Creating and Implementing Standardized Management Innovation in a Large Organization

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Abstract

Management innovation represents one of the most important and sustainable sources of competitive advantage due to its context-specific nature. Still, current academic literature on management innovation and standardization is slightly limited. This intensive case study explores management innovation in a large European telecommunications company with the focus on standardization in managerial practices. The research data were gathered through interviews with managers from different levels of the case company. The results show that highly standardized management innovation is effective for reaching a standard level of management in a large company; it is also a prerequisite for further systematic development.

Research questions: The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how standardization emerges in management innovation in a large organization by studying the construction and conduction of a managerial toolkit in a European telecommunications company.

Links to theory: The theoretical framework is based on a study of management innovations and related processes by Birkinshaw et al. (2008) and a standardization study by Wright, Wylie & Sturdy (2012) in which the tasks of an internal change agent were divided into “standardizing agendas” and “standardizing methods”.

Phenomenon studied: Adoption process of a standardized management innovation in a large company.

Disclaimer: This case is written for classroom discussion and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation, or to represent successful or unsuccessful managerial decision-making, or endorse the views of the management. The views and opinions expressed in this case are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of South Asian Journal of Business & Management Cases.

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**Case context:** The case company is a large European telecommunications company which operates in a highly competitive market where organizational excellence is extremely beneficial. The case study focuses on the case company management innovation process for creating a “toolkit” for day-to-day management in the retail sales channel.

**Research findings:** The research findings gathered through systematic combining approach show that standardized management innovation is an effective tool for implementing managerial best practices from management fashions into organizational standards. Through adapting these learnings systematically to managers’ individual work, the good “standard” level of managing can be achieved in a large-size company. Reaching these standards also appears as a prerequisite for a further systematic managerial development in the organization.

**Discussion:** This study contributes to management innovation research by highlighting planning and coordination in introduction and successful adoption of standardized management innovation. Planning communications, setting achievable timeframes and choosing the right implementers are important aspects of implementation. Clear guidelines help employees understand the ideological background of management innovation, and close interaction between change agents and store managers promotes the adoption of management innovation.

A standardized management toolkit is an effective tool for putting external leadership ideologies, known as management fashions, into practice in a large organization. However, practical implementation requires comprehensive communication and preferably internal recruitment of change agents.

**Keywords**
Case study, innovation, management, management innovation, standardization

**Introduction**

Innovation is crucial for firms to stay competitive in a continuously changing business environment. Traditionally, many scholars (Henderson & Clark, 1990; Rosenberg, 1972) have focused on different aspects of technological innovation. Since the mid-1990s, the research trends have moved towards other forms of innovations as the process (e.g., Pisano, 1997), service (e.g., Gallouj & Weinstein, 1997) and strategic innovations (e.g., Hamel, 1998), especially on how such innovations are managed and how management influences the success of the firm.

This case study focuses on management innovation and how it was implemented to change the case company’s daily practices. Management innovation may take place in adapting organizational structures, processes and practices (Teece, 2007). Management innovation also relates to how managers give directions, make decisions, coordinate and motivate (Hamel, 2006).

Overall, the literature on management innovation and standardization is limited. There are few studies about the role of standards in management processes and organizational innovation. The broader literature on standards focuses on technological innovation (e.g., Farrell & Saloner, 1985). In the traditional literature on innovation, standards and standardization have been called ‘iron cages’, which, many researchers claim, prevent innovation (Wright et al., 2012, p. 652). Some researchers (e.g., Adler & Borys, 1996; David & Rothwell, 1996) argue that a supportive relationship exists between standardization and innovation. For example, according to Adler and Borys (1996), workflow formalization, which is a form of management innovation, supports innovation if it enables rather than controls the work performance of employees.
The level of innovation narrows when it is considered to be ‘new to the state of art’ (Birkinshaw et al., 2008, p. 829) and when standardization does not generate ‘truly novel ideas’ (Hamel, 2006, p. 76). Instead, when management innovation is considered new to the firm (e.g., Mol & Birkinshaw, 2009), it captures and exploits existing knowledge (Wright et al., 2012). Still, standardization in management innovation has not been widely studied, and there is a need for further examination, which this study attempts to address.

This case provides rich empirical data on management innovation and standardization in a large European company. It brings forth insights on how companies create management innovations and what kind of applications these innovations provide. In the case study, management innovation emerged through the interaction of managers at the case company with current management fashions (e.g., lean management). Birkinshaw et al. (2008, p. 826) refer to this as the ‘fashion’ in the perspective of management innovation. This intensive case study examines an exclusive and, therefore, theoretically interesting case and provides a thorough description, interpretation and understanding of it (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2014).

Theoretical Background

Birkinshaw et al. (2008, p. 825) define management innovation as ‘the invention and implementation of management practice, process, structure, or technique that is new to the state of the art and is intended to further organizational goals. In its simplest form, management innovation is a new way to lead and manage a company’ (Mol & Birkinshaw, 2009). The boundaries between management innovation and process innovation (Boer & During, 2001), however, are not clear because they both aim to further organizational goals, such as competitiveness and performance (Vaccaro et al., 2012). Birkinshaw et al. (2008), for example, identify a four-step process of how management innovations are rooted in an organization’s structure. In addition, management innovations have similar ideas about changing organizational ideologies, such as organizational innovations (Birkinshaw et al., 2008). Because organizational innovations enable technological innovation (Camisón & Villar-López, 2014), the definitions of different innovation types seem to overlap.

Birkinshaw et al. (2008) identify four different perspectives that explore the meaning of management innovation: institutional, fashion, cultural and rational. At the macro level, the institutional perspective enables a comparative approach; it draws attention to the institutional and socioeconomic circumstances in which management innovation occurs. The institutional perspective approaches innovation as discourses and practices within certain ideologies (Birkinshaw et al., 2008, p. 826).

The fashion perspective studies the management innovations that emerge through the interaction between the managers who use new management ideas and the ‘fashion setters’ behind those ideas (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996). Abrahamson (1996) defines ‘fashion setters’ as consulting firms, business schools, gurus and mass media organizations. This perspective includes the macro and micro levels of analysis concerning both the industry that supplies new management ideas and the behavioural reasons why individual managers choose to accept those ideas. Management fashion may exist as abstract ideas or in rhetorical form or as a specific practice or technique (Birkinshaw et al., 2008, p. 826).

The cultural perspective focuses on understanding how management innovation is shaped by the culture of the organization in which it is being implemented. This perspective operates between the micro and macro levels of analysis by looking at how individual attitudes towards management innovation interact with the introduction of the innovation at the organizational level.

The rational perspective suggests that management innovations are introduced by individuals. The goal of management innovations is to make organizations work more effectively. From this perspective,
an individual presents an innovative solution addressing a particular problem faced by the organization and then ensures the implementation and adoption of the solution (Burgelman, 1983; Howell & Higgins, 1990).

Abrahamson (1996) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) conclude that normative management fashions are commodified and promoted as new standards that are essential for organizational competitiveness, the adoption of which increases standardization in business practices. The supportive argument says that implementing management innovation requires standardization. Worren et al. (1999) show that standardized methods of implementation are used in the implementation of innovation for achieving organizational consistency.

Case Company and Research Methodology

The company chosen for this case study is a large European company operating in an extremely competitive telecommunications market in which competitive advantage stems from not only products, services and prices but also organizational development. Due to research ethics and anonymity, details about the case company and respondents have been removed.

Organizational excellence is a crucial part of the case company’s strategy, and it motives the company to develop management innovation to improve its daily management practices. The current study focuses on the company’s management innovation process of creating a toolkit for the daily management of a different stores and retail channels. This managerial toolkit was later implemented throughout the organization and was adapted to meet the needs of various organizational branches.

This article describes an intensive case study (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2014, p. 18). A thorough description, interpretation and understanding of the case are provided. Instead of theory building and generalizing the case, the aim of this study is to explore the underlying logic that makes the case unique (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 120).

The data were collected through interviews with individuals and groups. The interviews were conducted as thematic interviews (Table 1).

In total, five individuals were interviewed: a development director, a former channel director, a current channel director, an area manager and a former internal change tutor, who worked as an area manager during the interviews. The group interviews consisted of five store managers from three different areas. The interviews were conducted via Skype or the phone. One interview was conducted face to face. In terms of data analysis method, the inductive content analysis was used.

| Interviewee’s Position       | Interview Type          | Duration (minute) |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Area manager                 | Individual (phone)      | 60                |
| Area manager                 | Individual (phone)      | 55                |
| Development director         | Individual (Skype)      | 50                |
| Channel director             | Individual (Skype)      | 50                |
| Channel director             | Individual (face to face)| 60                |
| Store managers (5 manager)   | Focus group (Skype)     | 70                |

Source: The authors.
Data Analysis and Results

Management innovation can be defined as a comprehensive development process of daily management. In addition to leadership development (by, e.g., introducing coaching perspectives to leadership), the toolkit introduced by the case company also included process and communications development. The overall purpose of the management innovation was to systematize and standardize the management of the case company.

Standardized Practices

Standardized Tools

Management practices varied in the case organization, and, therefore, it began to reorganize and systematize management. The systemization started with the sales unit, and according to the experience gained, the corresponding model was implemented throughout the organization. Through systematization, the management toolkit was introduced and implemented into practices, and the whole organization performance became more professional. The systematized toolkit included elements of lean management, which was often mentioned and highlighted by the interviewees.

The systematization procedure included a comprehensive package of daily tasks and management tools. The toolkit included various tools, such as visual flip charts, schedules for supervision activities and guidelines for meetings and personal discussions with employees. It also included checklists for keeping stores clean and orderly—an example of more mundane issues that should be considered—even though managerial advice was still at the core of the checklist.

According to store managers in the focus group interview, the toolkit was the company’s first guide to day-to-day management. One supervisor, for example, commented that before the introduction of the toolkit, ‘things such as one-to-one discussions with salespeople, everyone seemed to do as they wanted’. The toolkit’s biggest change was, as another supervisor explained, that it created a ‘biorhythm’ for the teams, ‘which supports the daily work and the practices of daily management’. These comments highlight how the systematization of daily operations was a remarkable innovation in the organization’s long history. The systematization also had a visible, positive effect on workers.

In conclusion, the process development side of the toolkit was based on lean management. It systematized daily operations, including the use of management tools, checklists and flipcharts as visual elements that served as systematic guidance for all of the teams. The systematization of the workflow was seen to be a prerequisite and facilitator for self-direction through the guidance of the managerial toolkit, which also enabled supervisors to delegate tasks to trusted employees if the supervisors themselves were absent (e.g., during vacations or weekends).

Coaching Leadership

After the systematic introduction of the management toolkit, managers talked about a change in the focus of leadership. Whereas management had previously focused on numerical results, the focus now shifted to practical performance. The regional leader who led the change process compared the change to a hockey match where the coach focuses on results without actually watching the performance:
It is funny that the coach briefs the whole team for the first period like a crazy, but when the game starts, the coach stays in the locker room, watches the results, says it is not good, shots on the goal are poor, and something else is poor. If this happens, how can he know how was the game was controlled or anything else? Those numbers do not [say] anything; you have to watch the game.

This comment shows that the toolkit not only brought tools for daily management but also made management culture more like coaching. Managers have to be present because how do they watch the results if they are in the locker room? A store manager of the focus group interview described using a coaching style to identify and harness the personal strengths of salespeople in their sales efforts:

We aim to consider a salesperson as an individual, not only a worker, and the improvement is to dig deeper than before. If at the start, we wanted to know how to [make] better sales with [a] certain product, now we focus on making the individual want to be better at his job and even to be a better person.

Thus, the toolkit, with its coaching style of management, also focused on developing the personal motivation of the employees; it considered the workers as human beings, not just as labour. As a tool for coaching leadership, the Toyota Kata (Rother, 2010) method was discussed in the interviews, and interviewed supervisors recognized the many beneficial aspects of the Kata method. In Toyota Kata method, solutions themselves do not provide sustained competitive advantage but the degree to which an organization has mastered effective routines for developing solutions with continuous improvement. A primary work of managers is to develop people for achieving desired results (Rother, 2010). One supervisor, for example, explained the following:

[We have used] Kata since the toolkit was launched, and it is like setting... someone a big goal [that] he or she wants to reach in three years, and shortly, through experiments, the person [his or herself] determines the experiments, how he/she could reach the stated big goal. And there are smaller checkpoints every now and then to review how the experiment went and what has been learned. Then we consider together [if we should] pick some new experiment or continue with the existing one.

Thus, the Kata method served as a long-term goal setting tool with several incremental checks in the middle. In addition, Kata brought psychological elements into management practices. One interviewed manager said that when new practices were utilized, they were communicated in an ‘inspirational manner’:

When giving feedback, the meaning of positive feedback is kind of [a] modern way of doing [things], and it is kind of old-fashioned to give just straight constructive feedback. We thought that we have lot of young people here, and the best way to operate is to rely on [a] strongly positive approach and optimism, and through that, make people... feel that it is fun to work.

**Communication Development**

Positivity was quite a strong tool in the toolkit due to its effectiveness in examining managerial best practices. One of the supervisors stated that this was especially visible in an organization that consisted of a lot of young people, but the focus group interviewees also discussed how the positive approach was seen at the store level. They, for example, said that when issues are approached ‘through positiveness, the results last longer and the desired change will be achieved quicker in practice, no matter if it’s related to sales or whatever’. Also, the overall atmosphere within the sales unit was more positive than previously: ‘The employees [feel better], and through that, the practical performance is better, which leads to better results’.

The positive approach is seen as an effective coaching method, although some interviewees also critiqued it. Some complained that positivity was overwhelming for some people and that leadership
cannot be ‘just hugging people and comforting people’. ‘I see it more like leading people through best practices instead of discussing… mistakes’ is how one leader described the coaching style of leadership.

New practices of communication meant changes in not only giving feedback in coaching situations but also building a platform for informal discussions through creating a certain communication style which is related to both the terminology used in an organization as well as the efficient, informative communication used inside an organization. Based on the interviews, the terminology for certain actions in daily work was intentionally informed by using everyday vernacular instead of academic concepts or the terminology used by the consultants. One of the managers even thought that ‘lean management’ might have been ‘intentionally hidden’ so that employees did not have the impression that changes would come from outside the company. In some cases, sport metaphors were thought to reach people better than, for instance, the consultant discourse. This kind of communication development was visible in materials in the managerial toolkit, and it was closely related to the positive approach of the coaching style of leadership.

Informative communication inside the organization was also systematized, together with interpersonal interaction communication. A model for deploying information was launched to reduce the number of emails and to systematize meeting practices, although this was later impaired. Based on the interviews, the overall aim was to ensure that the information reached every one. Later, the managers lamented that the introduced model for deploying information did not ultimately lead to established communication practices.

In Figure 1, the three elements of the management toolkit introduced in the case organization are presented. In sum, the shifting of the focus from results to performance was the largest change resulting from the use of the toolkit. Standardized tools for supporting interaction between managers and employees paired with the coaching style of leadership positively affected the organizational culture in general, which also resulted in better performance. This shift was supported by a new way of communicating management goals in a language that both employers and employees understood. However, not all elements of the management toolkit resulted in well-established changes because the model for deploying information was later discarded.

**The Standardization Process**

According to Birkinshaw et al. (2008), standardization begins with the establishment of what the authors call the ‘motivation step’. For the case company, the need to introduce standardized management
practices stemmed from confusing practices within the company that did not adequately respond to the industry’s intense competition. One interviewee also mentioned that Toyota’s idea of ‘going to the shop floor’ inspired them to start the change process from the sales unit.

The first version of the management toolkit came from external consultants, which was based on their experience of working in another European organization engaged in a similar business. In their model, Birkinshaw et al. (2008) claim that the management innovation process consists of four phases: motivation, invention, implementation and theorizing as well as labelling. These steps are supported by internal and external change agents. However, in the case company, the influence of the external consultants decreased as the process progressed. ‘The consultant office proposed that they could take responsibility for the whole project and implement it, but we decided to do it as own and include our own thoughts and premises of the firm, reported one of the managers. In practice, this meant that the process of communication was adapted to better meet the needs of the organization while blurring the discourse used by the consultants. The management of the company, for example, wanted to abandon the term ‘lean transformation’ because they believed it erroneously suggested that organizational change would be initiated from outside the company. The steps for the standardization of management innovation in the case company are illustrated in Figure 2.

Unlike the model of Birkinshaw et al. (2008), the company formatted the management toolkit before the actual implementation phase, and only some modifications were made based on the experiences gained (the design phase in Figure 2). For example, the model for deploying information was abandoned. In order to implement the changes as planned, the company named internal tutors to lead the change process. According to one interviewed manager, the idea was that these internal change agents could ‘coach the store managers through collaborative touch’, and the store manager, backed by a tutor, could begin to use the management toolkit in his own team. Some sales teams and some sales managers had immediate resistance to these softer management practices, but they were identified, and tutors were re-sent to them to help the managers learn new leadership skills, which emphasized coaching and positive communication.

Four years after introducing the management toolkit, the original label gradually vanished from organizational use. Although in substance the guidelines have remained virtually unchanged, instead of the toolkit, the organization now simply talks about ‘daily management’. The change process that started as a project has become an established practice in the organization that no longer needs a specific name or label. This supports the standardization-as-narration perspective of Haack et al. (2012), which emphasizes the social and contextual construction of change through discourse.

Thus, the introduction of management innovation in the case company went through the following steps, as illustrated in Figure 2: motivation, design, implementation, follow-up and further development.

| Motivation      | Design                              | Implementation          | Follow-up               | Further development |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Agenda setting  | Selecting and adapting the content to the organizational discourse | Supporting the adoption of new practices | Convincing the opponents | Consolidating into practice |

Figure 2. The Standardization Process of Management Innovation in the Case Company

Source: Figure created for study by the authors.
Discussion and Implications

The findings of the empirical analysis of the case study’s management innovation show that the managerial toolkit worked as a tool for the comprehensive development of daily management. By standardizing daily activities, the entire ideology of daily management was modified in a large organization. In their study, Wright et al. (2012) found that one form of standardization occurs at a macro-organizational level, focusing on the implementation of management innovations, such as new organizational culture, efficiency improvement and process redesign. All of these elements exist in the case company’s management innovation, which resulted in a hybrid toolkit that included elements of process development, coaching management, positive organizational culture and communication development.

The existing literature on management innovation and standardization is limited. Thus, as its main theoretical contribution, this research provides an exploratory viewpoint on how management innovation can be achieved through standardization in a large organization. This research also contributes to the literature of management innovation as a process and offers a framework for the process of standardizing management innovation. Unlike in previous management innovation process theory (Birkinshaw et al., 2008), in the standardizing management innovation process, the theorizing and labelling occur during the construction phase of the toolkit, which was named as invention in the original theory. The following phase after the implementation, which represented theorization and labelling in previous theory, is follow-up. In this phase, the managerial ideologies and practices are employed. In addition, this article divided the development of the management innovation into a separate phase, in which the original version of standardized management functions serves as a base for further managerial development.

In this study, management innovation is defined as new to the firm (Mol & Birkinshaw, 2009, p. 1270). Using this definition, this case study presents a supportive perspective on management innovation and standardization, as in Wright et al. (2012). This case study of management innovation underpins previous findings. First, management innovation is assisted by standardization, and it provides common languages, which lead to incremental innovation (David & Rothwell, 1996). Second, the diffusion of management innovation is reliant on standardization, and certain management fashions are promoted as new standards and are essential to organizational competitiveness (Abrahamson, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Third, the implementation of management innovation requires standardization (Worren et al., 1999). These findings were apparent in the current case study.

Conflicting perspectives on management innovation and standardization claim that management innovation is too fast for standardization (Kanter et al., 1992). This research presents a case study of standardized management innovation that is continuously developed. This empirical study shows that innovations in the field could be documented and tested in teams. They can be standardized and presented to others, although they are not necessarily implemented throughout the organizations.

The empirical data show that building such a toolkit was a comprehensively planned process. At the beginning of the process, external consultants were used, but the actual modifications to mould the toolkit into a launchable form were conducted internally. This was considered highly important for making the toolkit understandable inside the organization. In this case, the prior planning of the original version of the toolkit was conducted by top management. This empirical study shows that creating such a hybrid combination demands competence, not only practical know-how from the company but also a critical assessment of which themes and lessons from global best practices are best suited to the company’s needs.

This case study shows that the standardization and successful adoption of management innovation for everyday work requires planning and coordination. Planning communications, setting achievable timeframes and choosing the right implementers are important aspects of implementation. Recruiting
experienced change tutors or agents internally seemed to increase trust more than recruiting external consultants. Clear instructions helped employees understand the ideological background of management innovation. At the same time, the capacity for learning was important to ensure that employees understood the reasons and the thinking behind the toolkit. In conclusion, the interaction between the change agents and store managers was seen to be the most important work relationship for successful implementation.

As the main practical implication of this study, we suggest that when developing a management system in a large-scale organization, a standardized managerial toolkit is an effective tool for putting externally sourced leadership ideologies, known as management fashions, into practice. As found in this empirical study, the base level of leadership can be achieved by standardization. When a coherent level of leadership is achieved, it allows for further systematic development of management and leadership in the organization.

There are challenges in standardizing management innovation. This case study shows that when planning this kind of comprehensive programme of managerial development, comprehensive communication is crucial. In addition, the recruitment of change agents is important when implementing leadership ideologies, and it is preferable to recruit these change agents internally. Moreover, the deployment of the comprehensive change in leadership ideologies and practices must be followed for a relatively long time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how standardization emerges in management innovation in a large organization by studying the construction and conduction of a managerial toolkit in a company. As argued in previous research, management innovation represents one of the most important and sustainable sources of competitive advantage due to its context-specific nature. Still, the current academic literature on management innovation and standardization is limited. This study aimed to fill that gap by providing an exploratory viewpoint on management innovation and standardization through this intensive case study.

The research findings of this study show that standardized management innovation is an effective tool for implementing managerial best practices from management fashions into organizational standards. Through adopting these practices systematically to managers’ individual work, a good standard of managing can be achieved in a large company. Reaching these standards also appears as a prerequisite for a further systematic managerial development in organizations.

A previous theory (Birkinshaw et al., 2008) discussed four perspectives of management innovation: institutional, fashion, cultural and rational. These perspectives were not specifically examined in this study, even though the empirical data might offer an opportunity to consider these perspectives as well. For future study, the management fashion point of view could be explored, especially which practices are used in which fields and professions. This research supports coaching leadership and positive approaches in sales organizations; future research might consider how they vary in a completely different work task. It would also be interesting to study, for example, the work of CEOs or development managers, as they seek information and inspiration for the development of their organizations. In addition, further research should focus on the work of change agents in the implementation of management fashions, which might crystallize the practical importance of certain individuals during the process.

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