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### The fashion of management fashion: A surge too far?

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# **THE FASHION OF MANAGEMENT FASHION: A SURGE TOO FAR?**

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## **THE FASHION OF MANAGEMENT FASHION: A SURGE TOO FAR?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years there has been growing interest in the notion that management ideas and techniques are subject to swings in fashion in the same way that aesthetic aspects of life such as clothing styles, hair length, music tastes, furniture design, paint colours, and so forth are characterized by surges of popularity and then decline. Adopting a predominantly neo-institutional perspective, researchers have conceived of management fashions as techniques that fail to become firmly entrenched and institutionalized since organizations are attracted to them for a period and then abandon them in favour of apparently newer and more promising ones. Drawing on Gill and Whittle (1993) management fashions are seen to progress through a series of discrete stages: (1) invention, when the idea is initially created, (2) dissemination, when the idea is initially brought to the attention of its intended audience, (3) acceptance, when the idea becomes implemented, (4) disenchantment, when negative evaluations and frustrations with the idea emerge, and (5) decline, or the abandonment of the idea.

In the most influential model of the management fashion setting process (Abrahamson, 1996), groups of interrelated knowledge entrepreneurs and industries, identified as management consultants, management gurus, business schools, and mass media organizations, are characterized as being in a “race: to sense managers’ incipient collective preferences for new techniques. They then develop rhetorics which ‘convince fashion followers that a management technique is both rational and at the forefront of managerial progress’ (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 267). Their rhetorics must therefore articulate why it is imperative that managers should pursue certain organizational goals

and why their particular technique offers the best means to achieve these goals. Thus, within this model the management fashion setting community is viewed as supplying mass audiences with ideas and techniques that have the potential for developing mass followings. These may or may not become fashions depending on fashion setters' ability to redefine fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques are state of the art and meet their immediate needs.

More recently this model has been extended to examine how recurrent fashions within business-knowledge niches cumulatively build on one another. Thus, each succeeding fashion builds on the previous one. Consequently, these studies have concluded that there is a gradual and directional, rather than a punctuated and random, accretion in business knowledge (Abrahamson and Eisenmann, 2001a, b). This occurs because in an attempt to identify consumers' incipient preferences management fashion setters constantly launch "new" management techniques. When a technique is adopted by consumers fashion setters have then identified the nature of consumers' previously dimly felt preferences. Each succeeding technique then reinforces these preferences so that subsequent fashions develop along a particular trajectory. Thus, skirts become narrower, whiskers less popular, and organizations less bureaucratic with each passing fashion.

The growing interest in this area is evidenced by the proliferation of conference papers, published articles, books and the publication of Special Issues on Management Fashion in the *Journal of Management History* (1999) and *Organization* (2000). In short, management fashion has itself become a fashionable area of academic enquiry. One reason for the preoccupation with management fashion may be an increasing concern and insecurity about the status and value of academic knowledge. A key implication of

Abrahamson's (1996) model is that as the popularity of particular fashion setter's ideas rises and falls so does the legitimacy of the occupational community of which they are a part. This suggests that if the ideas developed and disseminated by scholars working within business schools are perceived to be less valid than those of other knowledge entrepreneurs, such as management consultants and gurus, then they will increasingly become seen as peripheral institutions. Thus, the increasing 'fashionization of the topic of management fashion' (Newell, Robertson and Swan, 2002, p. 5) may be partly motivated by a desire to understand the factors which account for the success and impact of a number of leading fashion setters. This may in turn assist scholars in business schools to intervene more effectively in the management-fashion-setting process by creating powerful alternative discourses that ensure the long-term viability of many business schools. Thus the dominating focus of research on management fashions centres on attempts to explain managers' enthusiasm for ideas whose truth claims are characterized as fundamentally flawed. As ten Bos (2000, p. 5) writes 'the fashionable is never authentic or robust, but always untrustworthy, unpredictable, fickle and capricious'. This paper is not concerned with a critical examination of such claims about the nature of fashionable knowledge (see Salaman (2001) for such a discussion). Rather, its focus is on identifying a number of shortcomings with respect to empirical analyses of fashion cycles and the general focus of the extant management fashion literature. Three issues are discussed: (1) the (over)use of citation analysis; (2) the focus on the dissemination / broadcasting phase of the fashion cycle; and, (3) the incorporation of ideas into different domains within the management fashion setting community. These points are further elaborated in the next section.

## **SHORTCOMINGS IN CURRENT RESEARCH ON MANAGEMENT FASHIONS**

Of primary concern is the disjunction between the definitions of management fashion developed in the literature and their subsequent empirical investigation. The current research on management fashion is based upon a central irony. Whilst management fashion researchers claim that the main focus of their research is on the diffusion process and the degree to which ideas become institutionalized within organizations, and profess that one outcome of their research is the development of criteria to assist managers in detecting those ideas / techniques which are potentially transient and toxic, they rarely provide direct empirical evidence of organizational implementation. This arises because the life cycle of a fashionable management idea is identified by citation analysis. Key word searches of electronic databases such as, ABI Inform, Wilson Business Abstracts and WISO, are conducted in order to measure the number of articles in any one year which contain the search terms. The results of these studies demonstrate that the life cycles of a number of fashionable management ideas are characterized by an initial period in which the frequency of citations increases, peaks and then declines; although the shapes of the curves for different ideas are not necessarily symmetrical (i.e., they do not necessarily rise and fall at the same rate) and vary between countries (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2001; Spell, 1999). In addition, the life spans of recent management fashions are considerably shorter than those for ideas which came to prominence in earlier periods (Carson *et al.*, 1999).

Despite its universal use, citation analysis is not without serious problems. Unless each article is read it cannot indicate whether the idea was central or peripheral to the main topic or whether it was referred to positively or negatively. But, of greater importance is

whether citation analysis actually captures the complete life cycle of an idea. Citation analysis is limited to the counts of references to an idea in selected sections of the print media, mainly leading academic journals, semi-academic journals and the popular management press. Such a method cannot determine the degree to which ideas are “adopted” by organisations. Nevertheless, there is a tendency in the literature to assume that there is a symbiotic relationship between the pattern in the volume of discourse and trends in the adoption and rejection of ideas by organizations. This is rather like conducting an analysis of the clothing featured in advertisements in fashion magazines, such as *Vogue* or *Harper’s & Queen*, in order to determine what the average person is wearing<sup>1</sup>. Despite heavy coverage in leading fashion magazines, few Western men currently wear a sarong. Fashion editors and consumers adopt different criteria as to what they regard as fashionable and therefore ultimately as acceptable to wear. The decisions they make are the outcome of very different competitive pressures and institutional processes. Business (and fashion) magazine editors, for example, operate in an environment in which they are constantly seeking to outcompete their competitors. One way in which they do this is by positioning their publication as being at the cutting edge of management innovation. In the same way that a radio or television station may seek to benefit by “breaking” a new artist, so magazine editors also seek to benefit from the reputational consequences of being associated with the early identification and support of a “new” idea or technique<sup>2</sup>. The constant cycle of ideas within this section of the print media is partly related to competitive processes within the industry. Ultimately citation analysis collects data on the extent to which one diffusion source for management fashions is captivated with a particular management idea at any one time.

In actuality, the management fashion literature is generally concerned not with the organizational implications of management fashions but with measuring the amount of “noise” generated in the print media with respect to particular ideas<sup>3</sup>. Put differently, it is concerned with the outcome of a series of competitive and social processes within the print media.

Second, and related to the previous point, the literature concerned with management fashion primarily focuses on the dissemination / diffusion phase within the fashion cycle. It therefore concentrates on the reception accorded to ideas *subsequent* to their publication. Drawing on Hirsch’s (1972) seminal paper, Abrahamson (1996, pp. 264-7) identifies a four-fold fashion-setting process (creation, selection, processing, dissemination). Yet, as the earlier review has indicated, his subsequent research has focused exclusively on the dissemination of a number of fashionable management ideas. This emphasis is further exemplified by the focus of the *Organization* (2000) Special Issue on Management Fashion which sought to address ‘gaps and weaknesses of current theory in management fashion’ and raise ‘new issues for research and debate’, but only in so far as they related to ‘the diffusion processes and rhetorical strategies surrounding “popular” management ideas and practices’ (Newell *et al.*, 2001, pp. 5-6). Whilst the articles contained within this Special Issue may have plugged a few gaps in our understanding of the nature of management fashions, they nevertheless failed to fundamentally shift the research agenda in that the contributors were concerned with examining fashionable management ideas only after they had been broadcast to managers through the print media and become widely accepted by the managerial audience. The picture that emerges from this research is one in which managers are seen as being the



sole arbiters of taste in that it is they who are presented as selecting between ideas that have potential for mass appeal and so determine which become fashionable and which do not. Management fashion setters on the other hand are depicted as lone creative geniuses who gain unique insights into modern organizational life by dabbling in their "organizational laboratories", who then emerge and use their expertise in rhetoric and persuasive communication to popularize their ideas through best-selling books, articles in the popular business press, live presentations on the international lecture circuit and so forth. Thus, managers are portrayed as responsible for the selection of those ideas which become management fashions whilst fashion setters are pictured as the sole creators and processors of the ideas for which they are well-known.

But, management ideas, like other cultural products, 'do not spring forth full blown but are made somewhere by somebody' (Peterson, 1979, p. 152). The displayed character of a potentially fashionable management idea at the dissemination stage is the result of active collaboration at earlier stages between the creator(s) and a range of support personnel. In this sense management ideas are "collective social products" which depend for their realization on reciprocal collaboration between a group of people. There are a range of necessary activities that must be carried out for a management idea to appear in its final form. Although the list of essential activities varies from one cultural product to another, for example making a film is different to producing a music CD or popular idea, they are nevertheless all produced as a result of collaborative relationships between a number of different people. Typically, many people participate in the creation of a work without which it could not have been produced. Usually, the identity of these individuals

is hidden or acknowledged only in passing with the consequence that their role in the fashion creating process has been overlooked.

Clark and Greatbatch (2002), drawing on interviews with a number of leading management gurus, have sought to illuminate the role of two support groups - managers and book editors - in the creation and development of fashionable ideas. They show that observations of managerial work and organizational practices through consultancy and research provided the gurus with the “raw material” from which they derived their ideas about the nature of modern management and organizational life. In addition, the responses of managers at their live presentations and to their articles in leading business magazines provided the gurus with a valuable source of direct feedback on their ideas, thus alerting them to any potential shortcomings or difficulties prior to the publication of their book. Book editors played a critical part in “discovering” a number of the gurus. In this respect their role is similar to that of “contact people” in other cultural industries. Publishing, film and music companies all employ people to locate new manuscripts, new film scripts and new singers. These people essentially go out into the field and act as scouts attempting to identify potential stars from the existing pool of talent which can then be signed up by their organizations. Having signed a book contract the second key function of the book editor, identified by the gurus, was as a creative collaborator during the writing process. Since many of the gurus were first time authors they depicted themselves as very dependent on the advice and knowledge of the editor with respect to conventional understandings of the ingredients of a management best-seller. Thus, for a number of the gurus their book editors had an important and in some cases very influential role on the process by which the ideas were shaped and framed for the

managerial audience prior to the publication of their first book<sup>4</sup>. Such was the importance of the book editor that several gurus referred to them as unacknowledged co-authors.

This research indicates that by the time ideas are disseminated to a managerial audience they have already been subject to a series of selection decisions. Gurus, in this instance, selected their ideas on the basis of observation of management practice. These were then refined in collaboration with managers. Book editors selected potential best-selling authors and then worked closely with them in order to turn their ideas into products that were likely to be successful with the intended audience. In this respect it is book editors and not managers who act as the key gatekeeper in that their decision to support the publication of a book either facilitates or blocks the career of a would-be guru. At the dissemination stage, therefore, the management audience<sup>5</sup> chooses from a pre-restricted menu of ideas that have been pre-selected on the basis of their blockbuster potential and have subsequently been carefully crafted in order to increase their likelihood of success. This research suggests that the popularity and success of a particular idea cannot simply be understood in terms of the factors explaining managers' receptiveness. Account has to be taken of all those people whose collective actions constitute the final product. Thus, a management fashion setter is located at the centre of a web of co-operative relationships that are essential to the final outcome. From this point of view, a management fashion setter is not a solo performer who possesses rare and special insight. Rather, this status is conferred onto an individual / organization as a result of the joint endeavours of all those people who co-operated in the creation and fashioning of their ideas. Without this network of collaborative relationships management fashion setters only have unrealized

potential. This suggests that the popularity of a management idea is in part determined by the milieu within which it is produced. In other words, particular combinations of support personnel can improve the chances of an idea gaining mass appeal. This is indicated by a perusal of the acknowledgement sections of recent management best-selling books where the same names are referred to by different authors.

Third, a key feature of popular management ideas is their malleability and plasticity. Whilst the apparent novelty and “uniqueness” of an idea is proclaimed a number of commentators have noted that its distinctiveness is often reduced to a number of broad principles which lack precision with the consequence that they remain ambiguous and vague (Clark and Salaman, 1998; Kieser, 1997)<sup>6</sup>. This creates an interpretative space in which an idea can be adapted to a broad range of situations and so becomes viewed as a universal panacea. These ideas are thus able to travel across different domains and as they become incorporated into each their meaning becomes re-articulated to meet locally occasioned requirements. For example, what one consultancy terms business process re-engineering (BPR) may be very different from another consultancy’s BPR offering, and both these packages may have only a passing resemblance to the central principles contained in Hammer and Champy’s (1993) seminal book on BPR. The pliancy of these concepts and ideas means that they have a distinct and to some extent separate life in a number of interrelated domains, not just the print media. These domains include management consultancy, the international conference circuit via live presentations, training and development programmes, video production and so forth. One consequence of this is that the life span of an idea may be considerably extended beyond its apparent period of decline as indicated by citation analysis of the print media. For example, with

respect to the learning organization and BPR as so-called fashionable ideas, citation analysis suggests that the latter peaked in the early 1990s whereas the former peaked in the late 1990s. Both had life cycles within the popular business and academic press of between three and four years. Yet, according to data from BookTrack<sup>7</sup>, sales of the books that generated both ideas, whilst not at the level they once were, have remained at a steady 4,000 to 5,000 copies for the past four years in the UK. Sales of the training videos produced to accompany the books are still amongst the best-selling titles for their respective publishers. Furthermore, the so-called progenitors of each idea - Peter Senge and Michael Hammer - remain popular speakers on the international management lecture circuit. In addition, they have each established organizations (i.e., Society for Organizational Learning, and Hammer and Co.) to support the continued proselytization of their message. These have ensured that a number of prominent organizations remain committed to the implementation of their ideas. This suggests that both these ideas, and their “creators”, continue to be popular in a variety of domains and have become institutionalized within a range of organizations despite their apparent decline and abandonment as indicated by citation counts in the print media. Linking back to the first point, this would further suggest that a focus on popularity within the print media does not give an accurate and comprehensive picture of the life span of different management ideas.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has outlined a number of limitations that attach to current studies of the management fashion phenomenon. In doing so it suggests three potentially fruitful areas of future research if the ambitions and claims of researchers are to reach their full

promise. First, greater stress needs to be placed on understanding the nature and process by which organizations adopt fashionable management ideas. Second, given the current emphasis of research in this area, a more detailed examination of the role of “back stage” support personnel (e.g., management consultants, video production companies) in the creation and fashioning of management ideas prior to dissemination is required. Finally, presently little is known about the way in which different domains select and then process management ideas, and how these then impact on managers.

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## **NOTES**

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- <sup>1</sup> In perhaps the first quantitative study of aesthetic fashion, Kroeber (1919) analyzed a sample of illustrations of dresses in a number of leading fashion magazines between 1844 and 1914. For each picture he measured such factors as length of skirt, length of waist, length of décolletage, width of skirt and width of waist. However, he admitted that a 'knowledge of the course followed by ideals of dress', whilst valuable in itself did not reflect trends in "real dress" because 'the actual wear of average men and women lags somewhat ineffectually behind the incisive styles of models or pictures' (p. 238).

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- <sup>2</sup> Alternatively publications may seek to discredit their competitors by debunking an idea that they have actively sponsored (e.g., *Business Week*, 1984).
- <sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Christopher Wright for bringing to my attention a parallel debate within the labour process literature with respect to the conflation of advocacy for scientific management and its actual implementation. A number of commentators have noted that whilst it is possible to find many references to Taylorism within a variety of publications, this does not mean that it was implemented in the workplace (see Patmore, 1991; Wright, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> Crainer (1998) has argued that a number of recent best-selling management books have been ghost written. He points out that a company run by the ‘queen of ghost writers’, Donna Sammons Carpenter, and several other individuals are behind many of the recent management best-sellers.
- <sup>5</sup> Whilst the focus here is on managers, in actuality the audience for management ideas is much broader and includes management consultants, trainers, video production companies, and so forth. These groups in turn reconstitute management ideas in terms of the presentational conventions within their own domain, and then disseminate them to managers. They therefore have an important mediating function.
- <sup>6</sup> Relatedly Benders and van Veen (2001, pp. 37-8) refer to the ‘interpretative viability’ of popular management ideas in that ‘users can eclectically select those elements that appeal to them, or that they interpret as the fashion’s core idea, or that they opportunistically select as suitable for their purposes’

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<sup>7</sup> BookTrack monitors sales of books in 6,000 retail outlets in the UK, including the Internet. The figures quoted are from their General Retail Market Database for the years 1997 to 2000. The figures were also cross-checked with the respective publishers.