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## ► To cite this version:

Jean-Baptiste Suquet, Damien Collard, Nathalie Raulet-Croset. L'organisation d'un management collaboratif entre acteurs publics et acteurs civils : Le rôle d'organisation frontière d'une association d'insertion dans l'emploi pour les jeunes diplômés. *Gestion et management public* [2012-..], 2020, 8 (1), pp.9-26. 10.3917/gmp.081.0009 . hal-03179267

**HAL Id: hal-03179267**

**<https://u-bourgogne.hal.science/hal-03179267>**

Submitted on 21 Oct 2021

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# Organizing collaborative management between public actors and civil actors: The boundary organization role of an association working for employment for young graduates

**Jean-Baptiste Suquet**, Associate Professor, NEOMA Business School

**Damien Collard**, Associate Professor, University of Franche-Comté

**Nathalie Raulet-Croset**, Professor, IAE Paris-Sorbonne Business School, University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

## **Abstract:**

While associations are increasingly contributing to public action, little work analyses their collaborative relationships to public actors. In this article, we study the case of the association *Nos Quartiers ont des Talents* (NQT) which accompanies disadvantaged young graduates seeking employment, in order to understand the organizational conditions of collaboration between public, private and associative actors. We show through its “boundary work”, this type of association constitutes a *boundary organisation*, capable of fostering collaborative management between public, private, and associative actors in which the public actor is not central, and which allows for the co-construction of a service of general interest. We identify four key factors accounting for the association’s boundary work: the common framework, territorial adaptability, a meeting place for catalysing innovation, and an agile structure combining standardisation and flexibility.

## **Keywords:**

*Boundary work*; *boundary organisation*; collaborative public management; platform actor; association; employment

## 1. Introduction

In a post New Public Management (NPM) context where inter-organisational coordination is key (Christensen & Laegreid, 2011) and where civil initiatives develop in the face of the difficulties of public authorities to respond to societal challenges, research is multiplying to understand how social and solidarity economy organisations contribute to public action (Laville & Salmon, 2015). Among the actions carried out, some are based on the articulation between public, private, and associative actors. We are interested in these actions and seek to identify the organisational conditions for performance and success.

We align ourselves with collaborative public management theory (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003), which examines overcoming organisational boundaries to enable a renewal of public action based on collaboration between heterogeneous actors. Collaborative public management is in fact a response to the challenges of integration and coordination inherent in collective public action. "Collaborative means to co-labor, to achieve common goals, often working across boundaries and in multi-sector and multi-actor relationships" (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003, p.3). This research stream pays "renewed attention to forms of organization that cross agency boundaries" (O'Leary & Vij, 2012, p.507), and focuses on the changing role of public managers. This is because they can no longer simply manage the organization whose problems are in their purview (Ibid.), but must work together with actors outside of their organisation to solve problems that could not be solved otherwise.

Numerous works in collaborative public management question the notion of boundaries in relation to organizations (Lamont & Molnar, 2002), and open up interesting avenues of analysis for studying collaboration in public management. It is often the public actor who, as a matter of course, bears the heavy task of creating a shared framework for a partnership (Geddes, 2012). Nevertheless, this responsibility sometimes falls to an associative actor, who then takes the place of the public actor at the centre of the collaboration. This situation is all the more interesting to study as it goes against the evidence of the primacy of the public actor and could open up new perspectives in terms of collaborative public management. Thus, we will ask how an associative actor can promote "boundary work" that initiates and supports collaborative public management. This is our research question.

To answer this question, we study the case of the association NQT, which helps young graduates from priority neighbourhoods and/or modest social conditions to find a job that matches their diplomas, thanks to a system of mentoring by experienced executives. During a research intervention, we helped this association characterize its model on the occasion of its 10th anniversary, within the framework of writing a white paper, which the association submitted to the President of the Republic in 2015. Through the formalization of this model, it was

also a question of understanding the success of a multi-partner collaboration between public, private and associative actors. The analysis of this case makes it possible to identify a specific type of mechanism that favours collaborations of this nature – in this case, that of an association playing the role of *boundary organization* (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008) – and to explore how it contributes to *boundary work*.

## 2. Theoretical framework

First of all, we return to the research examining collaborations between associations and public actors. These works emphasise the necessary concertation between heterogeneous actors. This leads us to mobilize research on the notion of boundaries, and more particularly, the way in which “boundary work” can facilitate this articulation.

### 2.1. What kind of collaboration between associations and public actors?

By their very nature, associations and public actors seem to exist as opposites. Indeed, associations are founded on the basis of private initiatives and engage in civil society projects, whereas the public actor fulfils, in a top-down manner, a public service mission. However, associative projects sometimes encounter missions in the public domain, and associations can then, as Marival (2011) explains, be qualified as intermediate spaces between the public sphere and the market. Indeed in various sectors, associations maintain very close links with the public actor<sup>1</sup>.

Many of these analyses thus focus on the question of relations between the State and associations. However, the question is often dealt with from the point of view of the public actor, and understood in a monolithic way, focussing on its disengagement (Cottin-Marx et al., 2017) or its inadequacies. The pressure linked to the difficult financing of associations and public services underlies thinking about the evolution of the relationship between these actors. Much less frequently does analysis focus on the co-production of a service of general interest bringing together heterogeneous actors.

Laville (2010), however, argues that it is necessary to move from a problem of instrumentalization, according to which associations are “the Trojan horse of the

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<sup>1</sup> All the more so as some associations source part of their funding from them, and may even substitute the public actor for certain missions, which raises the question of their instrumentalization.

disengagement of the State”, to another problem that places “the link between collective action and public authorities” (p.163, our translation) at the heart of the discussion. Several authors have taken the path that Laville proposes. For some, the role of social entrepreneurs and innovators that associations play (Lévy & Rival, 2010) leads them to identify and respond to unmet social needs. The initiatives launched by associations would then complement the actions deployed by public actors. To qualify the links between public actors and associations, some even go so far as to speak of “co-management” (Demoustier, 2005) of certain public policies (Demoustier 2005), while others simply point to the existence of “multiple forms of interaction” (Marival, 2011).

Multi-stakeholder cooperation thus appears as another entry point for analysing the construction of services or devices of general interest (Michaux *et al.*, 2011). In particular, it enables us to understand the day-to-day and long-term functioning of a co-production. It is no longer a question of knowing whether or not associations provide a public service, whether or not they are used as instruments, or whether or not they are under pressure, but rather of understanding their role in the multi-actor system and the way in which they use their unique positioning. This question is all the more important as associative action is often nested in those interstices not covered by public action and that it responds to needs not taken up by the market. Associations sometimes even succeed in getting private actors (merchants) to cooperate with public actors who would otherwise not have been able to do so.

Associations can thus give impetus to new collaborative configurations, whose innovative character questions the reciprocity between actors, the autonomy they can demonstrate, and the independence they can have. It is this dynamic that we want to explore in this article, by questioning the new place that associations can take in this type of cooperation.

This question echoes the work on collaborative public management. The latter emerged as a reaction to the New Public Management movement. On the one hand, it was a question of a public player who saw traditional public services slipping away from him (Anttiroiko & Valkama, 2016, p.678) regaining control through the integration of the various contributors to public action. On the other hand, it was a question of better taking into account the complexity of the latter, which requires the intervention of several actors on both sides of defined borders (Kettl, 2006), and therefore better horizontal coordination in the form of a network, a team, or a project (Christensen & Laegreid, 2011).

Questions of integration and coordination are therefore central to thinking about collaborative public management. Yet asserting that the public actor remains the “hub of all connections”, as Geddes (2012, p.949) reminds us, and maintains a central collaborative position often proves problematic. This centrality of the public actor can indeed generate an asymmetry that runs counter to collaboration. Thus, Bureau *et al.* (2013), but also Chabault and Martineau (2013), point out the risks of

too much State control. From a distance, without a real understanding of what is happening in the field, the constraint exercised by this dominant central actor can hinder the desired logic of collaboration.

Research in collaborative public management thus converges on the need to cross institutional boundaries in order to bring stakeholders closer to public action. Ideally, this occurs in a balanced and reciprocal relationship that guarantees stakeholder autonomy (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003), rather than favouring the trope of the public actor as centralizer. The notion of “boundary work” (Quick & Feldman, 2014), which makes it possible to work on developing a common framework (Emerson *et al.*, 2012), thus appears to be essential for collaborative action. It is this boundary work that will be at the heart of our reflection.

## **2.2. The drivers of "boundary work"**

### **The search for a common framework**

Several authors question the kind of framework needed to overcome differences between actors. Some research in public management have already pointed out the importance (and the difficulty) of a framework shared by the actors (Muller, 2000; Lascoumes & Le Bourhis, 1998). More recently, the work of Chanut and Rochette (2012) described the manufacture of the “Auvergne” brand and showed in particular how the various protagonists found ways to agree, by acting “on the basis of common conventions (notably the formalized brand code), work habits and also common interests” (Ibid., p.502).

The same concern for a common framework can be found in research on collaborative approaches in public management, since Quick & Feldman (2014) evoke the idea of a “framework”. Emerson *et al.* (2012) base the existence of a collaborative governance regime on a virtuous dynamic combining several ingredients. Firstly, a principled commitment is built, which gradually makes it possible to identify the various partners, and lead them through a series of iterations to a shared vision of the goal and an equally shared “theory of action” (2012, p.11). The existence of a “shared motivation” is the second ingredient that enables the collaborative dynamic. It is based on “trust” and “understanding” between partners, and requires the project’s internal “legitimacy” for each partner, as well as an ensuing “commitment”. Finally, Emerson *et al.* include in the virtuous circle of the collaborative governance regime the need for a “capacity for joint action”, which is distinguished by the fact that acting collectively gives a better capacity to achieve the goals set (through sharing resources, knowledge, a combination of kinds of leadership, etc.).

The development of this common framework for actors requires in any case effective *boundary work*, i.e., work on boundaries to build bridges between

stakeholders in public action rather than walls, in order to invent new and inclusive solutions (Quick & Feldman, 2014, p.690).

### **Boundary work practices**

The notion of *boundary work* was originally proposed by Gieryn (1983) to highlight the differences between social groups. Gieryn proposed this concept to explain how, in the scientific field, boundaries are established between what is and what is not science (as opposed to religion, ethics, or other), and which mechanisms scientists mobilize to protect what they consider to be their domain of legitimacy. In these early understandings, boundary work was thus intended to delineate the boundary. In fact, many authors have taken an interest in boundary work to understand how it distinguishes (Burri, 2008), or how it legitimizes and opposes (Gieryn 1999). In contrast, other authors are interested in *boundary work as a creator of collaboration*.

In the context of collaborative public management, Quick & Feldman (2014) propose the latter focus by identifying two contrasting ways to consider boundaries: either as barriers, in the same line as previous authors, or as porous junctures, “that enable diverse connections” (p.674). They identify three *boundary work* practices that create connections and act as an “*orienting framework*”. The practice of “*translation across differences*” aims to achieve multivocality, which may involve the creation of a new language or a new mode of expression. The practice of “*aligning among differences*” involves accepting differences and considering them as a starting point for the emergence of shared interests. The third practice, “*decentering differences*”, involves minimizing differences (e.g., by focusing more on points of agreement than disagreement, or by creating a new, more neutral space for collaboration).

### **Supporting boundary objects or boundary organization: reconciling convergence and divergence**

The perspective on boundary work resonates with the reflections of Star and Griesemer on *boundary objects* (Star & Griesemer, 1989), which seek to better understand how communication takes place between different social worlds. *Boundary objects* have a stable and shared structure, but can be interpreted in different ways, allowing different actors to maintain their own frame of reference and pursue their own interests, while coming together around the object (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Bechky, 2003), which then serves as a common framework. However, these are material or symbolic artefacts.

In a related perspective, scientific sociologists have proposed the notion of *boundary organization* (Guston 2001), notably to study organizations bringing together scientists and non-scientists (e.g., politicians). The *boundary organization*

is based on mechanisms that reinforce converging interests, while allowing divergent interests to exist. It therefore acts as a bridge, just like boundary *objects*, but the processes studied here are organizational in nature: “boundary organizations can accommodate the varying interests of parties by providing a mechanism that reinforces convergent interests while allowing divergent ones to persist” (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008, p.426).

O'Mahony and Bechky's contribution would be precisely to have identified the organizational mechanisms that play the same role as that of boundary *objects*, i.e., to reconcile convergence and divergence. They also draw attention to original and new organizational forms, namely, *boundary organizations* created specifically to enable *boundary work*.

The authors identify four main areas fostering collaboration, echoing questions in the public management literature:

- governance, also highlighted by Favoreu *et al.* (2016, p.449) who study the processes of setting up and governing multi-stakeholder networks by analysing in particular the role of the pivotal actors, public or private;
- control of production, and rules of membership, which correspond to the capacity for joint action and principled commitment already discussed above (Emerson *et al.*, 2012);
- and property management, which is concerned with the rights of each organization over what has been produced.

These areas are in addition to those pointing to the role of shared language (Quick & Feldman, 2014) and motivation (Emerson *et al.*, 2012).

### 2.3 Our problems and our questions

In short, we mobilize research into *boundary work* and *boundary organization* to question the collaboration between public and private actors and associations. By paying attention to the characteristics of the boundary organization (as synthesized from our literature review in Table 1), we wish to account for the importance of organizational mechanisms supporting the development of a common framework necessary for collaboration, without reifying boundaries, or postulating in advance the centrality or dominance of the public actor.

Who?	Who participates? Who decides? Who owns it?	Principles-based commitment (Emerson <i>et al.</i> , 2012), membership (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008)  Governance (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008; Favoreu <i>et al.</i> , 2016)
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		Ownership (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008)
How?	What are the production processes? What is the language used?	Capacity for joint action (Emerson <i>et al.</i> , 2012), production control (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008) Common Language (Quick & Feldman, 2014)
Why?	What mission? What goal?	Shared motivation and principled commitment (Emerson <i>et al.</i> , 2012)

Table 1: Ingredients of *boundary work* and *boundary organizations* supporting multi-stakeholder collaboration

### 3. Context and methodology

In this section, we present the case study on which our analysis is based, as well as its interest and context. We then shed light on our methodology, which combines intervention research, observations, and interviews.

#### 3.1. The interest of the case

The case study on which we are relying is the result of work carried out as part of an intervention research project, following a request from the association NQT (acronym for Nos Quartiers ont des Talents). NQT works to integrate young graduates from priority neighbourhoods and/or those with modest social status into the job market. The NQT model may not seem particularly original from the point of view of public employment policy. Indeed, many studies highlight the generalisation of such support since the early 1990s (Goux, 2009), sometimes uncritically (Fretel, 2013), and the opening of public service to private placement operators (Divay, 2009). In addition, the levers of sponsorship and, more broadly, the principles of positive discrimination are already well-known. Nevertheless, NQT stands out in terms of the target population segment (young graduates from sensitive neighbourhoods and/or from modest social backgrounds) and the impressive quantitative results claimed.<sup>2</sup>

The action of this association is mainly based on the large-scale organisation of a system of mentoring by experienced professionals young graduates looking for work. These professionals are executives employed in private or public “sponsor-partner” organisations. In concrete terms, young graduates who meet the scheme’s eligibility conditions are assigned a sponsor, who will accompany them for a few months by meeting with them regularly, help them refine their professional

<sup>2</sup> On its website in November 2019, NQT cited having accompanied more than 48,000 young people and stated that “70% of accompanied young graduates find a job in 6 months on average” (our translation).

project, give them the benefit of their professional network, put them in an interview situation, etc. The objective is achieved when the young graduate, seeking employment, finds a position matching his or her level of qualification.

On its 10th anniversary, the association sought to write a white paper to be presented to the President of the Republic<sup>3</sup>, François Hollande, and asked a team of researchers to contribute to it. Specifically, the aim was to update the operating model underlying the association's action. The white paper thus functions as a time marker, signalling a certain maturity of the associative model. By mobilising partners by itself, particularly private companies, the association was not operating in the logic of subcontracting to private placement operators, thereby meeting the specifications of Pôle Emploi. It participates therefore in value creation that is both shared and plural. Plural because each partner finds in the experience a source of value creation, and shared, because NQT, through "boundary work", succeeds in coordinating the actions of the different actors. The NQT model is in fact based on cooperation between many actors who all participate in the value creation the association generates.

The question for us as researchers was to report on the gradual establishment of a multi-partner collaboration bringing together heterogeneous players, and co-producing a service of general interest. In particular, we wanted to analyse it as an innovative organisational mechanism supporting boundary work. We wanted to understand how this mechanism fostered collaboration leading to the construction of a common framework, as well as to the implementation of an innovative employment policy proposition for young people.

### **3.2. NQT's development context**

The association was originally created in the Seine Saint Denis (93) poor area. The two founders of the association met there in 2005, within the framework of a local employers' association, the Medef 93. Taking advantage of the links already forged with both companies and local elected officials, they created within this local Medef initiatives to help young graduates. Their project was to promote equal opportunities, starting with "their" territory (to "save" young people with diplomas in hand, but struggling), and, with this in mind, to create a mentoring system with experienced managers.

From this creation, several types of actors with very different logics intervened. Thus, the founders, driven by a logic that is both entrepreneurial and humanistic, found support from public (the prefect, the director of the local ANPE), political (the local MP) and economic (the president of MEDEF) actors. They immediately

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<sup>3</sup> This presentation took place at the Elysée Palace on 21 October 2015. The white paper is entitled "Relançons l'ascenseur social" (Let's relaunch the social elevator), published by the association NQT, and was published in 2015.

understood the value of going beyond the existing institutional boundaries. For each of the players, the value created by the scheme took on a different hue, but in return they also contributed collectively to creating an offer based on this plural value. This value at the outset was expressed above all in terms of action to “save the young” for the “Seine Saint Denis territory”.

A first experiment concerned 200 young graduates for whom meetings with company executives would be organised. It was a success, and the association was born the following year in 2006. Very early on, the choice of large-scale development was in the minds of the founders (encouraged in this by both the president of Medef and the prefect), which immediately raised the question of extending the model to the national level. Soon, another major player would make an entrance. These are large companies, which are a reservoir of sponsors and which were interested in this partnership as part of their CSR policy. They too encouraged NQT to develop nationally. The association was therefore launched on this ambitious basis, which allowed NQT to develop its model further.

### **3.3. Methodology**

At the request of NQT's managers, we wrote an analysis that has been used as a basis for a large part of the white paper published by the association on the occasion of its 10th anniversary. To do this, we began collecting data, both through interviews and observation. We conducted 20 interviews with employees, directors, and partners of NQT, and 17 interviews with young graduates, between May and August 2015. These interviews were supplemented by documentary analysis. Finally, over 10 half-days and evenings, we carried out in-situ observations focused on the “ordinary” operations of the association.

It is from this empirical material (summarized in Table 2 below) that we were able to reconstitute the key practices of the association, its history, and evolution, in order to trace the foundations of the association, its strategic, organizational, and managerial choices, and thus identify the main components of the NQT model. In an inductive way, and by comparing our analyses of the data within the research team, we sought to characterize the functioning of this association.

Moreover, our research position can be considered as close to “intervention research” insofar as the white paper was a major issue for the actors of the association (David, 2012), and as we contributed to its writing by restoring the developed model. Thus, we sought to grasp the model from within the association, basing ourselves mainly on the organisational logics explained by the actors. For our analysis, we identified and compared the points of view of the various stakeholders, focusing primarily on the unifying elements, which “served as a model”. This discursive data was triangulated with our observations and the documents we consulted.

In addition, we sought to highlight from the corpus of data the main stages in the association's history, from its foundation to its tenth year, and identify its key moments and founding principles. This twofold analysis of the operation of the association at the time of our presence and the history of its development seemed the way to highlight the salient features of the "NQT model".

As we had to report regularly on our progress at the meetings of the steering committee of the white paper project, we were able to attend and even take part in, an on-going discussion on the historical foundations of the association, what characterized it at the time of the research, and how it could project itself into the future. Participating in the writing process therefore led us to present the results of our analyses to the actors, and allowed us to benefit from their critical rereading of our representation of NQT. By taking part in a discussion with the association's stakeholders on what characterized it, on the partners' issues, and on the partnerships to be created or strengthened, we were able to complete and better analyse our data.

<p><b>Semi-directive interviews</b></p>	<p>20 interviews (excluding young graduates), lasting from 30 minutes to 3 hours, were conducted from April to July 2015 with representatives of the association's various stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees (interviews lasting between 1 and 3 hours): 2 interviews with the management of the sponsorship division, 2 interviews with the development division (the director, the head of institutional partnerships), 1 interview with the head of the communication division, 2 interviews with the founding president, 2 interviews with the founding director, 1 interview with the deputy director, and 1 interview with a regional regional development officer</li> <li>• Patrons: 2 interviews with representatives of private companies, and 1 interview with a public actor</li> <li>• Sponsors within companies (5 interviews, from 1/2h to 3h, and use of an internal survey)</li> </ul> <p>17 Interviews with Young Graduates benefiting in July 2015 (duration from 1/2h to 1h30)</p>
<p><b>Internal documents</b></p>	<p>Activity reports, action memos, internal processes, press articles, communication publications (multimedia</p>

	documents). Reports on the stages of the Tour de France des Régions in 2015, written by the Communications Department
<b>In-situ observations (March to June 2015)</b>	Sponsorship event (sponsorship night) Observation of workshops offered to young people at NQT and in companies (2 half-days) Clubs for Young Graduates organised by local authorities (2 sessions of 2 hours each) Observation of the sponsorship team: 1 day Accompaniment of the directors and the communication team in Lille on a leg of the Tour de France of the regions: 1 day Participation in an event to sign an agreement with a city in the Ile-de-France region (one evening)
<b>Observation and meetings at the governance level (March to June 2015)</b>	Observation of a strategic workday of the Board of Directors: 1 day Observation of working meetings in sub-groups with directors, sponsors, often NQT referents for their companies and sponsors themselves (Orange, LVMH, BNP-Paribas, Carrefour, etc.).
<b>Working meetings for the co-construction of the White Paper</b>	4 meetings, from March to September 2015

Table 2: Data collected

#### 4. Empirical results: the NQT association at the heart of a *boundary work*

Our analysis of the empirical data led us to highlight the key points that contribute to the *boundary work* and to the emergence of a collaborative public service. The particularity of the latter is that the public actor is not at the heart of the *boundary work*. This role is assumed by the NQT association, which acts as a *boundary organization*. Indeed, engineering collaboration is part of the DNA of this association, marking its foundation and the different stages of its growth. NQT succeeds in making a common framework coexist with heterogeneous or even divergent logics.

In our analysis, first of all, we show the construction of a common framework enabling the integration of the various stakeholders. We then identify the different methods used by the association to reconcile this common framework with the divergences inherent in the heterogeneity of the partners: the play on the territorial dimension, which allows adaptability to specific local configurations; the continuous incentive to innovate, which leads to a differentiation of the offer proposed by the companies, while remaining within the common framework; and, finally, the search for a balance between global mechanisms that promote rationalisation and other mechanisms allowing flexibility.

#### **4.1. A common framework to bring together actors from different worlds**

A first aspect of “boundary work” was the values and expectations of the different stakeholders. As one NQT manager put it: *“The institutional, public side follows us for the most part because we have this business side. (...). And we have also seen, conversely, for a number of years that, for companies, this is something important to them, that the public side, the institutional side, globally, also supports us, because it gives us this legitimacy, this aura”*. Or a manager of the sponsorship division: *“And we have to pay attention to this internally because we really need to have the point of view of the company, the young people, and the sponsors. You have to have all three points of view”*.

The NQT association thus offers its partners a unifying framework where tools and values close to the company co-exist with humanist values, which encourage membership. On the one hand, therefore, the company's operating methods, according to one NQT referent company manager, disclose *“the association's professionalism”* and that *“it is an association, of course, but it has the same requirements as if it were a Nasdaq-listed company, to put it simply, i.e., with very clear reporting, figures, data, etc., audited accounts, of course...”* On the other hand, as a founder of NQT recounts, it espouses the promotion of humanist values: *“When Marie-Christine, who managed contacts with companies, went to see them, she went to see them to take part in a human adventure. She would say, ‘That's what we're trying to do, come with us! You're going to help us do something that makes sense.’ And in fact, that's what kept them loyal”*.

NQT's players are constantly highlighting their historical partners and meeting their expectations. However, NQT's promotion of the historical players is not to the detriment of the other partners and their integration. Indeed, all the communication work of NQT, through the media, but also through annual or one-off events, plays a major role in highlighting the actions already carried out, and the commitment of historical partners, to make NQT a community gathered around a mission:

*With more than 600 events each year, the association promotes local links between young beneficiaries and companies. For Nos Quartiers ont des Talents, the choice of a professional orientation that is not adapted to the needs of companies is a discriminating factor. This is why, since 2010, it has created the National Meetings (...) which have brought together thousands of students and young graduates. Nos Quartiers ont des Talents is a facilitator of positive links both at the level of its partners and of the young people who commit to the scheme.*

(Excerpt from the 2012 activity report).

Historic partners help to give meaning and visibility, which helps to generate enthusiasm, attract new partners, and generate sponsorship vocations. Communication efforts (staging and setting the history of the association) serve to develop a common framework for all partners, and articulate modes of operation specific to private enterprise and humanist values.

Finally, the governance of the association plays an important role in ensuring that both this framework and the association's sense of purpose are maintained. The two founding leaders of NQT strongly embody the initial project and have been able to use their networks to rally prestigious personalities to their cause, whose endorsement is not without effect. It should also be noted that the Board of Directors is made up of all stakeholders, from young people to companies, even if they are not all equally represented. This diversity expresses the association's founding principle of bringing together heterogeneous actors around a common goal. As the president put it at a meeting of the Board of Directors: *"We must have a common vision and share an ambition. Let this make us stronger. It is crucial that we all be here"* (Observation note, March 2015). Even if the different actors may have different objectives, as a member of the board also puts it: *"This association is moving very fast. At a certain point, you have to settle down, not scatter. This day can help the Board of Directors have a simpler dialogue. We are an association, with many partners: universities, cities ... We have to be able to give these partners a vision"* (Observation note, March 2015).

#### **4.2. Dialectic between the local and the national: maintaining a capacity to adapt to local configurations**

Even if the integrating framework can be made permanent, NQT is no less exposed to the risk of entropy. Indeed, the offer has evolved over the course of 10 years, since, having started in one region, Seine Saint Denis, the association now extends to a large group of regions.

On the one hand, the common framework for the various actors involved in NQT is changing and gaining in scope: it moves from local action to a stronger, more

national ambition, in this case, the fight for equal opportunity and the relaunching of the social elevator. This excerpt from one of the interviews with one of NQT's young graduates reveals the mechanisms leading to inequality of opportunity: *"I am happy that NQT exists, because the main problem of young graduates from the suburbs is the fact that they have no network, and the fact that they constantly devalue themselves. They say to themselves, 'Oh, this is not for me, I don't have the level.' And they've got five years of higher education, it's ridiculous, actually"* (Young graduate, passed by NQT).

The ambition of large-scale development is constantly present in the organisation's speeches, as if it were an integral part of the mission. The president of NQT regularly expresses such a message: *"when we started out in Seine Saint Denis, from the very beginning, we told ourselves that we wanted to duplicate the model on a national scale. We also told ourselves that we wanted to make a long-term commitment. Because we needed at least 10 years if we wanted things to change"* (Observation, Board meeting, March 2015).

The association achieves large-scale development by gradually adding regions to the scheme once it detects interest from potential partners. As the Director of Development explains: *"Take an example, a (banking) company that comes to us, tells us, 'you are not present in the central region ... we would be interested in accompanying you in your development, to find financing (...).' This gives a first envelope of financing, and once this first envelope of financing is acquired, [there is] the possibility of hiring a collaborator, who will have the task of finding new private financing."* NQT also pursues development in cooperation with the public actor: *"we are also listening to the requests and expectations of the State, which will direct us as specifically as possible towards certain regions more than others"* (Director of Development).

Such development means that the region is an important link in the chain, which leads to the adaptation of supply to local specificities. It is therefore a fundamental level of *boundary work* at NQT. In order to target the relevant public and improve *sourcing* (the ability to identify and then enrol young people in the system), NQT adapts its offer region by region, as a member of the Development division points out:

*"In Lille, a big academy, we developed the system for the Bac+4 level. Initially, it was the same for both departments. But in view of the figures from Pôle Emploi, and also guided by the Pas-de-Calais Departmental Council, we also developed the 'our regions have talent' scheme, which is also available for those with three years of higher education."*

According to a regional development officer: *"Today, in our region, we have 80 partners, including 50 companies. As we are in the region, we have two types of companies, those that develop a partnership at the national level, [like] Thalès, SG*

*[Société Générale], Orange, which develop sponsorships ... But we also have a local anchorage, with companies that have a head office in the region”.*

This local adaptability goes hand in hand with an increasing emphasis on the association and its project at the national level. Thus, the association's brand is certainly crafted according to the types of territories (neighbourhoods, regions, overseas territories), but it is based on the same formula: ‘our ... have talent’. Similarly, in parallel with the centrifugal deployment of the association, there is a constant reminder of the unity of the project. In 2010, for the first time, the National Meetings for Equal Opportunities would be organised. Held annually since then, these strong signs of gathering of the NQT community are part of an effort to integrate members. For the same purpose, an *online* community of sponsors has been created, which allows them to exchange with each other. Finally, the recognition of general interest, obtained in 2014, also contributes to reinforcing the symbolic representation of its existence at the national level.

Thus, it is not only the strength of the common framework that explains the success of NQT's collaborative approach, but rather the dialectic that NQT manages to maintain between the national framework and the variety of situations that accompanies expansion into new territories. Similarly, the link with the public player may vary from one territory to another, while relying on national representations. Thus, as it has grown, NQT has sought to intensify its relationship with Pôle Emploi, the French employment agency. The stakes were high, since the *sourcing of young people* represents a real difficulty for the association.

However, it is mainly at the local level that collaboration is observed, and more or less successfully depending on the case: *“With Pôle Emploi, there is a framework agreement at the national level. We signed a regional agreement last April, which was put in place to give impetus. Pôle Emploi remains the main player in sourcing. Contact the territorial directors, make them aware of this convention, they must do sourcing according to this convention on a regular basis”* (excerpt from interview with the Regional Development Officer). All depends on the Regional Director: *“In department X, there is good contact with the territorial director of Pôle Emploi, which makes things more efficient. It has apparently been decided that there should be a phone-call for young people, not just an e-mail contact, which also helps to attract them. But apparently, there was no phoning for the meeting that I attended, few people ... They invited the young jobseekers (by mail), few are present”* (excerpt from observation note from the meeting at Pôle Emploi, May 2015).

At the same time, the founders also had the idea that another public player was concerned by NQT's mission, albeit linked indirectly to employment. It was a question of going up the food chain to act and collaborate at university level by transforming the question of accompaniment towards employment into a problem of orientation. NQT therefore established links with universities to work on student orientation. In this way, the association has sought to connect education

stakeholders to its network of partners, indirectly connecting public employment and higher education stakeholders in each region.

The work on this territorial dimension refers to a first form of *boundary work*, which articulates the existence of a convergent global framework, and the acceptance of a certain heterogeneity carried by local actors at the scale of the territory, where another *boundary work* operates.

### **4.3. A meeting place: promoting and taking advantage of innovation opportunities**

Another lever of action that we have identified, to reconcile the global integrative framework and possible divergences between the actors participating in the collaboration, is the encouragement of local innovation. We were able to see the progressive structuring of the association, notably through various innovations (brand creation, events, etc.) allowing its growth and adaptation to various contexts. In order to maintain its capacity for innovation, NQT thus encourages innovation in its partners, from which it takes advantage whenever possible, and then integrates them into its global offer.

Thus, NQT is constituted as a meeting place catalysing additional innovations compared to the basic model. With the dynamics of quantitative and geographical growth linked to the success of the sponsorship formula, new resources flow in, allowing for a dynamic of sustained, incremental innovation.

This is, moreover, an essential dynamic of the model. Necessarily, growth and innovation means obtaining new resources, not only traditional resources (such as volunteer sponsors), but also new resources that will enable innovation: a new partner enables the creation of a new federating event in which heterogeneous actors are involved; a new skill enables the organization of a new workshop for young people, etc. While bringing a certain heterogeneity to life, this enriches the offer and facilitates cooperation. Around the initial, shared driver of NQT's organisation of sponsorship, is thus created an enriched peripheral offer for young graduates (CV workshops, coaching, English language training, use of social networks proposed by partners, etc.). This adds to the value that young people can derive from their integration within the system.

Sponsors can adapt their contribution to their personal desires, while companies can do so for their internal challenges. For example, one company considered that it could give young people the benefit of its employees' experience in the context of a CV workshop, which it also presented to the employees as a *team-building* moment with more meaning and added value than a session of outdoor sports. The company approached NQT with this proposal, which was compatible with NQT's mission and was therefore accepted. By constituting itself as a meeting space (here

in the literal sense, since the workshop took place on the association's premises), NQT could adapt to the specificities of its partners while benefiting from their skills.

#### **4.4. A structure with systems that combine rationalisation and flexibility**

*Boundary work* is also based on the internal organisation of the association, which allows its inclusion in the partnership ecosystem providing human and financial resources. Internally, we find an agile structure that combines rationalisation in the service of the overall framework, and flexibility in the service of reactivity for all the beneficiaries of the service, whether they are young people or companies.

Sponsorship was thus quickly streamlined, since it was the “core of the reactor” of the association, according to one founder’s metaphor. A good practice reference framework drawn up with the help of AFNOR was followed up with a guide to the association's processes, drawn up on a voluntary basis by a quality specialist. In the same spirit of setting the rules for “good” sponsorship, the association director explained the association's desire to set up a “points system” to assess the admissibility of applications from young people.

In addition, an information system promotes the exchange of data accumulated when connecting young people and sponsors. As the director of the association points out, this system “*serves all the poles, communication, accounting, etc., so that everyone has the same level of information at all times*”. It is therefore a guarantee of the quality of the implementation of the sponsorship processes. Such an information system is a key element in the institutionalization of a shared vision of the association's mission, which enables it to ensure that sponsorship relationships continue in the desired spirit.

At the same time, however, the organization remains flexible and responsive. Responsiveness is all the more important as the development of a network such as NQT is based on opportunities to be seized and the ability to play on different registers in order to interest current and future members in the long term. At the beginning of the association's history, this interest implied a very costly investment in time and energy, which mobilized the first members of the association very intensively. This is no longer the case, since a sponsor from Oracle suggested the idea of designating company referents who are responsible for finding sponsors within companies wishing to join NQT. This creates flexibility, and the possibility for the referent to adapt the specificities of his company to the system.

The NQT contact people in companies are thus a key part of the system and an essential element of this partnership ecosystem, allowing NQT to focus on the qualitative development of the offer. Companies are linked to NQT via an agreement, and it is the contact person who is at the interface with NQT, the

association entrusting the contact to point out the company's specificities, and show flexibility in the implementation of its internal processes. As community facilitators, the contact people must bring together the sponsors of their company, but also encourage new vocations.

The contact people are supported in this by NQT employees, who regularly organize unifying events, and by sponsors from other structures, who wish to share their experience, as during "sponsorship reviews", for example. The "sponsorship assessments" system is also a way of adapting to the specific characteristics of the company: *"sponsorship assessments consist of bringing together existing sponsors within the same company to hold a round-table discussion, exchange good practices, take stock of experiences, both positive and negative, and identify areas for improvement, things to be reworked, shortcomings, or to the contrary, the association's strengths. And these meetings are very important. Of course there are tools, but the sponsors are executives or company managers who are very busy and therefore do not necessarily take advantage of them. But above all, there are these meetings where they exchange ideas where such and such will say, 'Well, couldn't you meet my godchild next week to do a mock interview because I've been following him so much that I'm no longer completely neutral?' It is things like this that we're trying to create"* (member of the sponsorship division).

We have shown here that NQT produces boundary work, thanks to the different mechanisms put in place and its adopted structure, making it possible to give a common framework to the different partners while respecting the specificities of each one.

## **5. Theoretical contributions and discussion**

Our research contributes to the literature on collaborative public management by showing the organisational challenges of collaborative innovation, and the action of a boundary organization able to foster collaboration between public, market, and civil society actors. In addition, it also contributes to reflection on the relations between associations and public actors, by putting an associative actor at the heart of collaborative public management.

### **The organisational foundations of innovative collaborative management**

The organizational dimension that supports collaborative management has received little attention. The various research projects have focused on the knowledge and skills of different boundary actors (Geddes, 2012), and therefore on a more individual dimension. By taking up the idea of a *boundary organisation* (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008), our study confirms the importance of an organisation promoting more innovative and inclusive collaborative public management. This is manifest in its bringing together of heterogeneous actors and continuous inclusion

of new actors, in its continuous development, and in its existence as a reminder of a common framework while meeting the specific expectations of each partner.

This organisation has the same characteristics as those identified in our literature review (see Table 1): rules of engagement (the conventions), balanced governance, ownership (of the stated NQT brand); control of key production processes (ISO certification); and a shared language (via storytelling) and understanding of the mission (through communication efforts). Beyond this, we have identified in the case of NQT additional organizational levers that catalyse collaboration: the articulation between the territorial scales of collective action; the continuous incentive to innovate that leads to a differentiation of the offer the companies propose; and, finally, the tools that make it possible to combine rationalisation and flexibility.

In terms of collaborative public management, we have highlighted an ongoing work developed by the association on boundaries as identified by Quick and Feldman (2014), notably by highlighting complementarities and minimising differences in a collective and exploratory approach to diversifying partners. Compared to the case of free software, on which O'Mahony & Beckhy (2008) theorized *boundary organization*, this example of collaboration is not limited to a triangular relationship, since the association's mediation transpires between more than two actors. Thus, if NQT was largely built as a movement of companies, its functioning is that of a composite actor, mixing representatives of the business world and public organizations without opposing them or ranking them a priori. NQT acts as a composite player deployed over a large number of territories but in a singular and local way in each territory. It steers this deployment by ensuring local articulation with other players, including a multifaceted State, encompassing employment and education actors. At the centre of the collaboration, the association creates different configurations adapted to the territories, thus favouring more efficient action on the part of the public actor. We find here the recommendation of Quick and Feldman (2011) not to reify categories (e.g. public/private) in order to encourage collaboration.

We also show that the association, as a *boundary organisation*, is characterized by a stable and durable structure (which allows for anchoring collaboration), while maintaining flexibility and constant adaptability to a variety of configurations of stakeholders. This requires rules of engagement that are flexible enough to appeal to a wide range of actors, provided that they adhere to the well-identified mission of the association.

### **The associative actor at the centre of collaborative management**

It is interesting to note that, in our case, the public actor is not at the centre of the action, contrary to what can be seen in research on collaborative public management. Even if some have already noted that the role of the public actor is

likely to evolve to a more collaborative logic of public action (Favoreu *et al.*, 2016), our case shows a more peripheral place for public actors. The latter occupy a specific and above all variable place, depending on the direction taken by the association. Thus, Pôle Emploi played an important role at the very beginning with its initial boost, but then gradually found itself marginalised in the development of sponsorship (but without ever disappearing, since it holds the keys to accessing the target public). In addition, the flexibility of the association, although highly centralised, allows for various formats of collaboration with the public actor due to the territorialisation of its action.

In the case studied, it is indeed the association as a hybrid actor that remains central to the action, and brings together the various stakeholders, whose balanced representation it maintains through its governance. There is therefore a notable difference with the literature on collaborative public management, which places the public actor at the centre of the action as the “hub of all connections” (Geddes, 2012). This difference is likely to allow a reformulation of the issue of the disengagement of the State and its relationship to civil society. Hence the interest in using the notion of *boundary organisation*, which allows us to escape a dual approach to the relationship between the public actor and the association. The empirical case studied also shows the possibility of positioning reflection on collaboration on a much larger scale. Ultimately, this case invites us to question (or even put into perspective) the public actor’s role in collaborative public management – insofar as this actor is not always at the centre of the action – and to study more closely the role played by the associative actor and the practices it deploys to support the collaborative dynamic.

### **Another look at the relationship between associations and public actors**

This point is also of interest with regard to the literature on associations and their relationship to the State. NQT exemplifies the case of an association that initiates and develops its own relationship with the public actor in a very pragmatic way, both in terms of its relationship with the public actor itself and its interlocutors (since NQT specifically targets public actors that are relevant to its action and indirectly operates to connect them). In our case, we are very far from a reflection on the public actor as a “block unit” in its relationship to the associative world. Indeed, one might even wonder whether the action of this associative actor does not end up “making” public policy. In this perspective, NQT’s approach is interesting to observe because the association seeks autonomy – it limits the extent of public financing in order to safeguard its autonomy; but at the same time the drafting of a white paper presented to the President of the Republic marks a willingness to engage with the highest level of the State in order to derive legitimacy from it. It is also a way of formalising a model of action, which can then be appropriated.

### **A platform actor?**

NQT's development has shown its constant aim to communicate the association's mission, and the scope of what it undertakes. This includes internal communication, but also communication with the media and partners, extending up to the very presidency of the Republic. The values, mission, and results are shared very widely and cross existing organizational and institutional boundaries through crafted storytelling, which corresponds to this common language (Quick & Feldman, 2014) so necessary for the development of a common framework. Indeed, it gives substance to a common framework that maintains a dynamic around the project. This dynamic illustrates the virtuous circle conceptualized by Emerson *et al.* (2012). The common framework referred to here is progressively developed and substantiated, without being too constraining for the actors at any time. A balance is maintained so as to obtain a flexible framework that stimulates innovation and facilitates collaboration through shared principles (for example, the aim of sponsors is not to hire the young people they sponsor, but to accompany them on their path to employment).

However, the organizational principles we have just reviewed are enacted through the tools and structures deployed by the association, which thus constitutes a highly equipped intermediate space. It remains at the centre of the action, if only because it supports the common framework. Our analysis thus echoes the work of Geddes (2012), but, in the case studied, it is the associative actor who plays the role of platform and not the public actor. As a result, this case enriches the literature on collaborative public management in the sense that it shows the usefulness of placing the organisation and its tools “promoting innovative spaces” at the centre of the reflection (Grenier, 2014).

## **6. Conclusion**

The study of the case of the NQT association has highlighted the importance of organizational mechanisms to promote collaboration between public actors and civil society. We identified a set of organizational characteristics, salient in this case, and which would be interesting to study in other cases of collaboration. Moreover, our case illustrates the relevance and potential of the notion of *boundary organization* in the context of collaborative public management. It allows us to envisage a new role for associative actors, namely, that of a platform.

Several managerial recommendations emerge. From the point of view of the associative actor, working as a *boundary organization* consists of building rules of engagement that are flexible enough to interest many actors, while uniting them around the mission of the association. It can thus be observed that the construction of a common framework is certainly driven by shared values and a shared goal, but also by a common structure and management tools, which make it

possible to combine rationalisation and flexibility, and which are accepted by the various stakeholders. The associative actor also succeeds in *boundary work* because it mobilizes different territorial scales of collective action, and relies on a continuous incentive to innovate, which leads to a locally adapted differentiation of the proposed offer.

From the point of view of the public actor, it seems important to recognize the complementary roles of public actors and associations, and to think of the territorial level as the place for such an articulation. The cooperation between public actors and associations is not top-down, but the association creates different configurations adapted to the different territories, thus favouring greater efficiency of action on the part of the public actor. For the latter, thinking differently about collaboration means accepting a role that is undoubtedly more marginalised and fragmented, but which allows it to respond to expectations that are also more local and diversified.

At the end of our discussion, however, other questions remain that we were not able to analyse in the framework of this research: the capacity of such a space to protect the general interest in question<sup>4</sup> through balanced governance; and the legitimacy of an emerging and therefore most probably local functioning, where public action is most often the result of a general, or even universal, reflection. On this last, it would be advisable to continue the reflection by asking how this entrepreneurial flexibility can accommodate existing public institutions, and the values they hold, beyond the first years of collaboration. In other words, it would be appropriate to consider the possible linkage between a pragmatic approach geared towards innovation and a more normative approach to public action. The latest developments of the association, which now claims to have ambitions for the 100,000 young people it supports, makes this question unavoidable.

Finally, the reflection proposed here on an association at the centre of collaborative management can also be related to research on inclusive forms of collaboration around themes of general interest. It will also be possible to question the role of associations to promote this inclusion, and the forms of participatory democracy that can be associated with it, to enrich the forms of debate around themes of general interest.

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<sup>4</sup> Namely, to promote access to employment for young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and/or social backgrounds.

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