

Human Relations

[0018-7267(200101)54:1]

Volume 54(1): 67-75: 015573

Copyright © 2001

The Tavistock Institute ®

SAGE Publications

London, Thousand Oaks CA,

New Delhi

Why management scholars must intervene strategically in the management knowledge market

Eric Abrahamson and Micki Eisenman

We live in a knowledge economy. This statement has many implications, but three matter particularly for this article. First, knowledge is a commodity – it can be bought and sold in a knowledge market. In the case of the management knowledge market, varied producers on its supply side – consultants or journalists, for example – produce and market this knowledge to diverse individuals and organizations on its demand side that consume it. Second, as management scholars, we also belong to this market's supply side. We produce and disseminate knowledge that is consumed by varied customers – students, executives, managers, state bureaucrats, as well as a diversity of professionals, such as human resource management specialists or quality control experts. We generally agree that this management knowledge should be relevant to our consumers and have a salubrious impact on them, though we frequently disagree on what 'relevance' might mean and what this 'salubrious impact' should be. Our position in a knowledge economy has a third, vital implication – that, at certain crucial historical junctures, it is imperative for scholars to consider how their position, impact, and relevance in the management knowledge market might be evolving. The millennium presents such an opportunity, and this article takes it up.

Neils Bore once remarked, 'Prediction is difficult, particularly about the future'. Despite such warnings, we are so bold as to propose in this article that, as we enter this new millennium, we are also entering a period during which the business knowledge market will evolve in ways that are vital for scholars to reflect upon because their very role in this market is at stake. More specifically, we believe that we will see the continuation of a

broad shift in the management knowledge market. A shift away from a state in which management knowledge was less of a commodity, and management scholars were one of the few suppliers and disseminators of management knowledge. A shift towards a state in which management knowledge increasingly becomes a sought-after, lucrative commodity and, consequently, a broad variety of management-knowledge suppliers flood the management knowledge market, competing increasingly effectively to create and disseminate knowledge to an ever-growing number of management knowledge consumers. These new suppliers will include both a broader variety of consultants, practitioners, in-company universities, business media organizations, consultant journals, business schools, as well as new and yet unknown knowledge entrepreneurs. They will disseminate knowledge through a growing and broader array of channels and modalities, many of which are being opened up by the unprecedented opportunities for knowledge transfer created by the current incarnation of the World Wide Web and what it might evolve into.

We want to raise the possibility in this article that, in this new, increasingly commoditized knowledge market, scholars might lose ground and their traditional authoritative role over management knowledge might further diminish; the reason being that, as management knowledge becomes increasingly commoditized, in-demand, and lucrative, so will the number and sophistication of management knowledge entrepreneurs who compete with management scholars to supply this knowledge. Should we be surprised, therefore, that recent research indicates that management scholars lag rather than lead other knowledge entrepreneurs, both in when they introduce new knowledge (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 2000) and in what knowledge they introduce (Barley et al., 1988)?

We also want to raise the possibility that the declining influence of management scholars might occur at a time when recurrent, ineffectual, and sometimes downright destructive management fashion waves are sweeping the business landscape (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996a; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Therefore, we are now facing a period when, more than ever, there is a need for careful, impactful, value-driven scholarship capable of advancing and balancing the interests of all organizational stakeholders. Consider, for instance, the devastating impact of the downsizing fashion on the careers of thousands of employees. Consider the well-documented uselessness of many downsizing strategies. Consider, lastly, the lack of a vocal challenge to this fashion by management scholars.

Our central claim is therefore that, as we enter the new millennium, trends in the management knowledge are becoming increasingly necessary. Our plea, therefore, is for scholars to learn how to better influence the

management knowledge market and how to compete in it more effectively. To do so, management scholars must become better at understanding how the management knowledge market functions. Doing so will enable them to influence the creation of a better management knowledge market and will enable them to compete in it more effectively in the new millennium.

After briefly reviewing Abrahamson's theory of how the management knowledge market functions, we consider a number of ways in which this market could be influenced and in which management scholars could compete more effectively within it.

The management knowledge market

Abrahamson's (1991, 1996a, 1996b) theory of the management knowledge market distinguishes rational from progressive norms governing the choice of management techniques in the management knowledge market. Rational normative expectations are that management techniques will be efficient means to important ends (i.e. rational), whereas progressive normative expectations are that management techniques will progress over time (i.e. will be replaced repeatedly by new and improved techniques). These norms create a market for discourse disseminating rational, progressive management knowledge. The discourses contain labels that denote particular management techniques and specify important organizational goals and the means of attaining them most efficiently by using these techniques. A community of interrelated knowledge industries, populated by knowledge organizations and idea entrepreneurs, market and supply this discourse to a variety of knowledge consumers. Forces exogenous to knowledge markets shape demand for this discourse, as do endogenous forces exerted by the knowledge community.

The management knowledge market tends to produce a recurrent series of management fashions (Gill & Wittle, 1993; Abrahamson, 1997; Kieser, 1997; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Based on Abrahamson's theory, the management knowledge market's fashion-setting process is defined as the process by which management knowledge entrepreneurs continuously redefine both their and fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques are at the forefront of rational management progress (Abrahamson, 1996a). A management fashion is a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management knowledge entrepreneurs, that a management technique leads rational management progress.

Influencing management fashion

Shaping norms of rationality and progress

Norms of rationality and progress create an insatiable appetite for progressive, rationalized management knowledge and techniques, driving recurrent demand for new and improved management fashions. It follows that these norms might constitute one point at which management scholars could intervene to shape a better management knowledge market and compete in it more effectively.

Scholars could attack these strong norms of progress in management knowledge and promote a more balanced conception of management innovation as potentially retrogressive as well as progressive (Abrahamson, 1991; Eccles & Nohria, 1992; Kimberly, 1981; Rogers, 1983). Such a more balanced conception would presumably lead to fewer and less transitory management fashions. It would also create an environment in which carefully validated scholarly knowledge might also be more valued.

Norms of rationality tend to call for one-most-rational-ways to manage that are often differentially efficient across contexts (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 1994). The result is slickly packaged fashionable techniques that promise universally useful and impactful quick fixes for managing organizations (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Management scholars could challenge such norms of rationality. Scholars could promote norms that render organizational stakeholders tolerant of greater experimentation and diversity in fashionable management techniques (Starbuck & Nystrom, 1981). This would create environments in which a greater variety of management techniques, better suited to the idiosyncratic needs of firms, industries, and countries, could become popular, and in which scholarly work designed to fit particular knowledge to specific organizations might be in greater demand.

Influencing the creation of management knowledge

Management knowledge must be created on the supply side of the management knowledge market. Involved in this creation stage is the invention of management innovations and the rediscovery/reinvention of old management knowledge and techniques. This creation stage constitutes another intervention point for management scholars seeking to influence the management knowledge market and to play a greater role within it. Not only is it a point where management scholars can strive to create better management knowledge, but, more importantly, it is a point at which scholars could become

much more vocal in debunking management knowledge that is created and disseminated purely for financial profit, at the expense of its truthfulness and utility to varied organizational stakeholders.

Enhancing the selection of what management knowledge diffuses

After management knowledge is created, it has to be diffused and marketed to reach knowledge consumers. Much more knowledge is created than is diffused, revealing the existence of a selection process that determines which knowledge, ideas, and techniques are diffused, and which are not. This selection stage constitutes another intervention point.

Interventions by management scholars in the selection of management fashions could render management fashion setting a more technically functional learning process for fashion followers and could also enhance the role of management scholars. Management scholars could be much more vocal in alerting fashion followers to new and important performance gaps and to management innovations that efficiently narrow these gaps. One way to do this would be for scholars to be more timely (Beyer & Trice, 1982). Another would be for scholars to become more aware and concerned with current developments in business so as not to lag well behind the incidence of the phenomena about which they are producing management knowledge (Bettis; 1991; Astley & Zammuto, 1992). Still another would be for scholars to focus on problems with a greater concern for the real issues that management knowledge consumers face, or will face in the future (Corwin & Louis, 1982). Scholars might go so far as to involve management knowledge consumers in the selection of areas requiring more scientific knowledge production and dissemination (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). Finally, if scholars cannot lead management knowledge dissemination, they should take care not to follow well behind in the management knowledge dissemination race.

Modifying the dissemination of management knowledge

The dissemination of management knowledge involves the elaboration of rhetorics revealing organizational performance gaps and championing management techniques capable of narrowing these gaps (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). There are several ways of narrowing these gaps, bearing on both the form and substance of scholarly rhetorics that could render the dissemination process more influential in the management knowledge market.

With respect to form, management scholars can write more clearly and forcefully, unencumbered by scholarly jargon (Beyer & Trice, 1982). They can use qualitative data to make interpretations of quantitative data results more

comprehensible, relevant, and convincing to themselves and to users (Beyer & Trice, 1982). They can also produce knowledge about constructs and techniques that can be manipulated by managers, revealing their performance implications, but strive to do so at a less abstract level; thus facilitating managers' comprehension of how these abstract generalizations apply to their specific situations (Cheng & McKinley, 1983). Finally, they can include prescriptive implications as a normal part of disclosing research results (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1977; Starbuck & Nystrom, 1981; Bettis, 1991).

Decisions about how to reform the substance of scholarly rhetorics differ depending on whether scholars decide to take a more or less engaged view of applied research. The most disengaged approach to applied science sees it as providing a total replacement of management knowledge with scientific knowledge. In this approach, scholars would develop a strong, unitary paradigm in order to speed up scientific understanding of managerial behavior (Pfeffer, 1993). Scholars would continue contributing to normal science in order to develop a clear basis of knowledge on which scientifically tested prescriptions for change can then be offered to managers (Donaldson, 1992). Such disengaged applied management knowledge creation would occur independently of practitioners because management knowledge and priorities could bias and corrupt the substance of applied scientists' rhetorics (Dubin, 1976).

The more engaged approach to applied science sees it as challenging and complementing managerial knowledge (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). Scholarly management knowledge producers would attempt to maintain a rich diversity of perspectives and methods (Canella & Paetzold, 1994). Scholarly knowledge production would be directed at challenging and complementing the assumptions guiding what managers think and do (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Davis, 1971). Scholarly knowledge providers would interact with practitioners because helping them transform the world might help applied scientists understand it (Starbuck & Nystrom, 1981). An empirically validated theory of the management knowledge market might help determine whether engaged or disengaged approaches to management science are more efficient and effective in improving the management knowledge market and the position of scholarly management knowledge producers.

Enhancing the dissemination of scholarly management knowledge

Management knowledge must not only be articulated in discourse, it must also be communicated to management knowledge consumers through a variety of channels. A broad variety of possibilities exist for enhancing the dissemination, influence, and impact of scholarly management knowledge.

Possibilities range from sponsoring scholars to help them establish

contacts with knowledge consumers other than students (Beyer & Trice, 1982) to a radical restructuring of management academia in order to facilitate the dissemination of scholarly rhetorics. It is also possible to create formal positions in academia for management scholars capable of (1) carrying out studies to exploit insights drawn from more basic applied research or (2) translating scholarly rhetorics into rhetorics fit for public consumption (Beyer, 1992). Other possibilities involve sponsoring joint conferences with practitioners, strengthening journals directed at these practitioners, using public relations firms to place reports of scholarly research in mass-media outlets, and forming alliances with mass-media editors and other management fashion setters (Hambrick, 1994). There are even more direct ways of reaching knowledge consumers. Scholarly management knowledge producers might act as their own advocates and disseminate their research findings in magazines or web pages read by users as well as in professional journals (Beyer & Trice, 1982).

Improving the demand for management knowledge

The content of management knowledge is driven not only by the knowledge that is supplied, but also by the knowledge that is demanded. It follows that training better consumers would demand better management knowledge. It also follows that training better consumers of scholarly management knowledge, therefore, constitutes an important venue for creating a better management knowledge market and enhancing the position of scholarly management knowledge producers within it. Scholars can train students to become consumers of scholarly and non-scholarly management knowledge (Beyer & Trice, 1982). Scholars might achieve the same end by enhancing the training of particular consumers of scholarly management rhetorics – personnel and human resource specialists, inside-research change agents, or outside-consultant change agents, for instance (Beyer, 1992).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that, as we transit into the new millennium, the management knowledge industry is evolving in a way that will make it increasingly difficult for management scholars to have an impact outside academia. We believe, however, that this tendency is not inevitable. Management scholars can turn their analytical techniques onto the management knowledge industry itself. They can clarify the position of management scholars in this industry. They can make strides to understand their competitors on the supply side of this industry. They can also make strides to better understand

consumers of management knowledge. Such understanding would be not only useful on theoretical grounds, but also important on pragmatic grounds. It would enable management scholars, who are interested not only in understanding the world of management but also in shaping it, to understand how they can influence the creating of a better management knowledge industry and play a more important role within it.

References

- Abrahamson, E. Managerial fads and fashion: The diffusion and rejection of innovations. *Academy of Management Review*, 1991, 16, 586–612.
- Abrahamson, E. Management fashion. *Academy of Management Review*, 1996(a), 21, 254–85.
- Abrahamson, E. Technical and aesthetic fashion. In B. Czarniawska and G. Sevón (Eds), *Translating organizational change*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1996(b).
- Abrahamson, E. The emergence and prevalence of employee–management rhetorics: The effect of long waves, labor unions and turnover, 1875 to 1992. *Academy of Management Journal*, 1997, 40, 491–533.
- Abrahamson, E. & Fairchild, G. Management fashion: Life cycle, triggers, and collective learning processes. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1999, 44, 708–40.
- Abrahamson, E. & Fairchild, G. Knowledge industries and idea entrepreneurs. In C.B. Schoonhoven and E. Romanelli (Eds), *The Entrepreneurship dynamic in industry evolution*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Astley, G. & Zammuto, R. Organization science, managers, and language games. *Organization Science*, 1992, 3, 443–59.
- Barley, S.R., Meyer, G.W. & Gash, D.C. Culture of cultures: Academics, practitioners and the pragmatics of normative control. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1988, 33, 24–60.
- Bettis, R.A. Strategic management and the straightjacket: An editorial essay. *Organization Science*, 1991, 3, 315–19.
- Beyer, J. Metaphors, misunderstanding, and mischief: A commentary. *Organization Science*, 1992, 3, 467–75.
- Beyer, J.M. & Trice, H.M. The utilization process: A conceptual framework and synthesis of empirical findings. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1982, 27, 591–622.
- Canella, A.A. & Paetzold, R.L. Pfeffer's barriers to the advance of organizational science: A rejoinder. *Academy of Management Review*, 1994, 19, 331–41.
- Cheng, J. & McKinley, W. Towards an integration of organization research and practice: A contingency study of bureaucratic control and performance in scientific settings. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1983, 28, 85–100.
- Corwin, R.G. & Louis, K.S. Organizational barriers to the utilization of research. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1982, 27, 623–40.
- Davis, M.F. That's interesting: Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology. *Philosophy of Social Science*, 1971, 1, 309–44.
- Donaldson, L. The Weick stuff: Managing beyond games. *Organization Science*, 1992, 3, 461–7.
- Dubin, R. Theory building in applied areas. In M.D. Dunette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology*. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1976, pp. 17–39.
- Eccles, R. & Nohria, N. *Beyond the hype*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1992.
- Gill, J. & Whittle, S. Management by panacea: Accounting for transience. *Journal of Management Studies*, 1993, 30, 261–95.

- Hambrick, D. What if the academy actually mattered? *Academy of Management Review*, 1994, 19, 11–16.
- Kieser, A. Rhetoric and myth in management fashion. *Organization*, 1997, 4, 49–74.
- Kimberly, J.R. Managerial innovation. In P.C. Nystrom and W.H. Starbuck (Eds), *Handbook of organizational design*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, Vol. 1, pp. 84–104.
- Lindblom, C.E. & Cohen, D.K. *Usable knowledge: Social science and social problem solving*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Meyer, J. & Rowan, B. Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1977, 83, 364–85.
- Nystrom, P.C. & Starbuck, W.H. *Prescriptive models of organization*. Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1977.
- Pfeffer, J. Barriers to the advance of organizational science: Paradigm development as a dependent variable. *Academy of Management Review*, 1993, 18, 599–620.
- Rogers, E.M. *Diffusion of innovations*. New York: The Free Press, 1983.
- Scott, W.R. & Meyer, J. *Institutional environments and organizations: Structural complexity and individualism*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1994.
- Starbuck, W.H. & Nystrom, P.C. Designing and understanding organizations. In P.C. Nystrom and W.H. Starbuck (Eds), *Handbook of organizational design*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. ix–xxii.

Eric Abrahamson is a tenured full professor of management at Columbia Business School, USA. He holds degrees from New York University (PhD and MPh). After teaching at New York University, he joined the Columbia Business School faculty in 1989. He was a visiting professor at INSEAD, France in 1999. He is internationally recognized for his research on innovation diffusion generally, and fashions in management techniques more particularly. His work has won two of the most prestigious awards in the management area, the Award for the Best Article published in the *Academy of Management Journal* (1995) and two Best Paper Awards of the Academy of Management Organization and Management Theory Division (1990, 1997). He is a past consulting editor for the *Academy of Management Review* and has published numerous articles and book chapters.

[E-mail: ea1@columbia.edu]

Micki Eisenman is a second-year PhD student in the Management department at Columbia Business School, USA. She holds an MBA degree from Tulane University and a BA from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is interested in fashions in management techniques and is currently examining the evolution of fashion trends in the second half of the century. Additionally, she is interested in cultural industries and the unique attributes that emerge due to the tensions between the artistic and financial forces that drive these industries.

[E-mail: le86@columbia.edu]