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Fad, fashion and fit: An examination of quality circles, business process re-engineering and statistical process control

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Abstract

This paper reports the major findings of a literature-based study which has examined the extent or otherwise to which quality circles (QCs), business process re-engineering (BPR) and statistical process control (SPC) follow the path of fad, fashion and fit. The findings indicate that QCs exhibit boundary conditions between the fad and fashion stages, BPR is in the fad phase, and it was difficult to position SPC using the methodology employed in the study. In tracking the development of management initiatives, from fad through fashion to fit the literature was evaluated using the six-stage model developed by Van der Wiele (Beyond Fads, Eburon, Rotterdam, 1998); however, some difficulties were encountered due to the lack of definition precision, in particular that of fashion. The methodology used to assess the literature in terms of the degree to which the paper describing each initiative represented fad, fashion or fit conditions was relatively successful and this is detailed. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The subject of management fads is well covered in the literature with typical definitions put forward by authors such as Cole [1], Huczynski [2] and Kieser [3]. Amongst those authors there is good agreement that the definition of a fad is: normally a new idea; it is developed in a vague and previously undefined area; and about what its users are initially enthusiastic about, albeit they can quickly lose interest if it turns out not to be as successful as envisaged at the outset. Van der Wiele [4] explores many characteristics of fads, pointing out that “(i)

fads can develop in an area of activity which is not well defined, (ii) most fads are not really new ideas, but old ideas translated into new words within a modern context and (iii) fads come to attention very quickly”. Bleckley [5], Byrne [6], Cole [1] and Shapiro [7] have all examined the trends of fads and their impact on an organisation and its management. For example, Cole [1] regards fads as “costly distractions and a panic response to a crisis that prevent managers from concentrating on running their business”.

A management fashion is less well defined than a fad, and only Kieser [3] and Robinson [8] from the literature examined have attempted definitions. Robinson’s definition – “fashion in its most general sense is the pursuit of novelty for its own sake”

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– implies something which is new with knowledge of it being restricted, and is very similar to the definition of a fad. Authors such as Cole [1] and Abrahamson [9] in examining trends tend not to distinguish between fads and fashions. Also some of the management activities (e.g. Quality Circles and Business Process Re-engineering) identified by Kieser [3] as fashions were considered as fads by authors such as Bleckley [5], Cole [1], Haari [10] and Kinnell [11].

It is clear from this that both fads and fashions are temporary phases. The organisation passes onto the next one or the fad/fashion dies and is subsequently discarded. Management is always facing problems for which there are no easy solutions and therefore anyone willing to think/talk about possible new ideas for solutions is received with interest. However, there is often no detail about the conditions which are necessary for success and about what specific situations the idea is relevant. In short, the fad is a panacea for everything.

Fashion takes the idea a step further and is totally different. The cost of adapting a fashion is much greater than with a fad. The organisation moves into changing behaviour which involves time, money and effort. So an organisation will not move into a fashion unless there is good reason to do so. Normally the organisation will try it out first as a pilot, see what it looks like and then go for full implementation. Learning through their own and others experience is important in this process. For example, the organisation needs to decide in detail why, when, how and in what specific situation the new fashion might be relevant because the move to change behaviour is costly and full of risk. It should also be noted that the adoption of a fashion is often associated with particular powerful people (e.g. the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)).

Only one definition of fit (i.e. Kristof [12]) from the management literature was identified, and the relevance of this definition within the context of the fad, fashion and fit methodology is questionable. Kristof [12], taking an organisational approach, defines the person–organisation (PO) fit as “The compatibility between people and the organisation that occurs when at least one entity provides what the other needs, or they share similar fundamental

characteristics, or both”. There is various debate in the literature about what managers can do to promote a high level of PO fit. For example, Chan [13] disagrees with Kristof [12], Judge and Ferris [14], and Muchinsky and Monahan [15] in distinguishing PO fit from person–environment fits such as person–job and person–group, claiming that the boundaries are unclear in many studies. The literature, in general, concentrates on P–O fit rather than the fit of management activities within the organisation.

Fit is never achieved without changing/adopting the fad/fashion to the organisation. It means that the organisation has changed: its routines; its standard operating procedures; its infrastructure support system (e.g. human resources, information, budgeting, costly reporting, etc.), and thus its organisation memory to sustain the activity/behaviour. In other words if it becomes part of normal operating procedures then it fits. The amount of change required in these type of systems which a particular activity (e.g. quality circles, BPR, SPC, etc.) demands will depend upon on how much organisational change is involved between the activity and the previous situation. For example, quality circles demand lots of changes in these systems because the old state of many European and UK organisations was very different (e.g. individual instead of group reward systems, senior management not being assessed on group facilitation behaviour and, a lack of access for groups to management information). By way of a contrast, SPC might be more easily introduced with less deep changes needed in the current organisation systems.

Van der Wiele [4], drawing on the work of Hesseling [16], has made a thorough investigation of quality management activities in terms of the path of fad, fashion and fit. He has put forward the following six-stage methodology for tracking this progression within an organisation:

Stage 1: Within an organisation there will be a small number of people who will believe in the management initiative which is currently under scrutiny and they will endeavour to explain it to others and convince them that it is important to the future success of the organisation.

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