



The championing of environmental improvements in technology investment projects

Nils Markusson*

School of GeoSciences, Grant Institute, The University of Edinburgh, West Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JW, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 April 2009

Received in revised form

25 November 2009

Accepted 12 January 2010

Available online 21 January 2010

Keywords:

Environmental champions

Technological innovation

Organisational context

Expertise

Careers

ABSTRACT

The literature on environmental champions emphasises the effective action of environmentally committed individuals. This paper draws on case studies of process technology investment projects in chemical and dairy companies in the UK and Sweden. The analysis is based on a political process perspective on organisations. By analysing the career histories of environmental champions as well as their behaviour in the investment projects, the paper shows how their championing behaviour is shaped by dynamic interaction with the organisational context, as well as a broader range of motivations and interests, including career opportunities and private life concerns.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Technology is a long-standing, central topic in environmental policy making. It has been discussed both as part of the problem and as a solution to environmental issues. The question of how to bring environmental concerns to bear on the use and development of technology, in companies and elsewhere, remains important for policy-makers in this area. Recent years have seen an expanding focus in environmental policy from manufacturing processes in industry to the consumption of products, and from single firms to innovation systems (Hilliard and Jacobson, 2003; Pujari, 2006). This does not mean, however, that the problem of pollution from manufacturing industry is solved. This paper will focus on environmental innovations in production technology, often discussed in terms of a distinction between 'cleaner technology' and 'end-of-pipe technology' (Clayton et al., 1999).

Environmental and technological work are sometimes rather separate domains in firms. There is a risk of firms focussing their environmental work on formal management systems and administrative procedure instead of technological measures that can more directly improve firms' environmental performance. This paper will contribute to answering the question of how environmental concerns can be effectively integrated into work concerning the development and deployment of technology.

Previous research on this topic has concerned the use of environmental criteria in relevant formal management systems (Green et al., 1994; Handfield et al., 2001; Blomquist and Sandström, 2004), by adopting special tools like Life Cycle Analysis or Design for Environment (Lenox et al., 2000), and by including environmental expertise in cross-functional teams (Groenewegen and Vergragt, 1991; Clayton et al., 1999) or sub-projects (Johansson and Magnusson, 2006).

Another mechanism for the integration of environmental concerns is the environmental champion (Anderson and Bateman, 2000), that is, an individual who promotes environmental issues in decision-making processes. 'Environmental championing' may be defined as: *any effort made by an (individual or collective) actor in a firm to promote environmental issues*. It is worth noting that promotion of environmental issues does not by definition presuppose heart-felt environmentalism on behalf of the champion. Indeed, such behaviour may be rooted in other things – as shall be discussed in more detail later – for example raised status or control of resources.

Effective championing is a matter of managing to influence decision-making. Environmental championing, therefore, needs to be understood in its organisational context, and the influence of champions is in part determined by structural factors. That successful championing is a combination of action on behalf of a champion and a context conducive to the promotion of environmental issues may seem to be a trivial insight. However, much existing literature strongly emphasises the champion and more or

* Tel.: +44 131 650 7010; fax: +44 131 668 3184.

E-mail address: nils.markusson@ed.ac.uk

less neglects the context. Moreover, saying that both a willing and able champion and a good opportunity for environmental promotion are needed begs questions about the precise natures of both the champions and the opportunities, as well as about how the two relate to each other and interact.

There is a long-standing topic of research and debate in the social sciences about whether human agency is determined by social structures, or whether social structures are to be seen as an outcome of the actions of individuals (Giddens, 1984). Action-oriented theories tend to highlight individual achievements and neglect contextual and historical factors, whereas structuralist theories emphasise social and organisational contexts, but may underplay the freedom of action of the individual. The dichotomy between structure and action will here be used to discuss theories of championing, and explore the relationship between environmental champions and their organisational context.

The analysis will draw on notions of expertise and interests to characterise potential champions. To understand the background of champions their career histories will be investigated. Their social context will be analysed in terms of the organisation of projects and firms, as well as firm-external factors including not least regulation.

The objective of the paper is to develop a new theorisation of environmental championing that gives due importance to both champion and context, and which explains how they interact, and so provide a social science contribution to our understanding of this important topic.

The paper will first review different conceptualisations of 'champions' in existing literature. After setting out the methodology of the study, the results will be discussed with a special focus on the career histories of environmental champions, as well as the opportunities given to them by their organisations to promote environmental issues. Finally, the paper is concluded by summarising the results, and setting out a new way of explaining environmental championing.

2. Environmental champions between action and structure

The concept of the 'environmental champion' is mainly used in environmental management literature (Anderson and Bateman, 2000; Boiral et al., 2008). This is, however, mirrored in the innovation studies literature where the 'innovation champion' is a common character (as reviewed by Jenssen and Jørgensen (2004)), and in organisational studies literature there is the similar 'change agent' (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Buchanan and Storey, 1997). This paper draws also on these additional sets of literature, since although they highlight (mostly) different actors with different skills, there is a commonality in the way they typically conceptualise promotion (of environmental issues, of a technology and of organisational change respectively).

There are different approaches to conceptualising what a champion is, and they can be described as lying on a spectrum from action to structure orientation. These approaches will be described below, starting at the action end of the spectrum.

At this end of the spectrum are models in which the champion possesses certain qualities – like enthusiasm and willingness to take risks – which are what makes him/her a champion (Jenssen and Jørgensen, 2004). Being a champion is here an inherent property of some people but not others; certain people have a champion essence as it were. Such an essentialist understanding of champions runs the risk of being voluntarist – that is, overplaying the achievements of the individual, and underplaying the organisational context.

Another, related, weakness with this model is that the champion tends to be idealised, to become a hero, and everyone who does not go along with the ideas of the champion becomes a villain. For

example, Tidd et al. (2001) speak of 'assassins' resisting the initiatives of champions. Having thus defined once and for all who the good guys are and what the good cause is, politically motivated behaviour in the organisation is seen as destructive and getting in the way of what is obviously and rationally desirable. Essentialist, voluntarist understandings of champions tend to go hand-in-hand with apolitical understandings of organisations.

Another way of understanding champions is to focus on the behaviour of championing (promoting) the environment. Anderson and Bateman (2000) studied the ways champions framed and presented environmental initiatives and compared successful championing attempts with unsuccessful ones. This approach recognises that the organisational context matters for championing, and that champions need to be reflexive about what they do. However, this is still a relatively voluntarist model in its concern with the receptivity of managers to the ideas of champions. The champion remains the prime mover.

At the opposite end of the action-structure spectrum is a structural model of championing. Here the organisational context stimulates the emergence of champions by creating opportunities for employees to assume this role. The findings by Fincham et al. (1994) illustrate this model. They studied the careers of IT specialists in financial sector firms, and observed how there were structurally defined opportunities for this group of employees to further their careers and strengthen the legitimacy of their expertise through the championing of IT solutions.

This more structure-oriented model thus highlights the organisational context of championing, and so avoids voluntarism. Moreover, it stresses the career and status interests of the champions, and the choices they make in seizing the opportunities offered to them by the organisation. This model, therefore, also includes an action aspect.

In this model, self-interest is part of what motivates the champions. In contrast, heroic accounts of champions tend to be uncritical of the champion's goals (environmental improvement, technological innovation, organisational change, etc.), and describe them as benefiting the whole organisation. An explicit example of this is given by Jenssen and Jørgensen (2004): 'It seems that the champion always acts unselfishly and in the best interest of the organisation but the organisation and its leadership do not understand this and resist change.' Resistance (cf. the assassins mentioned above) is seen as destructive politicking, and only other people than the champion engage in politically motivated behaviour. A political approach to the study of championing behaviour may reveal a more complicated set of motivations and interests, and show that a champion may be involved in politics to constructively promote his or her aims.

Attention to structural and political factors is thus useful to counteract the voluntarism and the heroism tendencies of some champion literature. This can be seen as a matter of putting the champion into proper perspective.

Another way to achieve this is to look at what other roles are played by firm actors in organisational change. For example, Tushman and Nadler (1996) present four roles that are critical to innovations: idea generator, internal entrepreneur (champion), boundary spanner (gatekeeper) and sponsor (mentor). Whilst such typologies are somewhat arbitrary,¹ this set of roles serves to emphasise that the champion is but one of the roles necessary for change. This way it puts the contribution of the champion into perspective.

¹ Buchanan and Storey (1997) call this approach to management research 'listology', and argue that the point of such lists is the plurality of roles they point to, rather than any particular set of roles they portray.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1746084>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1746084>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)