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Factors Affecting Diffusion of Management Fashions during Consulting Missions: An Exploratory Study in Tunisian Context

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to present factors that influence the management fashions diffusion in organizations during consulting missions. Due to lack of researches that present explicitly such factors, we adopt an exploratory approach. So, through a literature review and semi-structured interviews conducted with Tunisian consultants, we propose a framework presenting some factors that may influence the diffusion of management fashions. This framework shows that adoption and diffusion of such fashions is related to consultants and managers behaviors rather than fashions characteristics. Thus, the legitimacy of consultants, the nature of their discourses and the quest of rationality by managers are presented as the main factors that can favor adoption and diffusion of management fashions. From a theoretical perspective, these factors would help, in future researches, to develop and test research models that present the determinants of management fashions dissemination. From a managerial perspective, knowing these factors would help business managers to have more control on management fashions diffusion since some of these fashions are not so benefic for organizations.

Keywords: Management fashions; diffusion; consultants; discourses

1. Introduction

The management fashions literature illustrates that there are many actors who are responsible for the diffusion of management fashions and how these fashions are diffused into organizations (Abrahamson, 1996; Grint, 1997; Benders & Veen, 2001; Warnier and Lecocq, 2003; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2012; Lang & Ohana, 2012).

Heusinkveld and Benders (2012) note here the "emerging stream of research that concentrates on implementation" of management fashions which indicates the importance of such field.

However, previous researches concentrated on how to disseminate management fashions and less attention was given to factors that could influence diffusion. Indeed, when analyzing literature, no explicit factors were considered as determinant of management fashions diffusion.

Thus, this research attempts to study factors that can influence diffusion of management fashions. In this study, we choose to concentrate on diffusion in a particular context that is consulting missions. Indeed, consultants are considered as the most popular promoters of such new ideas and practices. These practices are sources of controversy. When somebodies think that management fashions setted by consultants are key factors for solving many managerial problems, others view them as "old wine in new bottles". By the way, understanding factors linked to management fashions diffusion in consulting missions seems to be interesting to have more control on such diffusion.

As the literature linked to this field is not so rich, we adopt an exploratory approach based on a literature review fllowed by semi-structered interviews with Tunisian consultants. Such approach would help to identify more practical factors linked to developing countries context where researches in the field of management fashions diffusion are almost missing and where the role of consultants in organizations is emergent.

2. Literature review

Due to lack of researches presenting the factors influencing the diffusion of management fashions, mainly in consulting missions, we present here a literature review that concentrate on explaining management fashions specificities and their importance for both managers (as consulting clients) and consultants. This would help to identify factors linked to management fashions diffusion during consulting missions.

2.1 The origin of management fashions concept

The apparition and the disappearance of new organizational concepts became a popular academic topic. Several authors (Abrahamson, 1996; Grint, 1997; Benders &Veen, 2001; Vilette, 2003; Bourgeois, 2004; Lang & Ohana, 2012) analyzed the management fashions and debated their effects on organizations that adopt them or that distribute them.

Abrahamson (1996) asserts that management fashions are created and diffused by entrepreneurs, gurus, professional organizations and consultants, popular and business press, business schools and by the academic and semi-academic press. He distinguishes the creators and the users of management fashions. The creators are defined as persons or organizations whose activity is dedicated to the production and the diffusion of a managerial practice. These creators shape the culture and the beliefs of managers in order to convince them that new managerial techniques lead to a rational progress. According to Abrahamson (1996: 257) a management fashion is "*a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress*".

For Warnier and Lecocq (2003), "fashion can be described at a time like a process and a result (Abrahamson 1991, 1996). Fashions are therefore a collective imitation of a novelty (Barthes, 1962), a transitory collective belief (Abrahamson, 1996), a collective manner to act (Strohl, 1999) that exist in many domains and that are valid to one time and to one society".

2.2 The theoretical role of management fashions

New managerial techniques evolved quickly since the middle of 1980. The main managerial fashions "collected" during this period is, among others, the Benchmarking, the Reengineering, the Project Management, the Total Quality Management (TQM), the Supply Chain, the Knowledge Management, the Outsourcing, the Quality Circles, the Coaching, etc.

Benders *et al.* (2007) argued that management fashions are characterized by certain degrees of generality, ambiguity and vagueness (Giroux, 2006), thus users could shape them in different ways and in various contexts. For instance, a concept can move across country borders and get translated or even re-labeled, so that the content of the retrieved articles ultimately become loosely coupled from the original label.

On the other hand, Lang and Ohana (2012) argued that fashions might be considered dangerous for companies and discussed four kinds of danger such as:

- The very short life cycle characterizing management fashions, “something that often translates into the implementation of small measures linking to a whole range of fashions but lacking any coherence among them, meaning that they are more of a disturbance than the source of truly positive effects”.

- "The creation and dissemination of fashions work depending on market mechanisms. At this level, there is the risk that instead of being an effective concept for the companies using it, fashion merely responds to the logic underlying its market".
- "The rhetoric used to promulgate a management fashion can be full of false promises or promote recipes that are counterproductive for companies".
- "The actors creating and implementing a fashion might - if they are mainly pursuing their own interests -endanger a company by implementing a fashion that does not suit its needs".

The literature on management fashions focuses on the role of new managerial techniques and their effects on the organization that adopt them (Abrahamson, 1996; Grint, 1997; Benders et Veen, 2001; Vilette, 2003; Bourgeois, 2004).

A positive effect is indicated by Edge (1997) and Warnier and Lecoq (2003) who argue that the firm which adopts management fashions can improve its performance. For Edge (1997), fashions contribute to give to organizations the possibility to maintain an internal consistency and to develop actions in conformity with the environment requirements. Thus, fashions as Circles Quality, ABC, Reengineering, Benchmarking, etc., contribute to assure a managerial consistency and continuity.

Management fashions are better conceptualized by the production and the consumption of managerial discourses and by the organizational changes led by these discourses.

Benders and Veen (2001) argue that, to convince clients to adopt fashionable concepts, setters of such concepts use discourses that present elements as:

- Improvement of performance;
- Threat of bankruptcy in case of non-adoption;
- The concept was used by famous persons;
- Accentuation on the universality of the concept applicability;
- The concept is easy to understand ;
- Presentation of the concept as being appropriate, innovative and oriented toward the future;
- Interpretative viability.

Rovik (1998) debate the argumentative texture of the texts encouraging the diffusion of a fashion as well as the capacity of these types of publications to convince the reader that he/she has a particular problem face to which the concept offers the solution. However, even though fashionable techniques can be beneficial to the organization that adopts them, it is only for a limit period. Carre (1995) argued that the life cycle of managerial fashions corresponds to the funding of three phases: the discovery, the development and the adoption by concerned public, then the diffusion in a large public that clears either on integration or on abandonment.

Therefore, with the dynamics of the environment, the life cycle of ideas and new managerial techniques becomes short. Lasfargue (2002) takes words of Yves Saint Laurent, the most known designer in the world, who shows that it is not necessary to become attached to fashions and to believe too much. It is necessary to look to fashion with humor, to pass it, to believe sufficiently to give itself the impression to live it, but not too much, to be able to keep its liberty.

Thus, the important number of arguments that pleads for use or adoption of new managerial techniques encourages managers to adopt them. Indeed, several factors can be counted to explain the interest of leaders in such techniques, even though their efficiency is not always proved.

2.3 The interest of managers in fashions

The interest of managers in the new practices is not innate. Indeed, Fimbel and Gomez (2003) argued that the main models taught to the students and distributed by the consultants propose reassuring settings of analysis where the man and his contingencies are ignored or substantially reduced. These models are inspired extensively from the dominating point of view in strategic management field inspired from the Harvard School. From this normative perspective, the retained strategy would depend then solely on objective criteria, from managers' affects. Benders and Veen (2001) affirm that "managers follow consciously or unconsciously fashions without reflection and without taking in consideration the consequences that such act can generate".

Managers worry about the legitimacy of their decisions. They decide and act not to search for the optimum, but to demonstrate that their decisions are in conformity with the market norms. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) noted, managers use discourse about management techniques to show to organizational stakeholders that their organizations conform to institutional norms mandating the use of these techniques.

They want to give the illusion that they behave in a rational manner while adopting new managerial techniques and norms discerned like the most adequate to reach the objectives fixed by the market. When produced and copied, these norms generate the apparition of the management fashions phenomenon.

The quest of rationality and legitimacy by managers is supported by the consultants, main distributors of fashions techniques. Indeed, according to a critical perspective, consultants and managers are causes of numerous bankruptcies of organizations. Rochet (2003) affirms that biggest well-known advisory firms of the planet drove numerous enterprises to the ruin. But, the mistake is not incumbent completely upon them: the power of the manager, his autism, his paranoia or simply his silliness to follow the management fashions without thinking is often the fundamental reason of the disaster.

The fortitude of managers to follow new managerial techniques is associated to a mimetic behavior. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) explain that organizations may be submitted to different shapes of isomorphism that drives to the standardization of organizational structures. This isomorphism can be imposed by a larger institution or can be bound to the mimetic behavior of managers that, in an uncertain environment, reassure themselves while copying the structures of the most effective organizations. They can also take the shape of “normative pressures” exercised by social groups (unions, associations, professions, etc.).

A snowball effect in the application of fashions can be noted. Indeed, managers who have the habitude to use new managerial techniques for years are incited to use some others. Fashions become anchored in the culture of the organization even though their consequences are not always positive.

The implementation or the appropriation of management fashions refer to managers and especially to consultants considered like the main distributors of new managerial techniques. As external intervening elements, consultants tend to produce discourses and symbols in order to legitimize their actions and to convince managers of the credibility and the validity of their interventions.

2.4 The consultants as suppliers of management fashions

Management fashions do not emerge spontaneously as results of inventive managerial behavior (Abrahamson, 1996). Both exogenous (suppliers) and endogenous (followers) actors can explain the diffusion of new managerial ideas in organizations. These actors have a collective belief that new managerial techniques lead rational management progress.

Many authors (Midler, 1986; Fridenson, 1994; Roach, 1996; Abrahamson, 1996; Vilette, 2003) argued that the profession of consultant proves to be a fertile land for fashions and presents the consultants as the main distributors of new managerial techniques.

Consultants do not spend one year without proposing a new panacea, directly imported from Japan or United States. It is the case of the just in time, quality circles, benchmarking, etc. Each of these techniques promised performance and prosperities for managers.

There is an agreement that consultants play an important role in developing, disseminating and translating management techniques and tools into current and desirable fads and fashions (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Abrahamson, 1991; 1996). Consultants use a rhetoric conviction to oblige managers to follow the new managerial techniques provided (Guillaume, 2009).

Then, consultants are considered like a vector that makes management fashions flow in different countries. In fact, too constrained by precise objectives, consultants collect, with selective and fragmentary way, data from organizations implanted all over the world, contributing to make of their transfer a fashion (Fridenson, 1994).

Fincham and Evans (1999) argued that consultants develop their own repertoire and develop ideas into applicable techniques and methodologies to support their services. Kesken (2005) argued that consulting firms have significant role of dissemination of management fads and fashions especially via trainings.

Then, organizations risk becoming a place of experiences of new managerial techniques that are supposed contributing to the success of organizations in developed countries. It is not evident to adopt new managerial practices just because they showed a success in other countries or in other circumstances.

In fact, managers risk to be shut in a vicious circle where they don't find any other exit then to follow management fashions that risk making their enterprise a cemetery of techniques which become, in a lapse of times, obsoletes.

Management fashions are not always useful and their adoption can harm to the critical situation of many organizations. Many authors argued that management fashions are not always efficient, that they serve only to increase the legitimacy and the reputation of organizations adopting them, that they lead to emotional discourses and that they are applied like miracle solutions (Thevenet, 1985; Abrahamson, 1996; Midler, 1996; Staw & Epstein, 2000).

Previous research has provided a theoretical basis to the field of consultation and explained the importance of new managerial techniques and their effect on organizations that adopt them. These studies showed that the main actors responsible for the diffusion of management fashions are consultants and managers, but they do not present explicitly the various factors that contribute to the diffusion of these fashions.

Nevertheless, from this literature review and the ideas developed by authors, we can identify a set of factors that could contribute to the diffusion of managerial fashions in organizations.

3. Method

Considering the lack of relative works to the consulting's domain in Tunisia, we led a qualitative survey by semi-structured interviews. This exploratory method is done in order to acquire a vision as complete as possible of the problem (Evrard *et al.*, 2003).

The interview guide is designed to gather opinions and perceptions of some consultants. It focuses on the implementation conditions of management methods proposed by consultants.

The study was conducted within 13 consulting firms. Consultants were contacted by telephone to obtain their agreement for a possible meeting. On average, the interviews lasted about 90 minutes.

In addition to information collected from consultants interviewed, we attended a training on "marketing and sale of consulting services". This training has allowed us to meet with other experts and to better understand the intervention process. In addition, we spent two days in two different consulting firms in order to observe closely the progress of their work.

For the interviews, we used open and large questions to allow people interrogated to express themselves freely. This helped us to collect information on the factors that encourage the diffusion of management fashions.

A content analysis was done in order to describe the nature and characteristics of consulting offer. The data were encoding in units of analysis that allowed us to group information into categories based on their similarities.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The consulting market

The advice market is not controlled. Actors (consultants and managers) interact in a variable and imprecise manner. This contributes to make difficult the assessment of the output of an intervention.

The disorder that characterizes the consultancy profession lets appear a lot of questions: do consultants sell standards or specific solutions? Is the customer's interest that excels in an advice relation? Are fees, gotten by the consultant, reflecting the effort agreed? What about the quality of solutions offered by consultants? Is there operationalization of the recommendations, Etc.

The result of a consulting mission is difficult to predict due to the complexity and the ambiguousness that characterize this sector and especially in the relationship between client and consultant. Indeed, it is between these two actors that the games around the rules and discourses are the most prominent. Besides, it is the commercial nature of the consultant/client relation that lets appear a certain distrust and reticence about discourses of the two actors in order to appear legitimate and credible.

The fuzzy that reigns around the intervention of a consultant concerns the use of new managerial techniques considered like an escape to the complexity of organizational problems. Indeed, consultants and managers cannot be completely neutral in front of fashions.

4.2 The management consultants and the organizational change

Choosing a consultant is a difficult decision that requires a lot of reflection regarding the adequate person with which confidential information is going to be exchanged. From our investigation, we note the skepticism of managers and the members of the organizations toward consultants. The distrust of managers resides in the nature of the information that they are going to be obliged to reveal.

> *“The members of the organization mistrust the presence of an external person, even though this presence is periodic, they refuse to collaborate to introduce an innovation or a change within the organization. This resistance sometimes appears by insults addressed to consultants” (consultant).*

For the members of the organizations, a consultant's intervention is synonymous of change. In fact, managers must often take decisions that are not accepted easily by the members of the organization. So, the recourse to a consultant allows them to pass the problem of the resistances. Indeed, among the reasons that push the leader to resort to an external service is to pass decisions that faced internal resistances. This report has been invoked by a lot of authors. For example, Boucher (2004) argued that if it is the consultant who recommend changes, this permits to make employees accept the changes easily.

So, the recourse to the services of an external adviser is considered like a symbol from which the manager tries to infiltrate his/her own decisions, to legitimize his/her actions and to influence the behaviors inside the organization.

> As one consultant say*“after starting a survey and in an advanced stage, we discovered, a situation that is not mentioned in the beginning. This made the introduction of corrective actions difficult and impossible”.*

4.3 The problem of consultants legitimacy

Most researches on the management advice industry define the consultant like “a qualified person who brings, in an objective manner, a solution to a particular problem”. All consultants that we met agree on the fact that the main qualities of a "good" consultant are: expertise, objectivity and independence.

Wilkinson (1995) argued that the consultant participates in the communication of the decisions and objectives to the members of the organization. This function deserves a particular attention. In fact, the consultant's work is not reserved to the simple transmission of decisions valued by top managers. He is supposed to communicate recommendations that the top management has the liberty to adopt objectively or not. Our investigation showed that consultants agree with managers to pass decisions that face some resistances by the members of the organization. In this case, the consultant is considered like a mediator between top management and the other members while continuing to maintain the myth of rationality.

Otherwise, consultants are also recognized like being the main distributors of new managerial techniques (Abrahamson, 1996). Indeed, with the complexity and the diversity of the organizational problems and with the obligation to find some missions, they don't hesitate to propose solutions directly imported under pretext that they gave their proof in well-known enterprises.

Accustomed to supervise their words, the consultants don't deliver to anyone the reality of their profession. From our investigation, we discovered that it is difficult to approach the topic of "fashions" with consultants. These specialists speak with prudence on everything that relates to the "deviant practices" of the profession. Although some among them don't deny the existence of deviations that essentially comes from the "impostors" of the profession. Most works and articles treating the management advice don't debate the deviant practices of consultants, specially the adoption of management fashions. It was only from the 90's that this topic began to be studied (Abrahamson, 1996; Vilette, 2003; Boucher, 2004).

Boucher (2004) affirms that the hypothesis that can be evoked is that consultants manipulate "symbols of excellence" (rhetoric, brilliant documentations, methods of scientific inspiration) and resort to the "management of the impressions" in order to create new needs and to let managers be dependent to them.

March (1991) demonstrate that "consultants bring a certain simplification of the world while offering ideas, metaphors, models and words that permit to order a confused world".
Most of the consultants who have been interviewed don't make any allusion to the possibility of using "best practices" or "success stories" for the exercise of their profession. However, the more and more important place that the training activities occupy in the advice industry proves the opposite. This method is adopted by Kesken *et al.* (2008) who measured the volume of discourse. They counted the name of training programs and activities of 72 Human Resources Consulting firms and 79 Management Consulting firms from their web-sites.

Thus, even though the consultants seem to be very prudent to the topics of fashions adoption and don't unveil the realities of the profession, we cannot elude these remarks.

Watson (1994) observed that managers often feel obliged to adopt fashions in order to enter in certain conformity. The consultants play a central role in this process through their discourses where problems and solutions are normalized.

Vilette (2003) argued that consultants use, according to the cases, the whole classic means palette of managerial actions, from the softest to the hardest, from the most attractive to the most menacing, in the limit of what is socially acceptable and supportable, and in the respect of prudence and discretion limits fixed by the customer.

The intangibility of the consultation services and the difficulties met throughout a consultant's intervention can have negative consequences on the consultant's work and on the quality of the service offered.

Many of the respondents in our interviews reported that:

> "*it is possible that there are some likeness in analysis and diagnosis in different organizations. These likenesses have a positive aspect because they help, through repetition, to make better analysis. The repetition is going to serve rightly to strengthen the expertise of the consultant's analysis and to save time for data collection*".

Others affirm that the notion of fashion doesn't suit the profession of consultancy and that, to every problem, they try to find the most adequate solution. They also affirm that consultancy is delicate and that some impostors try to do everything to win a market part.

So, at the end we can argue that consultants and managers are at the origin of the diffusion of new managerial techniques in organizations. In fact, consultants present themselves with ideological speeches to convince the client of the credibility of their actions and the legitimacies of the solutions proposed. A great importance is granted to the rhetoric of conviction that consultants utilize. This rhetoric has for role to make operational the transient collective beliefs while integrating them in organizations.

Managers are anxious to present a good picture of the organization and to legitimize their positioning; they follow consultants who offer them unrealistic promises. They choose the concepts that are presented to solve new problems for which the former concepts were not efficient.

Basing on our literature review and interviews, we propose factors that may contribute and influence the diffusion of management fashions within organizations (figure 1).

Conclusion

The phenomena of fashions touch many sectors. The source of new managerial techniques diffusion can be an internal source, that means it comes from a decision that emanate from managers who looks for the miracle solution in order to pass a problematic situation; as it can come from an external actor, as consultants, who are considered as the main setters of fashions in management field.

Thus, our research tried to give a first sight of factors that may contribute to the diffusion of management fashions during a consulting mission. Factors linked to discourses of consultants, their ways to convince and their ability to present themselves as credible are important aspects that enable the diffusion of management fashions. Also, to preserve a nice image of themselves and their firms, many managers favor these behaviors and thus encourage the dissemination of such fashions.

From a theoretical perspective, where previous researches studied how management fashions are diffused and what are their organizational effects, this research contributed to identify explicitly factors that influence dissemination of management fashions. Also, this research emphasized on dissemination during a particular context as consulting missions since consultants are considered as the main setters of management fashions. These factors may be useful to develop research models presenting the determinants of such dissemination.

From a managerial perspective, knowing these factors would help business managers to have more control on management fashions diffusion since some of these fashions are not so benefic for organizations. As developed basing on interviews with consultants in a developing country context (Tunisia), these factors would be specifically useful for organizations in such context where consulting is still emergent and where the consultant/client relation is still fuzzy and problematic.

However, due to its exploratory nature, this study needs to be supported by further researches. Indeed, it is difficult to verify closely the validity of the research results which cannot be generalized to all contexts. Also, these results are based only on the consultants' point of view which is insufficient to identify all factors linked to management fashions diffusion. Thus, further researches are needed to identify and test empirically the determinants of management fashions diffusion. It would be also necessary in future researches to take into account the managers' point of view to give more significant results.

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Figure

Figure 1: Factors contributing and influencing the diffusion of management fashions