



Worlds apart? — a look at the operations management area in the US, UK and Scandinavia

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the discipline of Operations Management. The paper looks at the convergence and divergence of research in OM in Scandinavia, the US, and the UK. The three different research traditions are described and analysed separately and then compared and contrasted. A short example is presented from the management of advanced technology literature. A synthesis is offered that locates the three traditions on Jick's "three-horned dilemma". Opportunities for researchers in each tradition to learn from the others are described. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction — a journey into the unknown

Staying home is too easy — travelling sharpens your wit! So goes an old Viking saying, and in accordance with the saying the Vikings — even though they were based in Scandinavia — travelled to discover distant worlds and to learn from them. First, it seems to become more and more accepted that it was in fact the Vikings that first reached America. Furthermore, around 1000 AD the Vikings ruled a minor empire consisting of Denmark, Britain, and large parts of Germany and France. The last Viking King of this empire, Canud the Great, ruled from London and allegedly never set foot in his native Denmark. If the Vikings travelled to learn from other worlds, why should not we?

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In this paper, we will use the old Viking saying to inspire us to another discovery of America, Britain, and Scandinavia — albeit our journey will be confined to the world of operations management (OM) and be a journey of books and papers. In other words, we will investigate the world of OM and attempt to find out what the differences are between the US, UK and Scandinavian OM tradition, and — in the spirit of the Vikings — attempt to see what the different traditions can learn from each other.

And, there are different traditions in science in general. Kuhn (1962) has provided a large part of the explanation for the phenomenon that certain groups of researchers seem to think alike. In Kuhn's terminology, this shared thinking is because the researchers share the same "paradigm", i.e., the same basic assumptions about science, the object of their science, etc. We will take this as our starting point, but also subscribe to Lakatos (1968), who has suggested that several paradigms can coexist at the same time within a discipline — there does not have to be one overall paradigm guiding all research, even in times of relative ease in the scientific world of a certain discipline (Andersen et al., 1990). In other words, a discipline can be divided into many different groups (some stronger than others) that each have their unique approach to the discipline in question. In OM, Chris Voss has applied this way of thinking to the discipline and attempted to describe different paradigms within the OM area (Voss, 1995a).

In this paper, we will focus on the approaches to OM that can be found in our respective originating countries and, hence, focus on the UK, the US, and Scandinavia. There are, however, other good reasons for focusing on the UK, the US and Scandinavia than that the authors of this paper originate in these three regions. There are distinctively different approaches to OM in the three regions — one can speculate about demographic reasons (e.g. the US is much larger than Scandinavia), cultural reasons (e.g. Scandinavian researchers feel very strongly that they must justify their existence by "solving" problems for firms/managers), historical reasons (e.g. the UK has many traditions from her long imperial history), and many others. Another good reason is that, despite the fact that the traditions are different, they still have a lot to offer each other. We shall show this later in the paper. For now, the reader must take our word for it.

The very purpose of this paper is, thus, to analyse three different traditions within OM in order to see in which ways they differ and how they may benefit each other. Inherent in this purpose is the assumption that different traditions within a given area should not fight each other, but instead try to create a dialogue. If the truth about, say, OM is so complex that it is possible (or even necessary) to form different assumptions about it, and hence different traditions to its study, then the truth is probably also so complex that there is not just one tradition that possesses the entire truth. In other words, each tradition — we assume in this paper — only holds part of the truth and could benefit from a dialogue with other traditions. Only by combining the perspectives of different traditions can we hope to get just a little closer to the truth about OM. Creating this dialogue is not an easy task — far from it. Each tradition has its own conferences, workshops, journals and other forums, but here are very few possibilities for airing such cross-disciplinary work as this. However, we feel that it is worth a try

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