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Creating Great Teams

How Self-Selection Lets People Excel

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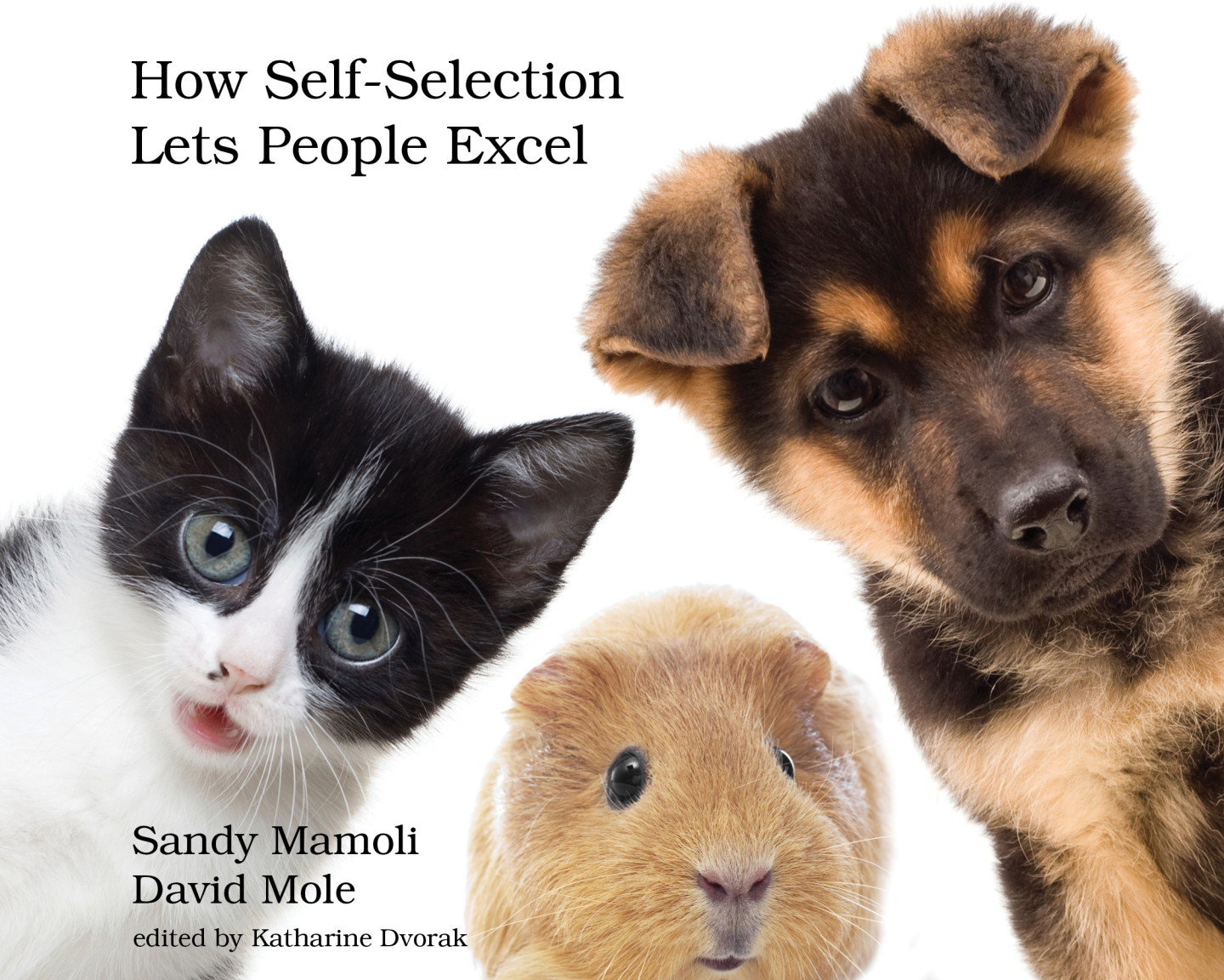

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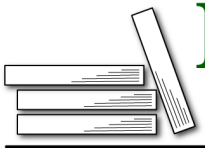

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Introduction: Self-Selection and Why You Should Care

Fast growth has a way of forcing organizational change on a business, but it also presents opportunities to try new ways of working. When Trade Me, one of New Zealand's biggest ecommerce providers, hit a new level of growth, we saw an opportunity to drive productivity by reorganizing the company into small, stable agile teams.

We found the best way to do it was using self-selection: trust the people who work in the organization—the engineers, testers, business analysts, designers, user experience professionals, and product owners—to come up with the best way to structure their teams. It seemed radical when we started, but it worked. Removing the managers from the equation and trusting in the employees involved created a fascinating story and incredible outcomes for everyone.

What Is Self-Selection?

Self-selection is a facilitated process of letting people self-organize into small, cross-functional teams. Based on the belief that people are at their happiest and most productive if they can choose what they work on and who they work with, we think it's the fastest and most efficient way to form stable teams.

To avoid confusion, we're not referring here to self-organizing teams. *Self-organizing teams* are groups of motivated individuals who work together toward a shared goal and have the ability and authority to take decisions and readily adapt to changing demands. We like self-organizing teams, but that's not what this book is about.

This book is about self-selection, which is a process you can use to set up self-organizing teams in the first place. Self-selection happens at an organizational level rather than at a team level and is a way to get everyone into teams. Another term for a self-selected team is a *self-designed team*.

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Why Should You Care?

If you work in an industry that benefits from people working in small, cross-functional teams, then this book is for you.

If you are a CEO, CTO, head of projects, VP of engineering, agile coach, head of marketing, or any other kind of manager who wants to structure your organization or department into small teams, you will learn why self-selection is the fastest and safest way to do so. You will learn how to prepare for and organize a self-selection event, how to convince your fellow managers that it's a good idea in the first place, and how to communicate with your self-selection participants to make sure everyone is on board and ready.

If you are a team member, developer, tester, UX designer, or business analyst, you will read about what it feels like to be part of a self-selection process and what the consequences are for your daily work. You will learn how to influence your colleagues and your bosses to be open to the idea of self-selection. You will be able to provide your boss with a plan for how to facilitate a self-selection event and evidence that the system works.

This book describes a process that will work whether you need to form teams from scratch, want to improve the design of existing teams, or are on the verge of a big team reshuffle. How do you know that the teams in your organization represent the best possible combinations of people? How do you know that everyone is working in the team they would like to work in? There's only one way to find out: ask them; then let them decide. By giving your staff choice through self-selection, you allow them to establish the best designed teams, and you will get the most out of your company.

Self-selection is a great way to get going if you don't have fixed teams yet or to revitalize people if you feel your organization or teams are stuck in a rut.

We've seen self-selection work time and time again with teams building software, websites, and apps, but we've also found that these principles translate to other industries and fields where people can or should work in small teams, such as marketing, sales, human resources, and even finance.

We've Done It, and So Can You

Our first trial self-selection event was in October 2013 at Trade Me, one of New Zealand's biggest ecommerce providers. Since then we've run the largest self-selection process we know of and repeated the process many times across multiple locations. Many more companies have since used our ideas and processes to run self-selection events across the world.

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In this book we share a case study of how we used self-selection to decide on the structure and composition of twenty-two new agile teams across Trade Me's technology department—a process that involved more than 150 people. We also demonstrate and explain a repeatable process for facilitating a self-selection event at scale.

Our aim is to convince you that self-selection is not only valid but also highly rewarding and can be a successful and positive approach for all kinds of organizations.

Who Are We?

We're Sandy Mamoli and David Mole, and we spent several years doing transformational work with Trade Me. If you aren't from New Zealand (or Australia at a stretch), then the chances are you will not have heard of the company we're talking about. Trade Me is an iconic Kiwi brand with more than 3.7 million accounts, and more than a million New Zealanders will have bought or sold something via the site in the past year.

The site is a popular place for Kiwis to buy, sell, and trade everything from cars and antiques to clothes, crafts, property, and farm gear. It's a Kiwi success story, having grown over the past sixteen years to a unique position where it commands more than half of New Zealand's domestic Internet traffic, serving more than one *billion* pages per month. For context, there are only 4.5 million people living in New Zealand, a country with Internet penetration up around 86%.

Trade Me has also been growing pretty fast. A year ago there were 110 employees in their technology department; now there are approximately 250. In total, there are more than 450 staff members at the time of writing and no sign of the growth slowing down anytime soon.

What Problem Did We Need to Solve?

The organization had reached a point where the technology department was increasing in size by roughly one person a week, but they noticed that adding new people no longer meant they were getting more done; if anything, the speed of delivery was actually slowing down. At the time people weren't organized into fixed teams; rather, the teams were assembled at the start of a project and disassembled when the project ended. Employees were not dedicated to a team or project; their time was split into percentages and their assignments were determined by their manager.

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Over the course of time a web of dependencies had evolved whereby every person and project were reliant on someone else, and there were always a significant number of handovers and delays between groups of people. Projects were constantly being paused and put on hold because there was no one available to work on them; everyone was busy somewhere else. No one had an overview of the people and the projects, so there was no big picture of what was happening.

Sound familiar?

We wanted to avoid the delays caused by waiting for staff to be freed from other projects, and we wanted to minimize handovers with their associated loss of tacit knowledge. Our strategy was to pull people out of this complex matrix and move them into fixed, stable teams where we could ensure that one person would work on only one team, and one team would work on only one project at any time. (Note that we use the term *project*, but technically it was more of a value stream or initiative, as there frequently was no hard start or end date.)

So, let's get started. In the first chapter we dive into what a stable team design looks like and why it's so important. Then we break down the process we took to guide Trade Me through a self-selection event, beginning with how we created the right context and ending with how we facilitated it toward a successful outcome. (While we discuss Trade Me's self-selection success story, this book was a completely independent project and not affiliated with or associated with Trade Me in any way.)

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