they see it as inappropriate, a lack of reversal indicates an implicit consensus on the proposed course of action; and 2) the decision (e.g., a bug fix) affects the shared team output and binds the team to a future course of development (i.e., there are team consequences).

Implicit-D (Figure 2b). In this process, the solution development phase is skipped, which does not mean that a solution was not developed, but rather that there is a lack of evidence of the development phase in the online discussions. For example, in these episodes, the person who brings up an issue may have already done a diagnosis and provides a solution together with the issue. The subsequent discussions concentrate on evaluating the feasibility or the benefits and disadvantages of the suggested implementation, rather than looking for more alternative solutions. For example, in the aMSN project, a user wrote an email mentioning a discovered problem and providing a patch (I-1, Decision recognition): "*Unfortunately, the gnomedock was segfaulting. I am attaching a patch that fixes most (if not all) of the problems.*" An administrator mentioned that he had the same problem, and that he then applied the user's patch on his computer, which resolved the problem (E-2, Solution evaluation-action). The same administrator then said, "*I'll add patched version to CVS and thank the guy who sent the patch*" (A-1, Decision Announcement). In this example, the steps of solution analysis, search and design were not visible in the text. However, these steps were conducted at least by the user who sent the patch, and possibly by others who did not feel it was necessary to report their progress.

Implicit-E (Figure 2c). The third type of decision-making process is called "Implicit-Evaluation", indicating a lack of online evidence of evaluative discussion. In these episodes, a decision is announced directly after the solution alternatives are generated without explicit evaluation of the alternatives. For example, in aMSN, an administrator brought up a technical issue (I-1, Decision recognition) and proposed three solutions (D-3, Solution design). Most of the subsequent messages concentrated on determining whether the problem was one for the aMSN project or just a problem from its supporting software such as a KDE problem (I-2, Diagnosis). After some discussion and testing, members confirmed it was an aMSN tray icon problem (I-2, Diagnosis). The team attention then returned to suggesting alternative solutions (D-3, Solution design) and the problem was quickly fixed (A-1, Decision announcement).

Complete (Figure 2d). In the "complete decision-making process" episodes, the team goes through all phases of decision-making, either in a linear sequence without looping back to previous phases or in an iterative sequence with loops back to previous phases, sometimes in every phase. The linear complete processes most closely resemble the rational approach described in earlier studies. For example, in the Fire project, a user reported a build failure (I-1, Decision identification). The administrator pointed out the problem immediately (I-2, Diagnosis) and provided a solution (D-3, Solution design). The user tested and confirmed the usability of the solution (E-2, Solution evaluation-action). Then the administrator promised to commit the code into CVS soon (A-1, Decision announcement).

Iterative processes were observed when the issue was more complex. The complexity of the issue stems from the fact that its diagnosis and resolution are tied to other sub-issues. As the sub-issues are interrelated, discussions may loop back to any previous phase at any time. It might sometimes be possible to find another trigger that could be interpreted as starting a new decision episode within these issues. However, since the issues are interrelated, it would not be faithful to the original source of the issue to treat them as different episodes. For example, in OFBIZ project, one administrator started a thread about how to design a workflow and based on which specifications. His first question was "*The first was, which activity should we start with, and how do we know when we're done?*" (I-1, Decision recognition). He then went on to show that he looked for existing solutions: "*I did find examples of workflows at WfMC including mail room, order processing, and various other things. It appears that the first activity for a given process is the first in the list.*" (D-2, Solution search). He then described how the solution would apply to this setting and evaluated this option, indicating it may be an easy-to-change temporary solution by saying "*At run time it will already be there so if another spec does it differently, or we find another way (the correct way?), it will be easier to change.*" (E-1, Solution evaluation-option). Another administrator took the process back to the development stage by writing an example of how the start activities might work (D-3, Solution design) and then evaluated this option. The first administrator then said "*What you said about starting and ending makes a lot of sense. That's a good idea of specifying a default start activity, and for each activity specifying whether or not it can be a start activity.*" (E-1, Solution evaluation, opinion) and announced the solution (A-1, Decision announcement). However, then a user jumped in to recommend an alternate solution, taking the team from decision announcement back to the solution development stage. When the administrator mentioned the user's solution would not work, the user improved his solution, leading to several loops of development and evaluation before a solution was agreed on.

Abandoned (Figure 2e). We called the final category "Abandoned decision-making process". In these processes, no decision was announced by the end of the observed decision episode. Abandonments may occur in any phase of discussion and happen for various reasons. A decision-making process may be abandoned during the identification phase due to a disagreement on whether there is a real problem or if there is a need to fix it. It may be abandoned during the development phase due to disagreement about the merits of different technical approaches and concerns. Abandonment in the evaluation phase can be due to multiple parties pursuing individual interests. For example, in the Gaim project, an administrator suggested adding audio functionality to the product (I-1, Decision recognition). Several core members challenged the availability of this functionality (I-2, Diagnosis). The discussions revealed two different preferred solutions—releasing a stable version with minor changes or releasing an unstable version with a major innovation (D-1, Solution analysis). Both sides extensively examined the current solutions, took relevant consequences into account and provided feasible suggestions (D-3, Solution design, E-1, Solution evaluation-opinion). However, after 11 days of discussion, we found no final decision announcement (even searching the list for months after).

Table 1 shows the distribution of the five decision-making processes across the 300 decision episodes. From the table we can see that, only 38% of decisions episodes analyzed went through all four phases (labeled as "Complete"), while 52% of the discussions reached a decision while skipping one or two phases

(Short-cut, Implicit-D or Implicit-E). No decision was reached in the remaining 10% of cases (Abandoned). In 23% of the decision episodes, the team decided right after the decision trigger was recognized (short-cut process). While 28% of decisions were made without the evaluation phase (Implicit-E process), only 1% of the decisions were made without a visible development phase (Implicit-D process).

When we looked for differences in the patterns exhibited by the ERP versus IM projects, we have not observed any systematic difference in the of the decision processes. The different types of knowledge required by the ERP FLOSS developers did not seem to cause them to use different phases or functional moves than those explained above and provided in the coding scheme in Appendix 1. Therefore, we concluded that the type and extent of knowledge required for the software does not influence the decision processes used by the FLOSS development team.

Lastly, we clustered the decision-making processes based on the cyclicity. We found that 39% of decisions followed a linear decision process, while the other 61% included one or more loop backs, following an iterative decision process.

Table 1. Count of Observed Decision Processes for All Episodes

	Short-cut	Implicit-D	Implicit-E	Complete	Abandoned	Total
Linear	56 (19%)	0 (0%)	38 (13%)	8 (3%)	14 (5%)	119 (39%)
Iterative	14 (5%)	4 (1%)	45 (15%)	105 (35%)	16 (5%)	181 (61%)
Total	70 (23%)	4 (1%)	83 (28%)	113 (38%)	30 (10%)	300 (100%)

5 Discussion of Findings & Theoretical Contributions: Multiple Sequences of Decision-Making Processes in FLOSS Development

In this study, we investigated decision making process due the focus of information systems research on how decision processes are influenced and supported by information technologies (Huber, 1990; Shaikh & Karjaluoto, 2015). This is true especially for FLOSS projects, where decisions are made virtually, asynchronously, across different time-zones and depending almost exclusively on information systems (Crowston, Wei, Howison, & Wiggins, 2012). The best way of enabling and supporting the virtual, asynchronous decision-making that spans different geographical locations and time-zones requires an in-depth understanding of what the decision-making processes are. Only then, the right types of new information technologies can be identified that supports the decision processes at hand. Group Support Systems is a highly funded (by both grants and the industry) subset of Decision Support Systems Research, which focuses exactly on the area of developing information systems that support the decision-making process within groups (Arnott, Pervan, & Dodson, 2005). Watson (2018) reminds us that decision support systems should help support interdependent decision making, which involves groups of people and should support all phases of the decision-making process, intelligence, design and choice (p.375). While Watson refers to the phases of intelligence, design and choice, we found in FLOSS teams four phases, which incorporates the distinct subsets of development stage (solution development) and evaluation stage (evaluation of the developed solutions). Further, we identified noticeable sequences in the decision-making process such as skipping of phases, and iteration back to earlier phases as described in more detail below.

Our key contribution to decision-making literature is the identification of the five different decision-making processes observed in FLOSS development teams. Identification of these processes fill in the gap in the literature identified by Nelson et al. (2006) on the lack of investigations the extent to which FLOSS decision mechanisms can be explained using classical theories from organizational structure (p.278).

We developed two sets of insights from our analysis. We saw decision-making processes in FLOSS development as having multiple sequences that reflect the unique characteristics of FLOSS setting.

In this research, we identified 5 different decision-making processes varying in both numbers and sequences of decision-making phases: short-cut, implicit-development, implicit-evaluation, complete and abandoned processes. Four patterns were observed in the use of these processes: frequent short-cuts, frequent implicit-evaluation, infrequent implicit-development and many cycles looping back to previous stages in decision-making. We explain these patterns of different decision-making processes based on 1) the unique characteristics of FLOSS development and 2) the high level of dependency of FLOSS decision process on information technologies.

First, we observed that the decision-making processes as exhibited in the discussion fora are unlike those observed in other decision-making contexts. For example, Mintzberg et al. (1976) argue that the evaluation-choice of a solution (evaluation in our case) must be included in any decision process. However, in our study, 23% of the decisions were made without any explicit discussion of solutions (i.e., 70 of 300 decisions were short-cut). The high frequency of short-cut decisions in what is often described as an open and participative setting is at first surprising. In addition to short-cut decisions, we found that 28% of decision episodes (a total of 83 out of 300) followed the “Implicit-Evaluation” process that skips the evaluation phase. In contrast, only 1% (4 out of 300) followed the “Implicit-Development” process, which includes an evaluation phase but skips the development phase.

At first, these results seem to be a paradox: open projects that make decisions in a seemingly opaque and non-participatory fashion. While we cannot completely rule out the existence of unarchived offline discussion that contains the missing phases, it appears that the lack of evaluation phase and other decision-making phases reflects an action orientation for decision making in FLOSS development teams (Eseryel & Eseryel, 2013): that it is preferable to simply try out a solution rather than performing detailed evaluation of potential alternatives in advance. This value is reflected in a description of the Internet Engineering Task Force decision process (part of the cultural heritage of FLOSS): “We reject: kings, presidents and voting. We believe in: rough consensus and running code” (Clark, 1992, p. 543). The result is a set of decision processes that emphasize making a sufficiently good decision based on as much collaboration as needed rather than spending too much time for evaluating options to find a perfect solution through 100% contribution by everyone to the decision.

Secondly, the missing phases may also be an empirical support for the stigmergic coordination in FLOSS development. By examining those decision episodes using simpler decision processes, we found that many of them had mentioned or referred to software codes explicitly in their discussion. Although prior research had proposed that stigmergic coordination makes explicit discussion unnecessary (Crowston, Østerlund, Howison, & Bolici, 2011; Gregorio Robles, Merelo, & Gonzalez-Barahona, 2005), no empirical research has been conducted examining this question. With shared work products and discussion based on asynchronous communication, developers can work independently to determine and test solutions rather than needing to immediately discuss them with others, a decoupling that enables distributed voluntary contributors to be effective participants.

Moreover, we found that developers often raised questions about others’ actions based on their knowledge, leading back to previous phases of decision-making, resulting in a high proportion of cyclic processes (181 out of 300, 61%). While our findings are in line with observation that “IS decisions are often complex and dynamic” (Boonstra, 2003, p.206), the factors that are previously used to explain this cyclicity, such as political influences, urgency and necessity (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Mintzberg et al., 1976), do not seem to apply in this setting. Rather, the dynamism of decision making in the FLOSS context seems to be an artifact of how FLOSS teams interact using information technologies that allow for asynchronous communication and collaboration, meaning that anyone can observe and contribute to a decision in process, even joining later a discussion that has been going on for some time. This pattern may also reflect the fact that no individual organizes the discussions to follow a normative path, as would be observed in teams with managers or decision support systems to structure the decision process.

While in organizational settings, the dynamic nature of the decision-making may to an extent indicate inefficiencies, in an open setting such as FLOSS, where decision-making speed is not necessarily a goal of the voluntary developers, the process allows participants the opportunity to jump in at any time to contribute to work and related decisions, thereby increasing the level of cyclicity in FLOSS decision-making. In conclusion, we suggest that the cyclicity in these teams results from the self-organizing nature of the teams and the use of asynchronous communication media, rather than the factors that have been suggested to lead to cycles (such as political factors) in other decision-making teams.

To sum up, consistent with multiple sequence models of decision-making, we found FLOSS development teams enact various decision-making processes. Further, their decision-making processes display certain patterns that we attribute to the unique characteristics of FLOSS development and the dependency on extensive ICT use.

Identification of these processes is important because the decision process used by the group directly affects group performance. Such an in-depth examination of the microstructures of decision-making processes compliments existing macro-level research on decision-making (e.g. German, 2003; e.g. Raymond, 1998). The frequency and type of decision-making processes used by FLOSS teams can be inputs for future theory development efforts predicting group performance. For example, quantitative studies can compare the types of decision processes used and the decision effectiveness (or overall project success).

5.1 Impact of the Controlled Factors on Decision Processes

Based on the earlier literature, we had expected that FLOSS teams that develop software that require many different types of external and internal knowledge to use different decision processes than those that develop software with more generic knowledge requirements. This had influenced our case selection strategy. However, contrary to our expectation, we did not observe differences in the decision-making processes used between simple (IM) and complex (ERP) software projects. Thus, our findings suggest that FLOSS projects tend to adopt similar decision-making processes for decisions regardless of the knowledge requirements of the software developed by the FLOSS communities. This similarity reflects the observation that the software development process seems to be organized similarly across projects: using same sets of ICT tools in discussion and implementation spaces, parallel development and debugging which involve loosely-centralized and gratis contribution from individual voluntary developers (Feller & Fitzgerald, 2000), resulting in developers selecting similar scope of problems to work on, with similar decision demands. This finding suggests that the decision processes identified can be generalized across the whole spectrum of community-based FLOSS projects.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study is the exclusion of synchronous discussion fora, such as Internet Relay Chat, Instant Messaging or phone calls. We have followed IRC and instant messaging channels of especially the IM projects such as Gaim before we made the decision to focus on the email fora. Our observations of these channels informed us that these channels were typically used to clarify programming questions quickly, rather than making decisions. This observation is the reason why we decided to focus on email for investigating community-level decision making.

We had no way of observing one-to-one IM conversations that happen outside of the publicly shared ones. Thus, we want to acknowledge that it is possible that some of the steps in the decision-process that we infrequently observed were in fact carried out by a subgroup using such alternative channels. Future research should consider the impact of communications synchronous communication channels on community-level decision making on email fora. However, we would argue that the use of such channels would not change our main conclusion, namely that many decisions that bind the teams to a course of action are made without explicit involvement of the entire team in seemingly important phases of the decision process.

Another limitation of this research is the small sample size (i.e., five projects and 300 decision episodes). While it enabled us to conduct manual coding and provided us with rich data that increased our understanding of the decision-making process from different projects, it limited the types of statistical analysis we could run with our data. For example, we only used two types of FLOSS projects (i.e., IM projects vs. ERP projects) thus limiting the generalizability of the result. We specifically focused on these two projects because they represented two extremes on the continuum of variety of knowledge required for decision-making: While the ERP projects require unique domain knowledge in many areas (such as accounting, finance, marketing etc,) in addition to technical knowledge on these areas, IM projects require focus on one area, which many developers experientially have as users of the software.

Nevertheless, the decision processes and relationships we have identified provide the foundation for deeper exploration and potentially richer explanations of decision-making processes in FLOSS teams. Future research should apply the framework of this research to a larger and more representative sample of FLOSS projects.

6 Practical Implications

Three groups of individuals in the practitioner community can benefit from the results of this study: 1) participants and leaders of FLOSS teams; 2) managers and members of companies who would like to actively contribute to existing FLOSS teams or to develop and support such teams; and 3) those who would like to apply the FLOSS model of work in their organizations.

Understanding decision-making processes also enables the creation of group decision support systems and other information systems that would fulfill the team requirements. Discussion and implementation spaces are especially crucial to the success and continuity of distributed teams such as FLOSS, which depend on such systems for both task accomplishment and group maintenance.

Second, the success of FLOSS development has attracted more and more companies' active participation (Dahlander & Magnusson, 2008). Companies first need to understand how FLOSS communities operate before they can be successfully involved in FLOSS development. By understanding the decision-making processes in FLOSS teams, firms can know better what kind of decision processes would likely be used for different task types, so they can adjust their behaviors to better contribute to FLOSS development.

Third, though this research studied decision-making processes in FLOSS development teams, many of our findings can be applied to self-organizing organizational virtual teams, and similar open organizations more generally. Indeed, Markus et al. (2000) argue that,

> *Although managers in industries other than software development may prefer more traditional styles of management, they should remember that the world is changing, and workers are changing along with it. In a labor force of volunteers and virtual teams, the motivational and self-governing patterns of the open source movement may well become essential to business success* (p. 25).

The results of this study offer several practical insights that can benefit organizations in decision making in a distributed, self-organizing, open work environment. For example, managers should consider implementing tools that enable team members to coordinate through their work product, and augment these with discussion tools in a way that mirrors the FLOSS practice. For example, co-workers may be able to substitute examination of shared documents (e.g., with tools such as Google Documents or Lotus Notes) for extensive discussion of their contents in the discussion space and rely on self-organized contribution to the shared work rather than detailed negotiation about who will take on which task. In this way the apparent advantages of FLOSS development may become more widely available.

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