Management fashion as proto-professionalisation: the case of Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT

The article argues that management fashions can be interpreted as processes of emerging professionalisation around particular bodies of management expertise. By integrating insights from research on professions and professionalisation, management fashions are analysed as attempts by specific groups within organisations to establish themselves as professionals within specific niches of organisational intervention and practice. This process is supported by corresponding developments in the environment of the organisations that help legitimate the newly emerging expertise. This view accounts for the social-integrative dimension of management fashion, referring to the social interaction, co-operation and conflict among groups, an aspect largely neglected by mainstream management fashion theory. The framework is tested with a study of a particular management fashion, knowledge management. Data are presented on publishing activity, organisational adoption in large UK organisations and developments in the supra-organisational UK environment. The results confirm the pertinence of the proto-professionalisation hypothesis in the case of knowledge management.
INTRODUCTION

Organisation concepts are prescriptive frameworks applied within efforts of organizational design or organizational change (cf. Benders and van Veen 2001). As such, they constitute management knowledge, i.e. a body of theories and concepts used by practitioners to manage and shape organizations. But management knowledge is recognised as not always effective in terms of inducing lasting effects on organisational structures and processes, and observers have hence pointed to a gap persisting between rhetoric and organisational reality (Zbaracki 1998). As Repenning and Sterman (2002) argue, most organisations seem incapable of capitalising on organisation concepts such as TQM although they have the potential to generate considerable benefits.

Nevertheless, specific organisation concepts, similar to social movements, experience boosts of attention from managers at specific points in time while others recede into the background. The concept of ‘management fashion’ has been proposed to conceptualise the transitory life of particular organisation concepts, as they emerge, diffuse and eventually fade (Abrahamson 1996). Related research considers the role of specific agents, such as ‘management gurus’ (Collins 2005, Jackson 2001, Clark and Salaman 1996), and the discursive and rhetorical features that underlie the popularity of management recipes and publications (Røvik 2002, Kieser 1997).

Management fashion theory has mainly used two explanatory principles for the surge, diffusion and downturn of fashionable concepts. The first principle is ceremonial legitimacy, taken from neo-institutionalist theory, implying that managers choose to adopt and discard fashionable organisation concepts because of pressure from the institutional environment of their organisations (Meyer and Rowan 1977). We refer to this as the *symbolic* aspect of management fashions. The second principle is ‘real
learning’ (Abramowitz 1986), meaning that concepts are adopted because of specific objective pressures in the economic environment (Carson et al 2000) or discarded because of their failure to produce the expected benefits (Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999). We refer to this as the instrumental-adaptive aspect of management fashions (Friedland and Alford 1991).

However, management fashion theory has failed to provide a convincing account of the actual organisational processes that determine the adoption and abandonment of fashionable organisation concepts. One of the principal reasons for this lies in its reliance on bibliometric data (Abrahamson 1999) or various types of discourse analysis (Røvik 2002) for empirical analysis. Although this has been necessary and desirable for constructing a macro-picture of fashion dynamics, the approach has left questions unanswered. Most prominently, it is still unclear as to what degree and when management fashions ‘live on’ as actual practices within organisations even though they experience a discursive downturn. Several contributors to the management fashion debate have therefore called for research that links bibliometric evidence to micro and meso-level research on organisational adoption (Spell 1999, Benders and van Veen 2001, Scarbrough and Swan 2001).

In this paper, we propose a theoretical framework that allows us to analyse the dynamics of management fashions by taking into account organisational adoption process. This requires us to shed light on the social-integrative aspects of fashions, referring to the social interaction, co-operation and conflict among groups, in addition to the symbolic and instrumental-adaptive aspects mentioned above.

Specifically, we interpret the diffusion of management fashions as proto-professionalisation whereby the suffix ‘proto’ denotes the early-stage and provisional
nature of the process. By this we mean that strategies aimed at introducing new organisation concepts are informed by attempts to establish the underlying new management expertise as *professional* expertise owned by specific groups. We hence interpret a fashion as an early stage of a professionalisation process where it is still unclear whether this will succeed and result in the institutionalisation of a profession.

This implies the diffusion of a fashion will go hand in hand with the formation of a new professional group who develops a vested interest in the survival and expansion of the new body of management expertise. Potentially, this might lead these groups to compete with other incumbent professional groups for specific niches of management interventions. Equally, the failure of a management fashion might be related to the fact that the newly emerging proto-profession has failed to establish itself as legitimate against other groups and vis-à-vis senior management. Among other things, this will also depend on the degree to which the newly emerging profession is supported within the environment of organisations, as traditionally professions are rooted in strong extra-organisational arrangements. We therefore develop our framework by integrating the literature on professions and professionalisation (e.g. Abott 1988) into our analysis.

We illustrate our framework with a study on a specific management fashion, knowledge management (KM). KM has emerged in the mid-1990s and shows characteristics of a management fashion (Raub and Rüling 2001, Ponzi and Koenig 2002, Scarbrough 2002). With its roots in artificial intelligence (AI) and expert systems during the 1980s, it was appropriated by information systems providers and professionals in the mid-1990 and then converted into a broader management practice aimed at enhancing the creation, sharing and exploitation of knowledge within organisations (Scarbrough 2002). Since then, a wide spectrum of management practices and interventions have
been subsumed under the label (Binney, 2001, Earl 2001) and organisations have experimented with various approaches (Thompson and Walsham 2004).

KM constitutes a suitable case for our purpose because its evolution shows strong aspects of proto-professionalisation both on the organisational and supra-organisational levels. There has been considerable debate in academia and among practitioners on what KM actually is (Hazlett 2005, Wilson 2002, Schultze and Stabell 2004). This reflects the semantic ambiguity inherent in many management fashions (Benders and van Veen 2001), although this is not emphasised in mainstream management fashion theory. While we do not intend to enter the definitional debate on KM, we interpret this as a reflection of the struggle among different emerging groups and jurisdictions claiming their stakes. Further below, we present data both on the level of organisational adoption as well as the supra-organisational context for the evolution of KM to illustrate our point of proto-professionalisation. This allows us to uncover moments that are overlooked by the aggregate analyses proposed by mainstream management fashion theory and take into account the role of fashions for professionalisation projects pursued by specific groups. But we are also in the position to reject the ‘anything goes’ views proposed by critics perhaps excessively emphasising the semantic ambiguity and interpretive viability of management fashions (Bender and van Veen 2001, Kieser 1997) by pointing to their ‘ownership’ by emerging professional groups.

The paper is structured as follows. The theoretical section develops the argument by reviewing the literature on management fashions and identifying its major points of critique. We then introduce the concept of professionalisation by referring to research on the professions. This results in a framework that will then apply to our case study of KM as a management fashion. After describing our methodological approach, we
present and discuss data on two levels: the organisational level and the supra-organisational level. We use bibliometric data and our own case study material on 10 large UK organisations to describe the adoption and evolution of KM on the organisational level, while we analyse the institutional environment to explore development in the environment of adopting organisations. For both levels, we emphasise moments of professionalisation in the evolution of the management fashion. We conclude that our theoretical assumptions are largely confirmed for the case of KM and provide an agenda for further research.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A CRITIQUE OF MANAGEMENT FASHION THEORY

The concept of management fashion was popularised by Abrahamson who uses neo-institutionalist theory to explain why managers adopt organisation concepts despite uncertainties around their techno-economic benefits (Abrahamson 1991, 1996, Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999). Managers adopt fashionable organisation concepts because they constitute ceremonial devices providing rational-instrumental legitimacy by building into institutionalised norms of progress (Abrahamson, 1996). The theory, empirically based on bibliometric analysis, suggests that just as isomorphic pressures can significantly influence the diffusion of new management ideas, it can also influence their collapse as organisations, via managerial discourse, quickly learn about failed initiatives and stop using the underlying managerial practice (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

Abrahamson points to the important role of the fashion-setting community, consisting of consulting firms, management gurus, publishers and business schools that perform as
carriers (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002) of the fashionable organisation concepts. They are responsible for the ‘supply’ of management fashions that is divided into four phases: creation, selection, processing and dissemination (Abrahamson, 1996). In empirical terms, these process stages and various other characteristics of management fashions are traced on the basis of bibliometric analyses of print media content, resulting in the typical bell-shaped curve representing the diffusion patterns of management fashions over time (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). One of the central empirical results obtained is that the early phase of management fashion diffusion is characterised by emotionally charged and enthusiastic discourse while the fashion downturn is dominated by more rational and reasoned discourse. This indicates a pattern of learning whereby superstitious learning (Argyris and Schön 1978) is superseded by rational learning when the fashionable organisation concept does not deliver what it promised.

Abrahamson’s work has spawned wider interest in management fashions, resulting in more empirical work on various management fashions (Carson et al 2000) as well as critical theoretical appraisals (Kieser 1997, Benders and van Veen 2001). The latter type of work in particular has challenged some of the implicit assumptions and implications of the original concept. Building on this literature, mainstream management fashion theory can be criticised from several angles. The main arguments are summarised in the following, illustrating that some of the criticisms are more valid than others.

Firstly, management fashion theory operationalises the diffusion of organisation concepts by using bibliometric data on print media publications. The theory has therefore been criticised for not providing direct empirical evidence on the actual
adoption of management fashions within organisations (Swan 2004, Clark 2004, Benders and van Veen 2001). The critics allege that it is simply assumed that there is a direct correlation between the actual diffusion of a fashion and the discourse that accompanies. The query is essentially over the validity of the construct, i.e. how close what is being measured empirically is to what is intended to be measured.

For instance, it could be argued that strong publishing activity is linked to increased efforts on the part of the fashion supply side, i.e. consultants and gurus, to popularise the fashion that could arguably sometimes fail and sometimes be successful. As Clark (2004) points out, publishers have incentives to push fashions in ways that might not necessarily mirror or induce their actual organisational diffusion. In turn, diminishing publishing activity does not necessarily indicate that an organisation concept is not being deployed any more and the underlying ideas are dismissed (Benders and Van Veen 2001).

While in theory these arguments are correct, it is an empirical question whether bibliometric data provide a good proxy for the actual diffusion of a management fashion. In this respect, in defence of Abrahamson and Fairchild, they do make efforts to triangulate publishing data with secondary adoption data, as for instance on the diffusion of quality circles (1999: 720-1). The critics Benders and van Veen (2001: 42) acknowledge themselves that the publication activity and organisational adoption are ‘loosely coupled’. Admittedly, aggregate secondary data on adoption are used but they show a close correlation between the adoption and number of articles published although, as the authors concede, no causal direction can be established. However, this close correlation provides some legitimacy to using bibliometric data as proxy of the
diffusion of management fashions. We can therefore conclude that – while awaiting further proof – validity concerns alone fail to undermine management fashion theory.

A second criticism of management fashion theory relates to its reliance on what is basically a linear model of diffusion inspired by Rogers’ (1983) framework. At close scrutiny, the framework privileges the diffusion stage of fashions, thereby neglecting their creation and adaptation on the part of the fashion suppliers (Clark 2004). At the same time, managers tend to be depicted as mere consumers as opposed to, as one might reasonably argue, co-producers of the fashion discourse (Clark and Greatbatch 2002). Benders and van Veen (2001) argue that managers are not simply recipients of fashionable organisation concepts, such as Business Process Re-engineering, but they make ‘active use of a concept’. By using their own judgement, they will ‘enact’ fashionable concepts in ways that suit their own interests (Kieser 1997). As Kieser argues, the model of an ‘arena’ where different groups of participants such as consultants, managers, publishers and others engage in co-operative games might provide a better metaphor than the diffusion model (ibid).

Mainstream management fashion theory is vulnerable to critiques of this kind because it concentrates on an aggregate level of data analysis and thereby neglects the micro-dimension of fashions and their adoption and adaptation within organisations. While aggregate data on organisational adoption are used, it does not provide insight in how fashionable organisation concepts are interpreted and manipulated by their adopters and provide little insight as to whether adoption is homogenous or results in a variety of diverging de-facto adoptions.

This leads to a third point of criticism. The theory effectively propagates a correspondence theory, positing an unequivocal correspondence between the label of a
fashion, and its implementation within organisations. In Raub and Rüling’s (2001: 116) formulation, the management fashion approach is based on an ‘outside analysis of fashion’. The primary interest is in analyzing the diffusion of a concept from its initial competition with other concepts, occupying a niche to its eventual displacement. But outside analyses assume that management fashion niches are homogeneous in the sense that the concept will correspond to a certain management practice in an unequivocal fashion.

These critiques use concepts such as interpretive viability (Benders and van Veen 2001), interpretive flexibility (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987) or ‘malleability’ and ‘plasticity’ (Swan 2004) to describe the semantic ambiguity inherent in any management fashion concept, albeit to different degrees. Adopters have therefore a certain amount of discretion as to how they choose to interpret the concept and enact it within their own organisations. Organisational members therefore adopt management fashions opportunistically, following a garbage-can logic (Cohen et al 1972), for instance to legitimate organisational re-structuring programmes in collaboration with consultants (Kieser 1997, Benders and van Veen 2001). However, these critiques tend to overestimate the ‘degrees of freedom’ involved in such garbage can choice; as we will argue more below, such opportunistic choice will be limited by the fact that it will often be only certain professional groups that will legitimately be able to deploy a fashionable organisation concept.

Finally, there is a fourth point of criticism less often mentioned by the commentators on the management fashion literature. This concerns the degree to which fashions constitute stakes within the intraorganisational interaction between functional or professional groups In their analysis of KM, Raub and Rüling (2001) argue that
different professional communities gather around the KM concept and compete for limited organizational resources. They show that there are competing discourses within a management fashion that shape it from within (ibid: 116).

The authors claim that the co-existence of these potentially rival discourses indicates that there is a struggle between different speech communities (Barley et al 1988) over defining what constitutes a legitimate discourse and attracting organizational resource. However, the authors find little evidence for negative rhetoric, such as ‘debunking’ (Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999) but, rather, what they call ‘piggybacking’, with the different protagonists attempting to benefit from the general interest in the theme.

Complementary to Raub and Rüling’s argument, Scarbrough and Swan (2001) illustrate that different organisation concepts are rooted and re-produced within different professionally or functionally defined communities. They illustrate the relative lack of overlap between the discourses of KM and the ‘Learning Organisation’, arguing that this is due to the path-dependent nature of the discourses created and reproduced within different communities. They note a ‘striking feature of KM, BPR and LO discourse is the lack of any cross-fertilization or learning transfer from one discourse to another’ (ibid: 9). This indicates that management fashions are appropriated and owned by specific groups within organisations, and not by organisations as such, an assumption implicit in mainstream management fashion literature.

Admittedly, both works do not look at actual management practices but are based on bibliometric data with a particular focus on the distribution of articles across journals owned and read by different professional communities. Nevertheless, these authors’ works point to an important limitation of the management fashion concept, namely the
implicit assumption that fashions are adopted and then discarded by organisations as a whole.

This article intends to build on this work but proposes a radical extension of their argument by exploring the role of fashion concepts in the constitution and reproduction of these groups. More specifically, we interpret fashionable organisation concepts as the basis of emerging professional identities of specific groups within organisations. Because management fashions, as organisation concepts, are always linked to the development of specialist expertise by those that position themselves as their propagators and implementers, they can serve as symbolic resource for the constitution of a group identity around that specialist expertise. In other words, fashionable organisation concepts provide opportunities for *professionalisation* as much as they can threaten the role and status of existing professional groups.

This perspective introduces a dimension into the discussion of management fashion that has so far been largely neglected, i.e. the role of specific groups as intra-organisational ‘carriers’ (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002) of fashionable management expertise. Importantly, it points to an additional factor to be considered when studying the transitory character of management fashions: The rise and fall of fashions will be linked to the success and failure of specific groups in co-developing, supporting, defending and institutionalising a body of management expertise around a specific organisation concept.

Notably, this perspective provides a possible explanation for the fading of management fashions, a particularly contested question. Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999), for instance, conclude that the downturn of fashions is characterised by rational discourse
and ‘real learning’ (Abramovitz 1986) on the part of the participants who recognise the limitations of the organisation concept in question and will therefore abandon it.

Other explanations for declining fashion abound. In line with fashion theory, as for instance applicable to women’s clothing, one can argue that fashions wear out though excessive use (Kieser 1997). Once the majority has jumped onto the band wagon, the fashion is no longer attractive to the early adopters and it loses its power to produce legitimacy for the opinion leaders. As Benders and van Veen (2001: 43) point out, this might be due to the fact that management fashions are most often operationalised via publishing activity. Although a topic might therefore not be fashionable any more to be written about, practitioners might find the underlying organisation concept still attractive and continue to apply it in practice. But once this effect is accounted for, Benders and van Veen argue that the wearing out of fashions can indeed be linked to their limited effectiveness in achieving organisational goals – in line with Abrahamson and Fairchild’s results – particularly in the later stages of a fashion’s life when it gets diluted to include a broad range of activities all subsumed under the original label.

All these arguments emphasise either instrumental-adaptive aspects, i.e. a fashion fades because the underlying concept does not work, or cultural-symbolic aspects, i.e. a fashion fades because it loses attractiveness to the fashionable. They fail therefore to take into account social-integrative aspects, referring to the social interaction, cooperation and conflict among groups. By considering the role of fashions for professionalisation projects pursued by specific groups, we aim to shed light on this aspect of management fashion and are therefore in the position to offer an additional explanation as to why fashions fade. We suspect fashions can fade because the underlying professionalisation projects fail. In order to explicate our argument we need
to develop a conceptual framework of professionalisation processes which is outlined in
the next section.

THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF MANAGEMENT EXPERTISE

While the classic professional is a self-employed service provider aimed at fulfilling a
widely spread need, in reality many professionals work within organisations (Harries-
Jenkins, G 1970). Many administrative, technical and managerial positions in
organisations are held by staff with professional sets of competencies and orientations.
Apart from the classical professions, law and medicine, organisations are populated by
accountants (Willmott 1996), personnel managers, marketers (Whittington and Whipp
1990), project managers (Hodgson 2002) and IT professionals who make authoritative
claims to carry out certain tasks on the basis of generally recognised canons of
knowledge and sets of competencies.

The literature has produced several theories of professions of which the most important
are: (a) trait theory, characterising professions inductively on the basis of certain
identifiable traits of the professional figures and their work; (b) a functionalist
perspective that focuses on the role of professions for society as a whole; (c) a critical
perspective emphasising the power and social status of professions and their role for the
capitalist system, (d) an interactionist perspective concentrating on the level of
individuality and the enactment of professional knowledge on the part of the
professionals (Willmott 1986).

While it is beyond the remit of this paper to discuss the merits of these approaches, a
syncretic working definition is provided to fit the purpose pursued here. We go beyond
the restrictive and taxonomic approach of trait theory by adopting Abott’s rather
inclusive definition of professions as ‘exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases’ (Abott 1988: 8). We avoid the functionalist perspective because we do not intend to generically analyse professions in society but we adopt insights from the critical and interactional perspective because of their emphases on power and identity.

Accordingly, we emphasise the following aspects of the professions and professional work.

First, professions have a specific domain of specialist expertise that is applied to activities aimed at solving an identified set of problems. This is the ‘technical’ aspect of professional work (Wilensky 1964). Such knowledge is often standardised via an official canon of expertise, resulting in prescriptive rules on ‘good practice’ and reproduced through standardised training schemes.

Second, professions tend to have a discursive foundation that manifests itself in various ways. Professionals tend to share a common professional identity (Robertson et al 2003), understood as a stable constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that are used by subjects to define themselves in their professional role (Schein 1978) although this can be an adaptive process whereby subjects experimentally assume provisional identities (Ibarra 1999). Identity constructions can be used by members of professional groups to gain legitimacy for carrying out certain tasks and generally ‘get by’ in their dealings with colleagues and clients (Willmott 1986). Over time, professions construct ‘professional ideologies’ (Eliot 1973) that idealise the role of the profession for adhering to values generally recognized in society and fulfilling organizational or societal needs that go beyond specific technical requirements.
Third, professions tend to be organised on a supra-organisational and societal scale. They will often form professional associations who present their interest within the policy-making process and provide training and advice to members. Professional organisations often act as cartels by controlling the supply of newly joining professionals and defending the profession’s stake against competing professions or other service providers (Abott 1986).

The overall configuration established by the confluence of expertise domains, discursive features and societal arrangements is aptly characterized by Abbott (1988) as ‘jurisdiction’, defined as the exclusive social space within which the profession operates.

As many professions operate within organisations, there are good reasons for using the insights provided by the theory of professions to understand the emergence of specialised groups with particular roles within large organisations. This is despite the tensions that can arise between professions’ emphasis on autonomy and client-orientation and the logic of organisational contexts characterised by hierarchies and demands on a division of labour that might cut across the defined boundaries of professional competencies (Freidson 1968). Child et al (1983) argue, with reference to Johnson (1972), that particularly in Anglo-Saxon white collar contexts, occupational specialisation often shows distinct features of professionalisation. This results in the tendency to isolate separable tasks and jobs and claim them as the specialist domain of the members of professions. Thus, many management specialisations, such as accountants, personnel managers or management services and para-technical staff functions, have acquired features of professional organisation and legitimacy (Child et al 1983: 68).
In light of these considerations, it is pertinent to apply the theory of the professions to the phenomenon of management fashions by reading them as transitory attempts to establish legitimate professionalised management expertise around specific organisation concepts. We take inspiration from Abbott’s work (1988) that rejects sequential concepts of the evolution of professions (such Wilensky 1964) as in favour of a theory that sees professions move in stop and go fashion, driven by conflict with others, and continuously expanding and contracting domains. In other words, we read management fashions as episodes of proto-professionalisation.

If our intuition is correct, then the organisational adoption of management fashions will exhibit those features of professionalisation processes we identified above. To summarise our argument, we can expect to find the following developments accompanying the life cycle of a management fashion.

The differentiation of a body of expertise, aimed at addressing a specific set of organisational problems and claiming a new functional niche within organisations

The emergence of a discursive framework around a body of expertise, resulting in a professional ideology around the value and utility of the expertise in question and associated identities.

Activities aimed at anchoring the emerging body of expertise within the environment of organisations; this will involve collective action among the holders of the specific expertise, criss-crossing organisational boundaries and resulting in the emergence of interest groups representing the potential profession.

In the remainder of the paper, we test our argument by using evidence on a specific management fashion, Knowledge Management. Throughout this exercise, we use the
elements of professionalisation identified above as criteria for examining whether the emergence of KM as a fashion can really be read as such a process. In doing so, one needs to acknowledge that these elements are likely to be manifest only tentatively and incompletely, given the temporary nature of a fashion and, hence, our argument about proto-professionalisation.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We use both primary and secondary data on three distinct bodies of empirical evidence to support our argument: bibliometric evidence on KM as a management fashion, the adoption of KM practices within organisations, and KM-related developments in the environment of organisations (e.g. carriers, professional organisations).

Our primary data comes in two parts: interview-based material on the organisational adoption of KM with specific organisations, and the results of desk-based research resulting in a collection of hard-copy and electronic materials on the institutional environment of KM adoption within an UK context.

In order to study organisational adoption of KM, longitudinal data were collected over an 18-month period between November 2001 and July 2003 on the appropriation of KM within 10 large UK-based organisations. All organisations involved in this research were in the process of implementing KM initiatives. The organisations each employ between 10,000 and 100,000 employees and are all but one are associated with the private sector. All are UK-based but in several cases employees are dispersed across the world.

Formal semi-structured interviews (N=40) lasting 1.5 hours on average were conducted in each of the firms with individuals responsible for KM initiatives. All interviews were
taped and transcribed. Following these interviews, a summary assessment of knowledge practices was created for each organisation and presented to their KM practitioners. Feedback was then incorporated into the analysis. In addition, quarterly workshops were held throughout this period with all key individuals responsible for implementation in each of these organisations, providing further data on the appropriation process as it has unfolded. The choice of organisations is not intended to provide a representative picture of KM within the UK but serves to provide a qualified understanding of the appropriation of KM within organisations across a number of sectors.

As for bibliographic evidence, we rely on the results of research published by a series of authors independently working from each other, as referenced below. Our evidence on the institutional environment of Knowledge Management is derived from interviews, informal interaction with practitioners and KM experts as well as desk-based research.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**DIFFERENTIATING KM AS A BODY OF EXPERTISE**

Above, we reasoned that an emerging professionalisation project will consist in establishing a body of expertise that is differentiated from existing incumbent professions and will form the basis of a potential new professional jurisdiction.

Regarding the emergence of a body of expertise, the evidence shows a movement from a strictly technical activity – managing knowledge via information systems ranging from artificial intelligence tools to simple ‘knowledge repositories’ – towards a strong emphasis on KM as a specialist management discipline. While the former activities
remained with the broader remits of information science, the latter claimed to be able to play an important role in organisations.

This shift is demonstrated both by bibliographic and organisation-level data. Bibliometric data reveal that KM shows the typical bell-shaped diffusion pattern of a management fashion. Publishing activity surged in the mid-nineties to reach a peak in approximately 2001, according to several authors’ data (Gu 2004, Koenig 2004, Ponzi & Koenig 2002). The data also seem to suggest that the popularity of KM might already have been in decline after approximately 2002 (Gu 2004, Koenig 2004, Swan et al, 2002) although it is perhaps premature to judge the precise shape and extent of its downturn.

More importantly, several researchers have analysed the professional dynamics of KM by exploring the type of publications used for articles about KM and their association with specific disciplines and professional communities. The data show that when KM was on the rise in the mid 1990s, the IT profession were the dominant professional group both in terms of the supply of, and demand for, KM ‘solutions’ (Scarbrough et al, 1999, Raub and Ruling, 2001). The implications of this, with respect to the implementation of KM in firms were that IT departments typically took the lead in implementation projects and primarily adopted a codification strategy or ‘cognitive’ approach (Hansen et al, 1999, Scarbrough et al, 1999). This was characterised by an emphasis on the purchase and development of information systems to support the creation, transfer and application of knowledge across the organisations.

As the popularity of KM rose, the field of business and management entered the arena as an important outlet for the discussion of KM issues. Raub and Rüling (2001) find that from the mid-nineties onwards, publications about KM tend to cluster in two main
distinct groups, as measured both by journal affiliation and the type of issues discussed:
Information technology and systems, on the one hand, and ‘general management’, on the other. Whereas the former includes topics such as IT systems, IT tools and KM systems, the latter is concerned with themes such as learning, KM processes and strategic implications of KM. These results are widely confirmed by Ponzi and Koenig’s (2002).

The top level evidence provided by these bibliometric analyses illustrate the attempts to open up business and management audiences for the KM concept that was originally ‘imported’ from the information sciences. This divide within KM is further confirmed by other commentators on the development of the KM field (Boisot and MacMillan 2004, Hazlett, McAdam and Gallagher 2005).

We find a similar pattern emerging from our organization-level data. To analyse the dynamic aspects of KM development across our case studies, KM initiatives were accounted for separately for two periods, 1999-2001 (t1) and 2001-2003 (t2) (Table 1). The most common type of initiatives pursued in t1 was the development of local and corporate intranets which can be defined as Internet-technology-based platforms for information storage and exchange. ‘Yellow page’ directories and expertise search applications can be seen as part of such platforms although they were – following pioneer implementations within companies such as BP (Collison 1999) – usually pursued as projects in their own right. The overarching majority of projects pursued in t1 had a strong technical focus and primarily consisted of IT implementations.

In t2, again a number of projects consisted of IT implementations, with a stronger emphasis on ‘genuine’ KM applications, such as the development of discussion forums and self-maintained Yellow Pages. However, in addition an increasing interest in
managerial interventions can be registered, involving the introduction of CoPs, knowledge sharing processes and competency development. Comments made during interviews and workshops emphasised that in view of the relative failure of IT implementations to produce the expected results in all firms in t1, the behavioural dimensions of knowledge sharing were now receiving increased attention. This meant KM was to focus on introducing, changing or improving processes and behavioural modes within the organisation, to achieve goals such as cross-departmental learning, learning capture from projects, and knowledge sharing across employees engaged with similar tasks. In addition to their technical expertise, KM practitioners had hence to engage in novel activities such as change management, internal consulting and evangelizing as part of applying their specialist expertise.

Despite the move towards claiming a broader portfolio of tasks, the developments nevertheless indicate a specialisation and differentiation with respect to the whole of the ‘KM universe’ as described in the literature (Binney 2001, Earl 2001). Certain activities do not appear to have widely diffused, such as asset management - the commercial exploitation of Intellectual Property - or ‘spatial’ approaches to KM, linking work practices, work spaces and knowledge sharing. Other activities, such as those informed by ‘analytical’ approaches according to Binney’s categorisation (e.g. Data Warehousing), are widely practised but are not usually referred to under the label of ‘KM’ and hence not claimed by KM practitioners as being under their remit.

Summarising, our evidence indicates that across our sample there was a sustained effort on the part of KM practitioners to differentiate their mandate by adding specific management practices to their existing technical portfolio. From beginnings rooted in the perhaps naïve belief that large ‘knowledge systems’ could be used for managing,
capturing and sharing the ‘knowledge’ of organisations, KM became concerned with interventions aimed at changing behaviours, practices and processes and facilitating social learning without the detour of codification. This meant it started to converge into a new management discipline in its own right, although ‘bread and butter’ such as the introduction of generic intranets still often formed part of the KM teams’ agenda. Our evidence shows a convergence towards a relatively narrow set of change and learning-related initiatives, certainly if compared to the breadth of what is portrayed as ‘KM’ by the business literature. For instance, a book authored by McKinsey consultants identifies no less than 139 techniques in the course of a survey of KM practices within large organisations (Kluge, Stein et al. 2001). This indicates that KM practitioners were concerned to create a niche for themselves within their organisations where they had to compete both against more established holders of expertise and attain senior management attention. In a fashion typical for the jurisdictional struggles among professions, this also involved developing first elements of a professional ideology, as illustrated in the next section.

**CREATING AN ORGANISATIONAL ROLE FOR KM**

Our second criterion indicated the emergence of a professional discourse as an element of professionalisation. Within the context of organisations, this is likely to take the form of arguments around the benefits of the new body of expertise for the organisation as a whole. In this respect, there were sustained efforts on the part of KM practitioners to continually re-iterate the value of KM for the organisation as a whole, and hence establish the building stones of an incipient professional ideology. To paraphrase a common argument, many defended the importance of KM in the light of the importance
of ‘knowledge’ as crucial competitive asset of organisations in a hyper-competitive context.

The following statement from an internal document of a major electronics company illustrates the point: ‘Never has a cliché been more apt: in today's business world, knowledge is power. The fast track to success seems to lie in finding new ways of managing and utilizing the knowledge companies have in-house.’

KM was seen as contributing to wider organisational goals in several ways. Some managers put major emphasis on the contribution of KM to their organisation’s effectiveness. By ‘re-using’ knowledge, and ensuring everybody was able to access the ‘right knowledge at the right time’, organisations were expected to be able to realise savings and avoid costly errors (manager, construction company). “We cannot go on and continuously re-invent the wheel. KM helps us re-use knowledge and therefore save costs” (Manager, Utility). Others saw KM as contributing to specific corporate strategic objectives: “We are trying to contribute to the bigger picture. We are not promoting KM as just another big initiative. KM is fundamental to our people strategy.” (Chief Knowledge Officer, telecoms company).

These discourses can be interpreted as attempts to establish KM within the repertoire of organisational functions. Organisationally, this was reflected in the growing presence of knowledge management teams, often lead by a Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO), in many organisations (Earl and Scott 1999, Raub and Rüling 2002). However, at the same time, the KM professionals faced considerable challenges in making themselves heard, indicating the incomplete status of institutionalisation of the KM discourse. Notably, they were constantly struggling to make a business case for KM activities. Senior management were always looking for clear ‘metrics’ and ROI (return on investment)
and were reluctant to sponsor initiatives without any demonstration of tangible outcomes. This is naturally problematic with respect to ‘soft’ issues such as improving knowledge sharing, developing a learning culture which KM practitioners had just begun to advocate. The fact that the majority of KM practitioners had no direct HR or organisational development expertise, meant that they lacked the necessary skills to be able to successfully articulate the benefits associated with the introduction of such initiatives. Largely as a result of this problem and despite the fact that the majority of organisations in our study had been pursuing KM initiatives for at least four years, the general level of awareness of KM across organisations was considered a major challenge by practitioners (Knowledge & Innovation Network 2002).

Concluding, the establishment of KM as body of expertise was accompanied by attempts to install and widen its role in the wider context of the organisations, indicating a further element of tentative professionalisation. We now turn to discuss various KM-related activities in the wider environment of organisations.

INSTITUTIONALISING KM

Among the processes accompanying the institutionalisation of management expertise, we can distinguish between two types of environmental processes. Firstly, there are the typical ‘carriers’ of management knowledge (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall 2002), such as business schools, management consultancies and media companies. Secondly, there is explicitly professionally oriented, supra-organisation collective action, notably the activities of professional bodies and standard-setting organisations.

As to the first type, there was considerable activity among the traditional carriers in the attempt to contribute to construct and support KM as a novel body of management
expertise. This is indicated by a wave of new KM courses offered by Business Schools, the launch of new journals and ‘guru’ books, the publications of reports by consultancies, and an inflation of practitioner-oriented conferences between 1995 and 2002. In light of our specific objective in this paper, however, we focus on the second type, i.e. professionalisation and professional group formation via standards bodies, professional bodies and inter-organisational forums.

In this respect, we observed several developments of relevance to our argument. The British Standards Institution (BSI) embarked on some initial steps towards a standardisation of KM as management practice around 2003. The BSI intends to provide ‘world class leadership in the understanding, practice and development of the field of Knowledge Management’ (Farmer 2003: 4). The first output of this BSI initiative, a document entitled ‘Knowledge Management PAS 2001: A Guide to Good Practice’ was the first within the field of KM to be released by a standards body. A series of further ‘Published Documents’ (as opposed to full ‘British Standards’) – sponsored by the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) – was commissioned. The EU standards body, CEN, has also recently launched a workshop series aimed at investigating the possibility of KM standards under the header of ‘Information Society Standardization System’.

In addition, a series of existing and newly founded professional bodies was attempting to occupy the potentially emerging KM space. The CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) was a professional organisation established in 2002 through a merger of the Institute of Information Scientists (IIS) and the Library Association (LA). By organising events and courses, CILIP was active in establishing itself as a body relevant to KM practitioners. With over 2000 corporate members
globally, Aslib was another relevant UK-based professional body. This body, founded in 1924, promoted its offering under the following strap-line: ‘Information management: knowledge for the information age’. One of its special interest groups, Aslib IRM (Information Resources Management) Network, also changed its name to the Aslib Knowledge and Information Management Network (Aslib KIMNET) as of January 2003. Another body, KMPro, was established in 2000 and promoted itself as the ‘Knowledge and Innovation Management Professional Society; recruitment efforts were made in various countries, including the UK, similarly to the US-based body Knowledge Management Professionals Association (KMPA). Both associations provided training and certification services for KM practitioners.

Finally, the desire on the part of KM practitioners to learn about practices adopted in other organisations and to establish themselves as a professional group was demonstrated by the emergence of various KM-focused forums in the UK. Most of these forums were run by universities, such as the Henley KM forum, the London Knowledge Network, and the Knowledge & Innovation Network. Our own review of the membership of these forums, suggests that KM practitioners from certainly more than half of FTSE 100 companies in the UK were engaged in such network activity.

In the US, IBM’s consulting division, IBM Global services used to co-ordinate the most prestigious of these forums - the IBM Institute of Knowledge Management – which was subsequently re-named and re-established on a smaller scale as the Institute of Knowledge-based Organisations. Similar initiatives exist in other countries, such as the Geneva Knowledge Forum (Büchel and Raub 2002).

The evidence confirms that a variety of strategies are in place to achieve some degree of institutionalisation of KM as a legitimate organisational practice. Importantly, apart
from the traditional carriers of management knowledge, the activities of standards and professional bodies as well as inter-organisational forums show strong features of incipient professionalisation processes, indicated by initiatives such as standardisation, provision of training, certification, spread and validation of ‘good’ or ‘best practice’.

CONCLUSIONS

We argued that management fashions can be interpreted as processes of emerging professionalisation of particular bodies of management expertise. With reference to the literature on professions within organisational contexts, we identified several criteria that would indicate as to whether such a process of para-professionalisation would occur. We then applied these criteria to a specific management fashion, Knowledge Management, and found our intuitions confirmed.

Firstly, we observed that the emergence of KM as a fashion coincided with the establishment and differentiation of a particular body of management expertise, addressing organisational problems not addressed by other types of expertise. This involved a departure from ‘managing knowledge’ as a strictly technical discipline towards proposing KM as a way of changing and managing organisational processes via new types of management interventions, such as ‘communities of practice’. Secondly, this coincided with the emergence of a discourse propagating the benefits of KM for the wider organisation, involving attempts to establish the management practice as a new organisational function. Finally, these processes were accompanied by activities in the institutional environment of organisations, aiming at establishing KM as professionalised practice via standards bodies and professional associations.
We acknowledge that more empirical research, including on other management fashions, is required to validate our argument more broadly. However, by using evidence on the KM management fashion, we have demonstrated the viability of an argument that sheds light on an aspect of management fashions that has so far been neglected. Interpreting the emergence of management fashions as proto-professionalisation allows us to take into account their social-integrative dimension. This means we are able to understand the rise and, potentially, fall of fashions as attempts by emerging groups of practitioners and intermediaries to establish new bodies of expertise as legitimate and valuable. As a consequence, the question as to whether a management fashion will eventually live or fail can be directly linked as to whether such processes of proto-professionalisation are successful or not. This offers a promising corrective to current explanations of management fashion dynamics that tend to focus on the role of isomorphic environmental pressures (for their uptake) and real learning and disillusion (for their demise).

What are the implications of our research more generally for the study of management fashions and the evolution of professional expertise within organisations? There are several aspects to be explored. Firstly, there is the question whether all management fashions will be characterised by processes of attempted professionalisation, or whether this applies only to specific set of management fashions. Some fashions appear to be accompanied by professionalisation (Total Quality Management), while others are not (Management by Objectives, Quality Circles).

Secondly, what is the impact of professionalisation on whether the organisation concepts that underlie management fashions become institutionalised? Arguably professionalisation could only be one amongst other ways of institutionalising expertise
and, hence, organisational functions. Research on this aspect could usefully contribute to the debate as to why fashions decline, and as to how long they stay (e.g. Carson et al 2000, Spell 1999). The debate tends to suffer from many researchers’ reliance on bibliometric data, a practice that risks neglecting both organisational appropriation and institutionalisation processes. By putting forward the professionalisation hypothesis, we shed light on both these dimensions. This also enabled us to go beyond another stream of the literature that focuses on the discursive characteristics of a management fashion as a criterion for its rejection or survival (e.g. Røvik 2002).

Our approach allowed us to take into the strategic context in which management fashions are generated, rejected and upheld. By drawing attention to the role of proto-professional groups we are able to delineate a category of social actors that developed a vested interest in the survival and institutionalisation of the fashionable organisation concept. How a fashion fares, will therefore not only depend on whether it is perceived as ineffective (Abrahamson/Fairchild 1999), its rhetoric features are inadequate (Røvik 2002) or the economic conditions are adverse (Carson et al 2000). It will also depend on how successful its proponents and practitioners are in establishing strategic agency, and positions of power, around a potential newly professionalized body of expertise.
REFERENCES


Johnson, T. *Professions and power.* London: Macmillan.


Table 1: Organisational adoption of KM

In ten UK-based large organizations

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<td>Corp Intranet, Forums, CoP, Competency</td>
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<td>Business Improvement</td>
<td>S/Engin./ general management</td>
<td>Corp Intranet, Yellow Pages</td>
<td>Corp Intranet Yellow Pages, repositories, sharing, Forums, CoP, competency</td>
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<td>S</td>
<td>Corp Intranet</td>
<td>Corp Intranet, Yellow Pages, Forums, Sharing?</td>
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<td>Banking</td>
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<td>Consulting</td>
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<td>Local intranet, repositories, Yellow Pages</td>
<td>Local intranet, Yellow Pages, repositories, sharing, CoP</td>
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<td>Municipality</td>
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<td>Repositories,</td>
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Strategic status: This refers to the extent to which the implementation of KM is a strategy priority. The following scores are applied:

Strategic: KM either (a) part of a wider corporate initiative or (b) instituted as a required business capability

Supportive: business-unit specific: localised strategic KM initiative with limited senior management support

Embryonic: limited strategic intent – primarily bottom-up driven

Only in relatively few organisations, had KM achieved strategic status, usually indicated by the existence of a formal role such as ‘Chief Knowledge Officer’ or similar figure within the organisational group functions. Even in these organisations, the resources allocated to KM activities were limited and formally established KM teams typically had only three to five members. In most of the organisations in this sample, KM was
confined to specific business units and in some instances there is very little formal recognition of KM by senior management.

Locus of responsibility: The majority of KM initiatives were pursued from within IS or IT service groups. In only two cases was KM associated with ‘people functions’, such as the HR department, while in a few other cases, KM was pursued from within a more generic business improvement taskforce (‘Operational Excellence’) or the business units themselves.

Professional background: In the majority of cases, KM initiatives were the primary responsibility of individuals who had moved into the new field from an occupation related to IT. However, most of these individuals were actually engineers by background and only in a few cases did individuals have a specialist IT/IS background. Very few individuals had an HR or general management background.

Initiatives pursued: These can be divided into two groups.

IT-based interventions

Corporate and local intranets

Yellow Pages: people/expert directories

Repositories: knowledge repositories / databases

Forums: asynchronous and synchronous communication tools

Managerial, ‘people-oriented’ interventions

Sharing: Development of knowledge sharing / lessons learnt / cross project learning activities

CoP: Development of Communities of Practice

Competency: Individual competency development (specialist training, mentoring, E Learning).