

This article was downloaded by:[University of Toronto]
On: 19 September 2007
Access Details: [subscription number 769429897]
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Technology Analysis & Strategic Management

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713447357>

Problematizing 'Innovation' as a Critical Project

Lucy Suchman; Libby Bishop

Online Publication Date: 01 September 2000

To cite this Article: Suchman, Lucy and Bishop, Libby (2000) 'Problematizing 'Innovation' as a Critical Project', Technology Analysis & Strategic Management, 12:3, 327 - 333

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/713698477

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713698477>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Problematizing 'Innovation' as a Critical Project

LUCY SUCHMAN & LIBBY BISHOP

ABSTRACT *Based on research experience within US corporations, this paper examines the rhetoric and practices of organizational and technological 'innovation'. Our aim is to identify discourses of innovation as a site for critical studies. Two cases are used to illustrate ways in which initiatives launched in the name of change are based in traditional cultural frames that work in practice to conserve existing institutional orders. We close with some observations on alternative, indigenous sources of innovation and the conditions required to sustain them.*

Introduction

At the end of the millennium we seem to go on recreating our past ... the expectation of clear transitions and dramatic transformations—moving upward and onward—and the feeling that we must be living in a time of major social progress is slow to leave us.¹

In this paper we focus on discourses and associated practices of 'innovation' as a site for critical studies. Our primary starting place is empirical, based in our experience as researchers working inside large corporations. As researchers we have been among various constituencies charged with delivering relevant knowledge, methodologies and technologies to those designated as agents of organizational change. Our interest here is to reflect on initiatives in which we have been enrolled and what we have learned about the production of 'innovation' as an imperative in late 20th century organizational life.

One line of continuity in studies of work, organizations and management has been a focus on relations between technology and labor. We maintain that focus in what follows, tracing out the rhetorical and practical traffic that flows across initiatives in new product development, work redesign and organizational change. Our interest is in developing the proposition that valuation of innovation and the 'new' comprises the extension of a deeply traditional frame in western, particularly American, culture. This frame operates, moreover, within a cultural imaginary² that places the individual actor over against a naturalized environment—a competitive field of action—that necessitates a certain order of response. This holds equally for corporate actors, for whom innovation is characterized as essential for 'survival' in a changing competitive environment, and for workers, for whom change involves sloughing off obsolete skills and acquiring new ones as a prerequisite for continued employment. There are no heroes and villains in our story, albeit that the benefits and costs of innovation initiatives are distributed unevenly across the various actors involved. Construed as individual actors, corporations and workers are

equally entrained in a frame of change-as-necessity. Within this frame the burden of change falls to the individual—whether corporation or worker—who must ‘get with the program’ or be left behind.

Producing Images: Acme Black Box

For corporations engaged in the production of technologies it is an accepted premise that innovation in ever-shorter time frames and continual expansion into new markets are the twin requirements for success. This premise underwrites the operations of Acme Black Box Co., a large producer of document-related technologies.³ Formed in the early 1950s, Acme for many years dominated the market for light lens photocopiers and the business referred to within Acme as ‘putting marks on paper’. In the 1970s, Acme began to reposition itself in the emerging market for computer-based, ‘digital’ artifacts. Over the next two decades this initiative remained largely in R&D, while the primary revenue source for the company continued to be its light lens copier products, with their associated supplies and maintenance services.

A growing preoccupation for Acme Black Box over the past decade has been the question of how to move the company from being a producer of stand-alone, hardware-based products to a producer of networked, software technologies as well as, more recently, associated consulting services. Framed by senior management as a question of wholesale transformation, this effort is seen to require thoroughgoing changes not only in the company’s technology offerings but in its workforce as well. These elements—new products, a redirected workforce, and market repositioning—comprise the pieces from which a new corporate identity is to be constructed.

Reinventing Identity

The first wave in Acme’s reinvention of itself from a light lens copier manufacturer to a producer of digital systems began in the early 1990s, when the company launched a new ‘corporate identity program’.⁴ This process involved the adoption of a secondary descriptor, ‘The Document Company’ following the company name. This descriptor was intended, among other things, to define a territory for the company’s products more open-ended than that suggested by the traditional copier product line. The company name ensured recognition, while the descriptor ‘The Document Company’ afforded a strategic ambiguity amenable to expansion across new document forms and media.

In the mid-1990s the new corporate identity initiative entered a second phase, marked by engagement of a public relations firm that delivered to Acme a comprehensive ‘identity program’ and prescriptions for its implementation. Three central elements of the program were a new color, a new logo and, most intriguingly, an inversion of the company name. Now, instead of occupying the position of descriptor, ‘The Document Company’ became the leading signature, with Acme as a secondary clause.

Through this process, social identity, in the form of a corporate image, was cast as something to be designed and implemented like the new technologies that are the company’s products. The projects of innovation in identity and products went hand in hand, insofar as the new image was deemed necessary to successful marketing of a new product line. In this sense image followed product, directed by the needs and desires of participation in new markets. At the same time, the creation of a new corporate identity led the production of new technologies, insofar as it worked as a kind of directive to organization members in how their own work should proceed. In this sense technologies

and identities are self-referential, as digital technologies define a new entrepreneurial terrain into which the company and its products must be placed.

Repositioning Products

In order to succeed within the territory defined by the new terrain, Acme must not only reinvent its identity but also offer products identifiable as digital. The Document Systems announced in the mid-1990s represented the first of what promised to be a lineage of digital products. Management wisdom within the company assigns central responsibility for the success or failure of these products to sales personnel, specifically their willingness and ability to grasp the implications of the new digital product line and convey it effectively to customers. Instructions for how to sell the product were provided in the form of 'The Knowledge Kit,' a collection of scripts packaged in three-ring binders with accompanying video, CD ROM, and diskette of Powerpoint slides. The key message of the kit was that the Document Systems are unlike previous company offerings: that they are 'a totally new category' of machine.

One aspect of the Knowledge Kit that interests us here is the extent to which the marketing of these products is oriented to the problem not of their functionality (though of course that is part of what sales people need to learn), but of their identities. In particular, the products must be presented to the customer as 'new', as qualitatively different from either the company's previous products or the offering of the competition. To this end, the kit presents all of the materials needed to conduct a Document Systems 'Awareness Workshop'. The workshop is implemented in ten modules, including scripts (each of which takes the form of a text to be spoken and instructions for which of the accompanying Powerpoint slides should be presented). A note on the title page explains that:

The goal of the [Awareness] workshop is to enable participants with the skills and knowledge to successfully manage the Document System selling process. (*Facilitator's Guide*, p. 2)

The phrasing 'to enable participants with skills and knowledge' suggests that the sales representatives themselves are a technology in need of upgrading, requiring additional features or capabilities. Like the corporate identity package, the sales training kit has become a kind of technology—an assemblage of artifacts and techniques for image management, treated in turn as a central aspect of the positioning of new products (including their positioning *as new*). Through these practices identity creation is rendered as a kind of new technology to be implemented and technologies are assigned new identities in the social world.

Remaking Labor: Midwest Insurance

While the traditional objects of innovation projects have been technologies, the case of Acme points toward the blurring of boundaries between discourses of technological and human development. New products require associated innovations in those who would produce and sell them. To consider the project of innovation in the available workforce more closely, we draw on a four-year research project in a large, multi-line insurance company that we will call here Midwest Insurance. In response to competition in the financial services industry, the company is 'innovating' by redefining its corporate direction away from a primary reliance on auto and casualty lines, and toward broader financial products, e.g. life, health, and long-term care insurance. For Midwest, the

rhetoric does not so sharply characterize these innovations as ‘new,’ but rather a fair amount of work is put in at Midwest to making connections between the old and new ways. This might be explained at least in part by industry differences: a privately held insurance company may be less pressured than a publicly owned technology company to be ‘innovative’ and more inclined to maintain ‘tradition’. Yet like Acme, innovation at Midwest is concerned with expansion, through new products, into new markets.

‘Acceptance of Change’ as a Strategic Category

Detailed, performance-based labels have always existed for sales agents at Midwest, usually derived from the company reward system. So, for example, ‘travelers’ refers to agents who regularly sell enough to participate in annual bonus vacation trips. During more than four years working with the company, however, we observed the emergence and use of new categories for labeling sales agents constructed specifically around their response to the company’s innovation initiatives. In particular, we traced the emergence of a new, dichotomous system of categorization that contrasted agents accepting of the general thrust of innovative business directions to those agents who were said by their managers not to ‘embrace change’. The key differentiating feature had to do with whether agents ‘bought into’ the new company direction. While this distinction was sometimes characterized as a difference between so-called ‘new’ and ‘old’ agents, the difference did not appear to be organized around age or tenure *per se*, except insofar as older, more experienced agents often were also more skeptical of the new corporate directions. Labels for the ‘resistant’ agents included agents who have ‘plateaued’, ‘flat-liners’, ‘pond scum’, ‘slugs’, ‘men of extinction’ or ‘sleepers and squeakers’. This kind of labeling, which forces a population of workers into two opposing camps, is consistent with many previous divisions (manual/mental, blue/white collar, union/nonunion) that have segmented the labor force in the past.⁵ In this sense ‘innovation’ in the work force, rather than creating something new, effectively perpetuates an old, ‘divide and conquer’, managerial strategy.⁶

Easing the Effects of ‘Innovation’ on Customers

During our period of research at Midwest we had occasion to observe an experimental training program offered to Midwest agents in one region. The program was geared toward motivating—or more accurately *re-motivating*—mid-career, ‘plateaued’ agents. Consistent with the larger agenda of the company, this training experiment was intended to encourage agents to ‘accept’ corporate-initiated innovations. The class offered ways by which agents could maintain the older tradition of warm, friendly, customer service, yet still develop ‘more professional’ customer relations. An upper-level manager claimed that there need not be any conflict between these old and new ways. ‘You will have to be an agent who cares enough about policy holders to have a business relationship with them’, he explained. Beneath a surface of innovation, companies like Midwest seek ways to buffer their customers from the rougher edges of competition and rationalization (for example, voice mail replacing a helpful human voice). Very often, particularly in service industries, it is employees who are asked to fill the gap between old and new, taking up the emotional labor of ‘service with a smile’, or ‘total customer satisfaction’.⁷

‘Innovative Employees’: Make or Buy?

Midwest has a long history and tradition of personalized internal development of its agents. An emerging practice is a shift, at the strategic level, toward ‘competency-based

human resource planning' in which consultants determine the 'competencies' required to become a top-performing agent. The intention is to use the profile to develop and assess current agents, and to recruit and screen new applicants. Consistent with the individualist frame that underwrites the culture of competition and the imperative of continuous improvement, assessment is based on an individual psychological analysis of 'competence'.

The shift in personnel practices from internal development to the creation of profiles for recruitment echoes the technology decision of 'make or buy'. Applied to workers, the decision is reminiscent of the long-standing nature/nurture debate. If managers believe that skills, attitudes, values, and the like are malleable and shaped through interactions within the company, they commit to developing, training, and socializing their workers. Alternatively, if it is assumed that people cannot change (or will not change, or not quickly enough), then it is better for the company to devote resources to highly rigorous screening in hopes of getting the right people from the start. When the nature argument dominates, the emphasis shifts away from development toward a model of inherent attitudes and traits.

Across these changes in employment policies we find a consistent pattern of rhetoric and practices that reinforce constructs of individualism. The emphasis on the individual's responsibility to acquire relevant skills and bring them to the job market is a growing trend in human resources policy, increasingly reinforced by the rhetoric of a 'free agent' economy. More concretely, policies putting workers 'in charge' of their own careers, benefits and pension plans all reinforce the large-scale shift in responsibility and accountability from the corporation to the individual worker. By defining inherent traits as dominant over systemic or socially constructed realities, initiatives framed in terms of new attitudes and skills perpetuate a tradition of *laissez-faire*, competitive individualism.

'Innovation' as a Conservative Project

Our observations of new technology, work redesign and organizational change initiatives indicate that 'innovation' in these contexts requires analysis not simply as a process that takes place (or does not), but as a highly politicized construct taken up by specific actors and made to work in particular ways. At least within the US, and to some extent within Western economies more generally, innovation is accepted without question to be a positive good. In a semiotics of bipolarized, differently valued opposites, 'innovation' is the preferred alternative to 'stagnation' or 'resistance to change'. This means that framing agendas under the rubric of innovation and change is inevitably a strategic move, appropriating the positive value of the term for whatever the agenda to be pursued in its name might comprise.

In contrast to this received semiotics of innovation, our experience suggests that change agendas may actually be directed at least as much at the reproduction of existing organizational and economic orders as at their transformation. This is the case insofar as corporate innovation initiatives are aimed in practice at the *intensification* of ongoing activities within an existing market with the object of increasing returns on the conduct of business-as-usual. Alternatively, innovation projects are often concerned with the *extension* of existing activities into additional, and/or different markets. In both cases, 'innovation' can be understood as a construct activated in the service of what is, on closer inspection, a fundamentally conservative (in the sense of the reproduction of existing orders) project.

At the same time, our experience and observations point toward some alternate understandings of change and innovation in the workplace. This alternate view rests on four basic premises:

- (1) Innovation and change are indigenous aspects of technologies-in-use, work practice and organizational life. Even to keep things going on 'in the same way' in practice requires continuous, mundane forms of active appropriation and adaptation of available resources—discursive and material—to the circumstances at hand. This stands in contrast to the view of organization members as intrinsically conservative, simply reproducing the *status quo* until some professional designer or organizational change agent comes along to insist that things be different.
- (2) Sustainable innovations are dependent upon substantial investments of time and resources in infrastructure development. By 'infrastructure' in this context we mean to include a range of social relations and material arrangements. Social relations develop only with time, and material arrangements require human labor to put them in place and keep them going. This means that innovation and change are inevitably costly undertakings, and require associated commitments to their ongoing, long-term development.
- (3) Innovation is less a question of singular inventions or wholesale transformations than a matter of what we have described elsewhere as artful integrations.⁸ The premium placed on discrete, discontinuous change events, and the generally negative value attributed to processes of 'incremental' change are part of a form of wishful thinking that aims to bring about desired transformations without the associated costs in time and human effort. In contrast, a frame of artful integration emphasizes the ways in which new things are made up out of reconfigurations and extensions to familiar environments and forms of action. While less available for ownership by individual 'change agents', innovation of this latter kind, we would suggest, has deeper roots and is more likely to produce change of lasting value.
- (4) Large, highly visible change agendas may actually create incentives to keep local innovations hidden. Insofar as the latter are dependent on particular social relations and ways of working, their appropriation into global initiatives runs the risk of destroying the very conditions that make the local innovations possible.

Resistance to change is commonly cited as a characteristic of organization members, arising from their (largely irrational) attachment to the *status quo*. In contrast, we might view the term 'change' as one useful tool for an agenda concerned with ensuring that, under changing conditions, distributions of symbolic and material reward remain the same. We are then left to find alternative readings of 'resistance' and 'change', understood as reasonable responses to actual shifts in the technological and organizational landscape. One implication of the alternate view that we have outlined above is that resistance to change, in the sense of resistance to the premises and consequences of agendas initiated under that banner, may in fact be a requirement for long-term, substantive innovation.

Notes and References

1. 'Editorial introduction', Special issue of *Organization*, 2 (3/4), 1995, p. 371.
2. The word 'imaginary' is a term of art in recent cultural studies where it is used to reference the ways in which how we imagine the world is shaped not only by our individual experiences but also by the specific cultural and historical resources that are available to us. See G. Marcus, *Technoscientific Imaginaries* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 4.
3. We adopt this felicitous pseudonym following S. Newman, 'Here, There, and Nowhere at All: Distribution, Negotiation, and Virtuality in Postmodern Ethnography and Engineering', in: S. Gorenstein (Ed.), *Knowledge and Society: Researches in Science and Technology*, Vol. 11, *Knowledge Systems* (Stamford, CT, JAI Press, 1998), pp. 235–267. Our purpose in using a pseudonym is less to disguise the organization discussed than to mark the possibility that the story we tell is not idiosyncratic to

this organization, but rather is emblematic of a more general direction in relations between the management of products and of corporate identities.

4. More accurately, perhaps, this effort began in 1970 with the founding of Acme's premiere computer research center. It was not until the 1990s, however, that Acme made a concerted effort to reposition its core product offerings around networked, digital technologies.
5. H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1974).
6. D. Gordon, R. Edwards & M. Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982).
7. R. Steinberg & D. Fighart, 'Emotional Labor Since the Managed Heart', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 561, 1999, pp. 8–26.
8. L. Suchman, 'Working Relations of Technology Production and Use', *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, 2, 1994, pp. 21–39.