

The Use and Handling of Management Fashions

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Some management concepts come and go, some become classics. Management Fashion Theory provides insights of how management fashions can be distinguished and recognized. This article illustrates the characteristic features of the theory using the example of the concept of “New Work”.

Keywords: New Work, management fashion, management fads

Introduction

New management concepts (such as Big Data Management or Agile Management) are attributed with the power to change or even revolutionize the corporate world. History, however, shows that many management concepts praised in the past could not fulfill the expectations placed in them, while others became (modern) classics that have secured their place in management.

On their way to becoming soon forgotten or established management concepts, new approaches are often accused of being merely short-term management fads. The Management Fashion Theory provides a description of what characterizes management fashions, how they spread, and how they can be recognized. Therefore, this article aims to investigate the concept of management fashion both theoretically and using the example of the “New Work” concept.

The “New Work” concept has the ambition and potential to shape the working world in the long term. Even though only time will show whether New Work as a concept will penetrate in the long term, this paper will adopt an overarching perspective and, with the help of Management Fashion Theory, examine whether New Work exhibits characteristics of a management fashion or if the concept may be of longer duration and not just a fleeting fashion phenomenon.

A Brief History of New Work

The “New Work” concept appears to be a magic word that creates new products and professions. By now, there are New Work coaches, New Work skills, and a New Work mindset (Schermuly, 2020). Looking at the implementation of the concept, a wide range of interpretations can be observed, ranging from setting up a table soccer game or offering free fruit, to demanding a fundamentally new understanding of work design. In between, many gradations are found, which allow other concepts such as Agility or Scrum to be integrated.

As broad as the interpretation of New Work is, the assessment of the concept varies just as widely. Some speak of the “mega-trend of our century” (Eversloh & Schürmann, 2020) and a “must-have for companies” (Wagner, 2017), while others assert “New Work—the dream is over” (Straub, 2021) and see the term New Work trivialized (Haller & Hornung, 2021).

The basic idea of New Work was shaped in the 1980s by Frithjof Bergmann, who defined New Work as a new way and idea of connecting life and work. With his approach, he demanded to replace classic wage labor with a new system of work (Bergmann, 2021). His vision of a society implementing “New Work” envisages the individual dedicating one-third of their time to traditional wage labor, one-third to work that they “truly want”, and one-third to “high-tech self-production” (Bergmann, 2019). His theory thus encompassed not only the mere change of work structures, but also the transformation of lifestyles and societal culture.

Väh (2016) describes New Work as a “cultural revolution”. In the “New Work Charter”, he articulates the five central principles for the future of work: freedom, self-responsibility, purpose, development, and social responsibility. Since then, the concept has been repeatedly revisited, enhanced with related principles, adapted for practical use, and expanded in its content (Hackl, Wagner, & Attmer, 2016), enriched by related principles, made useful for practice (Erpenbeck & Sauter, 2021), or further developed in content (Schermulý, 2021).

The Management Fashion Theory as an Analytical Framework

The Theory of Management Fashion provides explanations for why certain management concepts disseminate, why they become popular so quickly, and outlines their typical temporal progression until they are replaced by other fashions (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Abrahamson (1996, p. 257) defines management fashions as a “relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress.”

Subsequently, we will introduce the function of a management fashion (3.1), its characteristics (3.2), and the key players active in the “arena of management fashions” (3.3) (Kieser, 1997).

Purpose of Management Fashions

Fashions provide guidance to users on what practices seem legitimate. While fashion in clothing suggests the selection of certain outfits or accessories, music fashions categorize listening preferences in musical genres, fashions in the organizational context embody themselves in certain management concepts.

Resorting to a management fashion simplifies the choice of goals or practices that are presented to management in the design of leadership, planning, or control issues in organizations (Abrahamson, 1991; Kieser, 1996).

Characteristics of Management Fashions

Management fashions can be characterized by certain key features. These include: (1) carrying a catchy label as identification, (2) promising performance improvements, (3) having a range for interpretation, (4) being universally applicable, (5) being conveyed through specific rhetorical patterns, and (6) being characterized by a distinctive life cycle.

Labels. To attract attention, management concepts are typically marked with a catchy coinage (e.g., Balanced Scorecard or Business Process Reengineering). The concept New Work meets this requirement by serving as a catchy buzzword. More than that, it almost appears like a magic word that can occur in diverse contexts. A look at literature databases and internet search engines shows that the label New Work is compatible with a combination of other terms. Examples include New Work evangelists, New Work mindset, New Work hacks, New Work coaches, or New Work festival as paired terms (Schermulý, 2020).

Performance promise. A significant feature of management fashions is that their proponents raise high expectations and assure performance improvements (Benders & Van Veen, 2001). After all, it is unlikely that potential users will implement something if they do not recognize the future benefits as a result of its application.

The New Work concept is also accompanied by promises of success. Higher employer attractiveness, increase in turnover and productivity, economic advantages through the individualization of career paths, internal modernization, employee satisfaction, increase in innovation, flexibility, enhancement of competitiveness, digitization of work processes, and employee retention are just some examples of the touted success prospects (Wagner, 2017; N. Schnell & A. Schnell, 2019; Hackl, Wagner, & Attmer, 2016).

Conversely, the danger of being left behind as a company by not implementing New Work practices is emphasized. Companies risk becoming unattractive and losing their marketability. “Companies that want to remain future-proof should now deal with the topic of New Work,” warns the Haufe Academy, speaking of a win-win situation for employers and employees (Haufe Akademie, 2022).

Interpretation scope. Another typical characteristic of management fashions is their wide scope for interpretation. Management concepts are formulated in a vague and open manner, allowing both suppliers and demanders to interpret the concept according to their organization-specific needs and adapt it to their organizational conditions (Clark, 2004; Benders & Van Veen, 2001).

The term New Work is open and in need of explanation. The resulting interpretive scope allows New Work initiatives to be adapted to the respective organizational situation and objectives and, if necessary, combined with other existing management concepts. Even Bergmann (2019, p. 252) shied away from too strong a specification, as in his opinion New Work is “complex, surprising and hard to grasp.” Rather, he focused on drawing a large, visionary picture that contains little concrete content but is open to being filled with individual thoughts.

New Work thus became a meta-term that accommodates ideas about digitization, work 4.0, start-up culture, or just ideas about a somehow different working world. Thus, New Work became a container term filled with various new understood work models. Almost anything that has to do with current changes around work, leadership, and organization can be understood under New Work (Erpenbeck & Sauter, 2021).

Universality. Another feature closely tied to the scope of interpretation associated with popular management fashions is that they are typically formulated in a universal manner, allowing for widespread application across an organization. This is not limited to specific functional levels such as controlling, logistics, or procurement. Universality thus broadens the potential user base (Strang & Meyer, 1993; Fincham & Evans, 1999).

New Work is presented as a generic solution that can be applied at various levels of an organization, as well as across various industries and company sizes. As a result, scientists, politicians, and practitioners can all align behind the goals of New Work (Hofmann, A. Piele, & C. Piele, 2019).

Rhetorical patterns. Kieser (1996) identifies management fashions by their rhetorical patterns. A key factor is highlighted, the application of which is depicted as inevitable and aligns with the values and notions of the target audience. The concept postulates a radical break from the previous approach, while at the same time avoiding lessons or blame and making recommendations for action universally applicable through a clever mix of simplicity and ambiguity (Nicolai & Simon, 2001).

The New Work concept fulfills these rhetorical patterns. “New Work” already indicates in the title that it is something new, that breaks radically with old structures. The revolutionary scope describes the departure from the status quo through a structural and profound change in the world of work. The paradigm shift from an industrial to a knowledge society is emphasized, and the fact that the previously lived “Old Work” ends with this.

The portrayals of New Work do not involve blame. The previous approach was necessary, but now a different time is coming that requires different solutions. Anyone who has relied on the solutions of the old

industrial society so far has done nothing wrong. However, those who do not change course now risk being left behind.

Lifecycle

Management fashions are characterized by a certain lifecycle, which is characterized by alternating phases. At the beginning of the lifecycle, attention is still low. As the spread of the new concept increases, the following phase is ascending and pauses briefly at a peak, then, when the first negative feedback is published and disillusionment follows the inflated expectation, it subsides to a slightly higher level compared to the resting phase (Clark, 2004; Gill & Whittle, 1993). Even though the basic course of the popularity curve could often be empirically confirmed, it remains controversial whether the ideal course should be considered as a condition sine qua non for a management fashion.

To analyze the interest in New Work, the tool “Google Trends” can be used (Silva, Hassani, Madsen, & Gee, 2019). Google Trend maps the search frequency of individual terms over time since 2004.



Figure 1. Interest in New Work over time.

Figure 1 shows that the New Work concept remained in the resting phase until 2014. Since then, interest in it has continuously increased, up to a first peak around the turn of the year 2019/2020. Subsequently, possibly due to the Corona pandemic, there was a decline at a high level, which seems to have reached the old peak phase again towards the end of 2021.

If one tries to map the popularity curve with a view to the idealized phase division of management fashions, only the long start-up phase and the steadily increasing interest can be confirmed. The lingering at a high plateau phase and the slow decline that then sets in to a higher, stable level compared to the start-up phase cannot (yet) be confirmed.

Fashion Setters and Fashion User in the Arena

As soon as management fads emerge, they attract both providers and demanders. Kieser (1996) sees the actors in an arena where the participants cooperate with each other until the contract is awarded, as they all have an interest in the emergence and maintenance of the (new) management mode until then. Thus, management fashions take place on a market (Abrahamson, 1996) or in an arena (Kieser, 1997), whose actors are Fashion Setters (providers) or Fashion Users (demanders).

Fashion setters. The dissemination of management concepts is determined by Fashion Setters. These include, for example, management consultancies, so-called management gurus, conference organizers, publishers, or the scientific community itself. They all have in common that they can strengthen their (or their organization's) profit, reputation, or influence by spreading and perpetuating. The following will introduce some Fashion Setters in the context of New Work.

Management consultancies play an important role as providers. For example, McKinsey offers consulting services on the topic of New Work, Boston Consulting maintains the blog “The new way of working”, where contributions on the topic are offered. PwC regularly publishes new articles on the topic of New Work, and Deloitte discusses aspects of New Work in a podcast. What they all have in common is that in the first step they draw companies’ attention to the apparent necessity of urgent change and then in the second step offer their assistance in implementation. They benefit from mutual, cooperative publicity until the contract is awarded. At this point, they then compete.

The origin of every fashion is often associated with a guru, to whom individual representatives of science or practice then attach themselves and are seen as *primus inter pares*. They pick up the first ideas for a new concept and present it to the demanders. Not only in the startup scene is the guru status attributed to the New Work creator Bergmann. Following this, for example, Markus Väh (from organizational coaching) or Benedikt Hackl (from science) in Germany have been able to present the New Work movement as leading heads. They benefit from the movement through an increase in influence and reputation.

The popularization of management fashions takes place at conferences, seminars, or training sessions. This is where providers meet demanders. In events like the “New Work Future”, the “New Work Experience”, or the international conference “Brave New Work Conference 2021”, renowned Key Note Speakers (see Gurus) offer insights into the subject area. Thus, conference, seminar, or training providers and the speakers represented there, who can satisfy the demanders’ information needs, benefit from a new management concept.

The last Fashion Setter mentioned here are media providers. For example, Xing (a German competitor to LinkedIn), whose holding company has recently been operating under the name “New Work SE”, benefits from 1.7 million posts in its forums, LinkedIn attracts followers by offering podcasts on the topic of New Work. Publishers benefit from new management concepts, which allow them to offer new content to the public. For example, the personnel magazine advertises that it conveys to management “how to meet the growing demands of professional human resources work”.

Fashion users. Fashions are demanded by executives, companies, or organizations. Thus, management is both the object and subject of management fashions. They are the object because they are the target of all efforts by Fashion Setters (consulting firms, conference providers, publishers, ...) and the subject because they themselves have an interest in the spread of new management fashions.

Abrahamson (1996) explains the desire of executives for new management concepts by the fact that they are driven by themselves or externally, for example, by shareholders, to lead the organization to higher performance. New concepts promise (see rhetoric) to be able to close this gap. The use of a management fashion then appears rational.

The ideal image of executives is characterized by driving innovations, using new, improved management techniques, and creating value for employees and the organization. If new management concepts promise to help meet these high expectations, they are eager to adopt them.

The New Work concept offers itself as a solution concept in a transformation phase from an old economy to a digital economy, as it provides answers to questions that all organizations face. Through the ongoing digitization efforts and the simultaneous work-life-changing Corona pandemic, the understanding of work, technology, and strategy is changing. Here, executives can satisfy their need for security and demonstrate an awareness of societal, technological, and work-relevant problem situations.

Fads or Revolution?

Synthesis

The analysis of the key characteristics shows that New Work exhibits several features of popular management ideas and has high fashion potential. However, to arrive at a final assessment of whether the New Work concept is just a fad or a game changer, the perspective of time is still missing. The popularity curve seems to behave ideally at the current time. Whether there will eventually be a decline or if it will continue to rise over the coming years is yet to be determined.

If the hoped-for effects of New Work fall behind expectations over time, this could lead to a disillusionment of users and a decrease in interest. On the other hand, the phenomenon of the “persistent management fashion” (Perkmann & Spicer, 2008) is now also being discussed. If New Work manages to institutionalize itself (e.g., through training programs, conferences, specialized consulting companies, or seals of approval), the management concept appearing as a fashion could contribute to a permanent development and change in the business world.

Should We “Wear” Management Fashions?

In investigating whether a management concept is just a fashionable phenomenon or a long-term, success-conditioning development, the question arises as to whether the occurrence of management fashions is good or bad. Kieser (1997) tries to provide an answer to this.

Management fashions can be distinguished according to effective rhetoric and mere rhetoric. If managers manage to raise motivation and energy through the active and conscious use of management fashions, then a management fashion becomes an effective management tool.

At the same time, the hoped-for benefit of management fashion also represents the limit. Most will see through the rhetorical strategy at the latest when the next management fashion cycle comes along, so that at best the feeling arises that again “old wine is being sold in new wineskins” and at worst a cynical basic attitude towards all innovations in companies sets in.

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