Surges and sediments: shaping the reception of reengineering

Stefan Heusinkveld[*], Jos Benders

Nijmegen Business School, University of Nijmegen, P.O. Box 9108, NL-6500 HK, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Abstract

The business community is continuously confronted with allegedly new concepts. These are often temporarily intensely advocated, yet are at the same time likely to be portrayed as transitory or 'faddish' phenomena. To trace the reception of these concepts, this paper examines the Dutch discourse on business process reengineering (BPR). Instead of showing a single transitory pattern, empirical evidence revealed a complex and multifaceted dynamic. Though BPR has been propagated extensively, it has been exploited as an umbrella to encompass divergent organizational insights. At the same time, the reception pattern of the concept varied significantly across distinct social contexts. Particularly, BPR had a significant and sustained impact within the Dutch IS community. Although the concept has been criticized since its inception, it has undoubtedly induced discourse that has been used widely to shape contemporary IS problems and solutions. As a result, this concept has played a significant role in the dissemination and understanding of organizational knowledge. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Management fashion; Business process reengineering; Diffusion of organizational knowledge; IS issues; Organization concepts

Category: Research

1. Introduction

The Engineering Industry is as much subject to fashion as any other human activity, and a study of its history reveals a succession of new ideas which have swept into the industrial limelight, each being received as a panacea which is going to revolutionize production, only to make way for some newer idea still. [··] each has had its day, made some contribution to management thought, and then receded from the limelight [25].

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31-24-3611615;
fax: +31-24-3611933.
E-mail address: s.heusinkveld@bw.kun.nl (S. Heusinkveld).

Replace engineering by IT and this 1957 quote has been updated to today. Then, as now, managers and IT professionals were confronted with waves of allegedly new concepts, technology, and practices promising improved performance. Given this constant stream of new inventions and potential breakthroughs combined with the uncertainty this brings, IT professionals seem be either gullible or will likely have an especially favorable disposition towards well-published and ostensibly new ideas.

In an earlier issue of *Information and Management*, Lee et al. [86] empirically investigated the emergence and development of themes in IS research and praxis between 1991 and 1995. Although a limited number of journals and magazines were examined, the study revealed several notable changes in the intensity of

discourse on particular topics over time. As the initial widespread media attention to these ideas eventually appears to be short-lived, these concepts are quickly dismissed as hypes or fads and considered at odds with the needs of serious managers and professionals [85,98]. Nevertheless, these ideas seem to have considerable impact on both organizational discourse and praxis [75]. This has caused researchers to study 'management fashion' [1,3,63,77]. A management fashion is considered as a relatively transitory managerial discourse on a particular concept and organizational changes induced by, and associated with this discourse [15].

We argue that many theoretical efforts on 'management fashions' often fail to account for the empirical complexities involved with the reception of these popular concepts. Firstly, present literature treats a business community as a rather homogeneous entity. However, although certain concepts are widely propagated and disseminated, significant differences may occur in the uptake of these concepts within distinct professional and sectoral boundaries. Secondly, processes of re-interpretation or translation parallel the extensive dissemination of these ideas across business communities. However, most of the literature on management fashions provides limited information on the content and scope of an item in a particular social context. As a result, they may impede understanding of the meaning of a concept to a business community or the specific way it has been used. Finally, current literature tends to focus solely on the transitory nature of concepts and management knowledge. Instead, this paper suggests a more multifaceted view in which movements of transience and persistence co-exist.

The present study concentrates on the impact of one such 'fashionable' concept: business process reengineering, in The Netherlands. We draw on extensive bibliographic data in order to trace the way discourse on this management issue evolved over time. This paper uses a research method that entails the simultaneous application of a qualitative survey with a quantitative analysis based on current bibliographic material. Thus, we seek not only to measure the development in the intensity of discourse on BPR but also to get 'inside' the discourse, and seek to understand how it has been socially constructed in a specific business community. Unlike most present theoretical accounts, this study will show a more complex, multifaceted dynamic that is continuously shaping the meaning of a specific concept.

2. Management fashion

Present, largely conceptual, accounts on 'management fashion' have tended to regard the incessant flow of allegedly new concepts a result of processes of supply and demand of transient management ideas in their mutual interaction. On the one hand these technologies and concepts have often been propagated by 'fashion setters' trying to 'hitch-hike on a hype' [13] and thereby enhance their business. Under the banner of an appealing label, organizational knowledge is commodified and presented as solution to most of the present-day organizational problems [47]. Often to enhance their ability to 'flow' within a community, concepts are launched as novel, promising ideas that will bring significant performance improvements [102].

To propagate and legitimate a fashionable idea fashion setters will seek to introduce it as an issue of contemporary managerial discourse. Discourse on these issues seems to encompass at least two important aspects. First, it is suggested that there exists a dramatic gap in performance between 'advanced' and 'ordinary' organizations [2]. The latter's survival is threatened if they continue working in their accustomed way. Second, the fashion is presented as a rational, progressive cure-all for the performance gap, so that implementing the concept can be seen as a rational act leading progress. By referring to successful applications in prominent organizations they are portrayed as a beneficial and legitimate solution. Such arguments may impel other organizations to adopt the concept and induce actions associated with the discourse.

On the other hand, managers are continuously confronted with persistent and complex organizational problems. As certain concepts gain in popularity, these managers may feel compelled to adopt them. They then appear to be innovative and have a legitimate banner under which organizational change may be applied. Moreover, such concepts may be useful in framing organization problems and stimulating adaptive processes [28]. As a result, these phenomena