

BREAKING THE WAVES OF SKEPTICISM AND EAGERNESS: THE PARADOXES OF KNOWLEDGE-SEEKING MANAGERS

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Abstract

The production and diffusion of management knowledge attracts an ever growing academic interest. However, most of the recent works, with few exceptions, have so far underestimated or even assumed the non relevance of significant issues such as the active role of managers in seeking knowledge for action and the role of mass media as carriers of management knowledge. In this paper we try to bring the agent (i.e. managers) 'back in' to scholarship addressing management knowledge dynamics.

Bringing managers into the management knowledge dynamics means to advocate the development of a consumption perspective replacing the so far dominant view of production and diffusion of knowledge. The consumption perspective emphasizes the twofold focus of media effects on knowledge dispersal and consumer effects on content. It is not simply consumption by passive commodity consumers, but is more akin to involved instrumental interaction by active clients.

By assuming the consumption perspective, management knowledge reveals some peculiar aspects. Management knowledge appears to be a heterogeneous bundle of ideas, ideologies, rules of thumb and technical features. This description is very far from the "quasi" scientific content assumed by most research in management knowledge diffusion. So, by proposing to look at management knowledge from the consumption side, we derive a different description of what management knowledge is and, as a consequence, a different view of why management knowledge is consumed, what are managers' consumption attitudes towards knowledge and how management knowledge is employed in action.

In order to explore these questions, we surveyed a group of managers with formal business school education. The findings can be summarized as follows: 1) management knowledge is perceived to emerge in relation to practitioners; 2) the decoupling of prestige-instrumentality is crucial for managers; 3) management knowledge is consumed for the sake of manager's network formation; 4) managing increasingly requires normative and cognitive practices vis-à-vis instrumental ones; and finally, 5) on-going organizational change requires more consumable knowledge in terms of volume and degree of differentiation.

Based upon the results of this exploratory attempt, we argue that managers as knowledge consumers oscillate between the skepticism towards what is out of their experience and the eagerness for inspiring new ideas. Sceptically eager managers perceive management knowledge as both a source of disenchantment and inspiration. This leads us to conclude by calling for more research on management knowledge in order to understand what it stands for and for revisiting the contents of the managerial task.

Management knowledge is increasingly the object of attention by management scholars. Recent pieces have described the production of fashions in management ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Spell, 2001), the cyclical rhythms of their expansion (Barley and Kunda, 1992) and the development of business rhetoric (Astley and Zammuto, 1992).

At the same time, this interest has led to investigations on the processes behind the diffusion of management knowledge. From a macro social perspective, it has been argued that the diffusion of management knowledge is linked with the spread of managerial ideologies and by-products of globalization (Czarniawska, Mazza and Pipan, 2001). From a micro perspective, it has been argued that the diffusion of management knowledge has been enhanced by the legitimising role exercised by the popular press (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000).

A third research stream has started arguing that the effects of these spread are highly controversial. On the one hand, managers tend to be increasingly sceptical about the usability of the management knowledge diffused (Watson, 1994; Gopinath and Hoffman, 1995; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000).

On the other hand, investigations have shown the increasing success of all types of publications regarding business-related topics (Huczinski, 1993) even those turning humanities into usable knowledge for management (see the pioneer work by Czarniawska and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994). As the success of many recent books on literary pieces for management confirms, managers seem to be eager to get new ideas for the daily undertakings.

So, as management knowledge gets more and more legitimated, empirical evidences support both the idea that managers are increasingly sceptical and the idea that they are increasingly eager. Is there a solution to this paradox? In this paper, we propose that adopting a different theoretical perspective on management knowledge diffusion, that of consumption, helps to solve that conundrum. The consumption perspective assumes that managers actively select the knowledge they need rather than passively receive what is diffused by other institutions such as business schools, consulting firms and others. By adopting this perspective, we try to bring the agent (i.e. managers) 'back in' to scholarship addressing management knowledge dynamics.

The paper is structured in three sections. First we introduce the consumption perspective and locate it in the existing debate on management knowledge. Second, we consider the empirical and theoretical consequences of the adoption of the consumption perspective. We present a) the empirical results of an exploratory study analysing why managers acquire management knowledge and b) theoretical arguments on the link between management knowledge and managerial action. Finally, we summarize our main arguments and point out some research avenues.

The Consumption of Management Knowledge

Despite a growing interest, management knowledge is still primarily thought of as an outcome of the activities of institutions such as universities, business schools, and consulting firms, diffused

through academic journals, professional books and conferences as the first ways of carrier institutions suggested (Alvarez, 1998). In a way, scholars investigating the diffusion of management knowledge have projected on the phenomenon their own mode to transmit it in the classrooms as well as in the academic and practitioner-oriented outlets. From this perspective, management knowledge is assumed to be scientifically validated knowledge. It is presented as a stable package of rules and prescriptions that can be neutrally “taught” in different contexts and to different audience (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994).

The development of the concept of management fashion (Abrahamson, 1996) has shown that management knowledge also consists of rules of thumb, craft and beliefs diffused by popular media. Waves of fashionable management practices follow each other in an “evolution without end” mode (Taylor, 1938). The fashionization marks the difference of management knowledge from scientifically validated knowledge.

In line with the post modern debate on knowledge (Lyotard, 1990), management knowledge starts to be thought of as “knowledge-in-practice”, and exists as long as it is embedded into practice. As accounted for by Gherardi and Nicolini (2000), management knowledge is relational, rooted in a context of interaction, and situated in a system of ongoing actions. Therefore it is local, embedded into artifacts and brings together emotional, tacit, and explicit aspects (Law, 2000).

We hold that this description of management knowledge does not fit the diffusion models sharing the New Institutional legacy (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994; Huff, 2000). A relational, provisional and context-based body of knowledge cannot be packaged and transferred. While diffusion implies stability across space and time, management knowledge is intrinsically unstable since it depends upon local and provisional arrangements. Moving from this analysis, we propose to adopt a consumption perspective.

In the context of this analysis, we conceive of consumption as the outcome of the actions of acquiring and putting-in-practice management knowledge. Acquiring accounts for the active role that managers play in defining what they think they need. Putting knowledge into practice accounts for the managers’ effort to make it actionable in specific contexts, in the course of enacting their organizational roles (Staw and Epstein, 2000).

From this perspective, acquiring knowledge reflects the personal choice of managers, shaped by local peculiarities, including the processes of socialization among peers and self-formation (Townley, 1995). So, acquiring management knowledge is not the passive act of receiving what is made available by educational institutions and consulting firms. It implies personal evaluations on the “stimuli” coming from many different sources, such as mass media, literature, art, etc. In this way, by adopting the consumption perspective, we are able to construct the map of what managers consider sources of usable knowledge and the reason why they acquire knowledge. In the next section, we will present the result of an empirical exploration of these processes.

In practice, knowledge and action appear inextricably intertwined in specific time-space locations. We argue that actionable knowledge is a wider concept than knowledge used to solve problems. By actionable knowledge, we mean the knowledge managers use to increase their resources and capability to make sense of their daily challenges and act accordingly. Knowledge can be used to solve problems if problems are defined and managers know the causal relation among the acquired knowledge and the solution to achieve. These conditions are applicable only to a limited set of the challenges faced by managers. As Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) underlined, problems are often ill-defined, solutions are available before the problems emerge, and the flows of problems and

decisions are rarely coupled or even tuned. So management knowledge does not provide only ready-made solutions; it provides managers with the sensemaking skills to select problems, establish criteria for action, and measures of success (Weick, 1995).

In the last two paragraphs we have outlined a few consequences of the adoption of the consumption perspective. In the next two sections, we make an attempt to a deeper analysis of these consequences. First, we present the results of an empirical exploration on how and why managers consume knowledge. Then, we introduce a theoretical approach to trace the knowledge-action link.

Managers Acquiring Management Knowledge

From a consumption perspective, managers may acquire management knowledge by many different means, in a continuum from more to less passive ones. By building upon the existing literature (Watson, 1994; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000)¹, we identify three basic modes of management knowledge acquisition by managers. These are, from less to more active: 1) *company policy*, 2) *imitation*, and 3) *personal discovery*.

Since the stock of internal knowledge and competence is commonly considered as the primary source of sustainable competitive advantage, companies develop complex policies to select management knowledge sources, their contents and high potential managers to educate properly. In this case, managers acquire knowledge often pre-determined by Human Resource departments. They choose providers (universities, business schools, increasingly consulting firms), means of delivery (in-house courses, training on the job, etc.). In this case, managers behave as passive consumers who are supposed to be able to find a way of applying the acquired knowledge in their actual job context.

The modes of management knowledge acquisition can be also imitated. Imitation may rise through the implicit pressure a group exerts on each of its members. Business organizations encourage this imitation by facilitating the interaction among peers and the process of socialization among colleagues. In this way, managers share information about relevant management knowledge available in the field. Imitation may also result from the diffusion of role models. Mass media have increasingly turned managers and “management heroes” into “*maîtres à penser*” on politics, fashion, sport and entertainment as well as management trends and future market drivers. Managers increase their personal legitimacy also by reproducing behaviours of these top managers. By selecting what to imitate, managers actively select areas of interest and, to a certain extent, knowledge sources.

Finally, managers are exposed to a large spectrum of information about management. Sources and contents are widely advertised, available through a variety of channels, and even debated in mass media. Bookstores and Internet afford a large space to management topics. Interestingly, a growing amount of novels and movies deal indirectly with managerial issues, both having managers as main characters and describing corporate life. Managers may acquire management knowledge by screening this wide offer on the basis of personal tastes and attitudes. In this case, management knowledge acquisition is triggered by covers, titles, headlines, and personal interests. Personal

¹ We also rely upon the reports of the research project “The Creation of European Management Practice” (CEMP) funded by the European Union.

discovery is the most active mode of management knowledge acquisition; it may direct towards any field; in fact it is up to managers' sensibility to find what can be inspiring for managerial action.

The modes described above regard the *how* of management knowledge acquisition. We have investigated the *why* through a survey on managers' reading habits. As a matter of fact, reading is still the main activity related to knowledge acquisition and written texts are on the desks and shelves of most managers (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000). We have elaborated a twenty-four questions survey divided into two sections. The first collects information about the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The second deals with the preferences on managerial book, popular business press, management education publications and academic management journals.

The recipients of the survey were the alumni of the Executive Education Programs, the MBA Program, and the International Executive Education Programs of IESE (Barcelona-Madrid, Spain) between 1994 and 1999. Though the sample is based on a single business school, we believe that it provides an insight on the reading habits of the population of MBA graduates and executives attending or having attended higher management education. A total of 4.925 surveys were sent; 261 valid filled-in surveys were received with a 5.29% response rate. This fits with the common response rate attributed to this kind of survey (5%-10%). Average age of respondents is 38; barely 10% are women, this introducing a potential bias in gender terms, though consistent with business schools experience (Sinclair, 1995).

Empirical Findings

Figure 1 shows that practical help with daily professional practice is by far the most frequently given reason for reading management articles. The second most frequent reason is reported to be to gain academic knowledge. To keep up to date on new developments in management is reported to be almost as important as to gain academic knowledge. The importance given to this issue tends to support the idea that the acquisition of management knowledge is not exclusively driven by contingent managerial problems to solve, even though practical relevance and some kind of scientific status appear more significant.

Taken at face value, the less frequent reason for reading management books is reported as *to be familiar with the latest best sellers in management*. However, it is interesting to underline how it might appear inconsistent that books are read to keep up to date but latest best-sellers are not considered attractive readings. This might reveal that reading management books does imply some acquisition of social prestige. However, it is not seen as valuable in itself but it has to be combined with some instrumental argument addressing practical managerial action.

insert Figure 1 about here

By looking at the sources of management knowledge, Figure 2 below shows that those sources related to professional pressure—long programs in business schools, learning from oneself, colleagues and/or superiors, specialized management books and seminars and conferences—are ranking high in usefulness. High prestige sources are associated with academic institutions and academic activities, such as academic publications, specialized management books and seminars and conferences. Whereas low prestige sources are defined as Radio and TV, Internet, Daily

Business Press and Specialized sections in general press.

As a consequence, usefulness and social prestige seem to be inversely correlated in choosing management knowledge sources, Figure 2 reveals that for sources like academic publications, long programs in business schools and learning from oneself, colleagues or superiors, social prestige and usefulness are ranked differently. They appear to be de-coupled: managers pursue both objects by relying upon different sources. So managers appear to justify their acquisition of management knowledge by relying upon instrumental arguments for practical knowledge and more social argument for more abstract knowledge.

insert Figure 2 about here

From the evidences shown in Figure 2, managers seem to link what they conceive of as useful knowledge with professional sources. We argue, however, that this link may reveal another implicit dynamic. Following the arguments on managerial justifications (Salancik and Meindl, 1984; Weick, 1995), we think that managers base the usefulness of management knowledge on its origin within institutionalized professional groups. In other words, managers do not believe of appearing incompetent or naive if the management knowledge they acquire comes from professional groups such as consultants and management educators.

As managers directly tie with peers, consultants, university professors, etc., in order to choose the management knowledge to acquire, those professional groups are able to influence their choice. In this way, the argument on social prestige gets clear. Managers perceive themselves as members of a profession (Follett, 1927; Wren, 1994; and see Byrkjeflot, 1998, for a critique) whose rules are developed by managers, consultants, management gurus and scholars altogether. So, social prestige is linked not only with being updated but also with aligning to such professional rules. From this viewpoint, we hold that social prestige underpins managerial readings, even though it seems linked on the surface with rational/instrumental arguments on knowledge usability.

These considerations pave the way for the introduction of the arguments on how management knowledge is put in practice. From the consumption perspective, to analyse how managers put management knowledge in practice means to analyse the link between knowledge and action. What is needed to study consumption is therefore a framework to study management knowledge in action.

Managers Putting Management Knowledge in Practice

Putting management knowledge in practice means transferring management knowledge over time and space. Since management knowledge is local, putting it into practice implies the managerial capability of bridging knowledge and courses of action. The concrete organizational artifacts (procedures, rules, systems, objects) are our point of departure to analyze this bridging.

Agents, in their quest for acting and breaking extant rigidities of stable organizational junctions, create new connections and structures of control. These become objectified in organizational rules and praxis ultimately becoming artifacts (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) embodying actions preferences and knowledge. So management knowledge gets trapped within organizational networks, practices, rules, systems, procedures, and physical objects. In order to make it

transferable to other contexts, management knowledge has to be dis-embedded (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) from the fabric of relations and action it is trapped in. Dis-embedding knowledge from its context means its de-contextualization and its translation into a portable form. This form could be another artifact which can travel from one place to another—e.g. a routine, a budgetary procedure, a production layout, etc.—or a more tacit element carried out by people. In the latter form, management knowledge frames the general cognitive framework which guides behaviors and decisions; that is what Bacharach, Bamberger and Sonnenstuhl (1996) name *logic of action*. Logics of action are cognitive frames embodying “the implicit relationship between means and ends underlying the specific actions, policies, and activities of organizational members” (Bacharach, Bamberger and Sonnenstuhl, 1996: 478). Logics of action also provide managers with the arguments when justifications for action are required (Bacharach, Bamberger and McKinney, 2000).

What is interesting to notice is that once management knowledge is translated into logics of action, managers have to use their imaginative power to apply these logics to mobilize people and undertake fresh actions. We concur with White (1992) that the core of the managerial task is the ability to open rooms for fresh action by breaking strong ties and reconfiguring existing networks of actors. In order to perform their task, managers have to be able to re-embed knowledge into new contextualized actions. Re-embedding implies the development of ties with actors, the mobilization of external constituencies, the configuration of new networks of actors and the like. So, it is at the heart of the political dimension of managing.

The dis-embedding/re-embedding process is not the outcome of conscious planning; it goes back and forth, allows for controversial or “hypocritical” moves, at least in the short run (Brunnson 1989). From this perspective, translating management knowledge into managerial action is to build consensus and mobilize constituencies on priorities and specific courses of action. It is noteworthy that these political dimensions are reminiscent of the difference argued by Robert Michels’ (1959) between organisational leaders and politicians within political parties.

Propositions

Building upon the process depicted above, we make an attempt to define a set of theoretical propositions about the management knowledge-managerial action link. These propositions are sketches of a theoretical framework to derive testable hypotheses from. We build them to identify the main elements of a theoretical framework rather than to empirically validate them as they are. In this sense, further contributions could refine and turn these arguments into empirical themes.

As described above, management knowledge trapped into concrete actions and artifacts, has to be dis-embedded in order to be translated into a different context. Following these arguments, we could argue that a consistent part of the management knowledge consumed by managers originate from what is already embedded into current praxis. So, in line with Barley, Meyer and Gash (1988), we expect that most management knowledge should emerge from extant practices and experience and then rationalized by academic institutions consulting firms and mass media. This dynamic provides an interpretation of rising skepticism of managers towards management academic knowledge; in fact, it may appear as a mere rationalization of what is already available in the form of experience-based heuristics. The following Proposition 1 is derived.

Proposition 1

Management knowledge emerges in the management context and flows later to academic institutions, consulting firms, and mass media.

By applying Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) intuition, to get physical objects done and goal attained in their organization, managers are called for to match the flow of management knowledge with the flow of actions. As our survey on managers' reading habits shows, we could expect that the flow of knowledge and the flow of action have no *a priori* synchronicity upon logical/rational or chronological premises. In other words, managers deal with knowledge flows not only to support actual problem solving but also to generate actionable alternatives in the future.

Managers cannot act as rational optimizers and cannot have perfect information on future challenges and on causal chains of events (Roethlisberger, 1954). So, we hold that managers cannot develop rational rules to couple knowledge and action or to select and store management knowledge. Managers need to open rooms for as many links between knowledge and action as possible. The actual completion of the link—i.e. the use of logic of action to make a given artifacts done—depends upon locally situated conditions. In this sense, to increase the availability of knowledge-action links, managers are eager to acquire as much management knowledge (in broad terms) as possible. The following Proposition 2 is derived.

Proposition 2

In order “to make things done”, managers increasingly requires management knowledge from educational institutions, consulting firms and mass media over time.

Finally, the arguments above converge to give a picture of the managerial task as increasingly political and less technical. Managers are called for managing expectations of success by properly undertaking strategic actions (Oliver, 1991). Managerial legitimacy is continuously put at stake by markets volatility. So expectations of success have to be met very fast in order to display success and keep a high reputation internally. In so doing, according to our arguments, they need to accelerate knowledge consumption by extensively acquiring scientific management knowledge, knowledge dis-embedded from previous actions and perspectives, management knowledge legitimated by fashions. Among them, fast revolving fashions and fads introduced by periodicals are particularly available to renovate expectations of success. So mass media are expected to become more and more important channels of management knowledge. The following Proposition 3 is derived.

Proposition 3

The relative weight of periodicals as vehicles of management logics of action is expected to increase.

In the next section, these propositions and the related theoretical arguments are discussed and developed.

Eagerness, Scepticism and Fashionization: A Political View of the Knowledge-Seekers Managers

In the previous sections, we have sketched a few examples of the application of the consumption perspective on management knowledge. The arguments presented there can be summarized into two main issues, each of them enabling peculiar line of research explorations: 1) the relevance of the consumption attitudes of managers and 2) the dynamic of the link between management knowledge and managerial action. Below we discuss these issues and present elements for future research.

In his recent “What to read and Why”, the noted literary critic Harold Bloom (2000), referring to narrative, affirms that people read in order to enlarge the sense of otherness, in order to heal the pains of solitude, and to practice the sense of irony. Our arguments show that his can be applied also to managers in order to explain how skepticism towards management literature and eagerness towards knowledge are bridged. Reading habits emerges as a relevant topic if the consumption perspective is assumed to observe the management knowledge dynamics. We hold that managers read for reasons not essentially different from readers of fiction. Then managerial action explains the basic dynamics of consumption of managerial ideas.

Data from many research (Huczinski, 1993; Mazza and Alvarez, 2000) indicate that business books and other publications are issued at an increasing rate. A good deal of this literature is not technical, but have important motivational elements, that is, it can be read as texts that both require and elicit the active imagination of the reader. The input that the specific and idiosyncratic act of reading provides to decision-making processes, the reading habits of managers, and the role of written media in the diffusion of business knowledge are therefore interlinked issues.

As it has been already mentioned, managers read a lot, and incrementally so. This eagerness for knowledge transmitted through texts is parallel, perhaps even related, to similar increases in the advice industry, in executive management education, as well as to the recent concern on knowledge management. To assume an active role of managers in consuming knowledge imply the acknowledgement that the traditional role of education and consulting firms may be put at stake. As many scholars underline (Porter and McKibbin, 1988; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000), scepticism on the usefulness of business education is rising.

Besides that, managers read very different genres (from technical to motivational texts) from very different media (from books to newspapers to magazines). Moreover, text that are essentially non technical enjoy a widespread followership. Interestingly, some of the reading habits of managers, specially those of motivational texts, seem to follow the cycle of fads, as it has been thoroughly researched (Abrahamson, 1996). The supposed wave-like or cyclical nature of the evolution of business knowledge, as if no true building up were taking place, has facilitated that in some academic circles business knowledge, and the very managerial job been seen with suspicion, as an irrational activity in need of legitimated cum legitimating knowledge.

We believe that analyzing the reasons and contexts of managerial reading opens two key avenues of research. One goes to the heart of managerial action. We sustain that action in organized settings require the use of imagination for action that can only be educated through the reading of narratives. The second consequence of the previous argument, will serve to advance in the research conceiving of managers as passive and rather powerless consumers of knowledge, without much influence either on the contents and on the process of management ideas’ transmission. Future research can no doubt improve our exploratory effort in describing the link between knowledge and action

Our propositions on the link between management knowledge and action point out the primarily political nature of the managerial task. Implications of this assumption are manifold. First, the

managerial task is conceived of as unobtrusive, what White calls managing by indirection. Third, setting up structures, selecting staff and then giving autonomy is more politically effective than managing operational details. Finally, organizations are a socially constructed reality and therefore managing sense-making—and there is no sense-making without discourse and rhetoric—is at least as relevant as control systems.

The view of managerial action as highly political leads to a notion of managers as experts in long-term strategic action through playing short-term local games. This political model of managers corresponds to what March (1988) poses: executives should be seen as political brokers that relentlessly, from the power base of coalitions they need to build and continuously maintain, negotiate the composition of the firm and bargain its goals. However, while political theories of organizations have existed for a long time in organizational theory (among others, Cyert and March, 1963; Hickson et al., 1971; Pettigrew, 1973), they have never become hegemonic, nor have managers' tasks been widely recognized as essentially political, with the exceptions of few practitioner-oriented works (Kotter, 1985; Pfeffer, 1992).

Also amplifying the political content of managerial work is the commodification of organizations. The coordination of units, only loosely subject to hierarchical umbrellas, is impossible to achieve with a stringent command-and-control style. All these features are pushing managers to become more like mobilizers of collective action, like leaders of social movements created around specific and transitory issues, or like coordinators of a number of small or middle size cells, or of transitory teams enacted around projects. Years ago, Zald and Berger (1978) noted emerging analogies between the organizational tendencies of economic organizations and social and political movements. This analogy is much closer today.

Third, an essential summary of the consequences for managers, and for their development, of the organizational milieu and the repertoire of tactics just described is less than novel. The thrust of our arguments was made in perhaps two of the most lucid and still valid reflections on the challenges of managers in promoting collective action through their decision-making and their acting (Roethlisberger, 1954; and, following him, Athos and Coffey, 1975). Roethlisberger (1954) states that managers should try to apply several sets of knowledge to concrete situations. Among these different knowledge are the following. Knowledge that state what the appropriate behavior of persons in groups should be (the so-called norms of behavior). Second would be the knowledges of behavior (regardless of time, place, and circumstance). Third, the knowledge which persons have about themselves and to which they have to be true and consistent. Fourth, the knowledge that state the logical conditions that must be obtained if the purposes of an organization are to be sufficiently secured. Finally, the knowledge that state what the behavior of a person should be if verifiable knowledge about things and people is to be acquired (scientific knowledge).

Athos and Coffey (1975) affirm that these dimensions have to be balanced continuously in the daily job of managers. Moreover, this balancing is a very personal challenge. As Roethlisberger recognizes, managers develop by, at the same time, balancing these dimensions and the growing awareness of the complexity of relationships in concrete phenomena. In this sense, the way knowledge allows for purposeful managerial action is at the core of any managerial accomplishments. In search of this balance, managers look for a wide spectrum of knowledge for managerial purpose, far wider than that offered by traditional management education. This explains the rising skepticism on traditional management knowledge—seen as a sign of *cultism*, that is what Roethlisberger calls the emphasis on one dimension of knowledge at the expense of the others.

Most probably, this cultism is at the root of some of the phenomena of fads that take place in the realm of management knowledge.

The reaction to cultism leads to the increasing eagerness towards management knowledge sources. No wonder then that managers recur to narrative, or make fictional readings of texts. They need, as Bloom, would say, to heal their solitude among so much uncertainty and complexity, hear stories that could help to understand the predicament of others, and of themselves towards those others, to come to terms with the fragility of success. If a social actor needs the “consolation” of fiction this is decision-makers and actors in organizations.

Although we can not make conclusive statements, we tend to agree that managers are not so far removed from Bloom’s fiction readers. Managers mainly play political games in their daily work. As for most readers, reading is for managers a primary source of ideas, techniques, inspiration and imagination for action, for the moves in their political games. Managers have no alternative sources for their consumable knowledge and hence the following paradox emerges: managers’ skepticism about the content of management publication is at the very heart of their continuous spread. Managers cannot replace reading with other means of knowledge acquisition. The institutional legitimacy of media disseminated knowledge offers justification even as the contingencies of managing push managers to seek new knowledge, new inspiration. In other words, they are compelled to live with their skeptical eagerness in our media-saturated world.

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FIGURES

Figure 1

Main reasons for reading management books

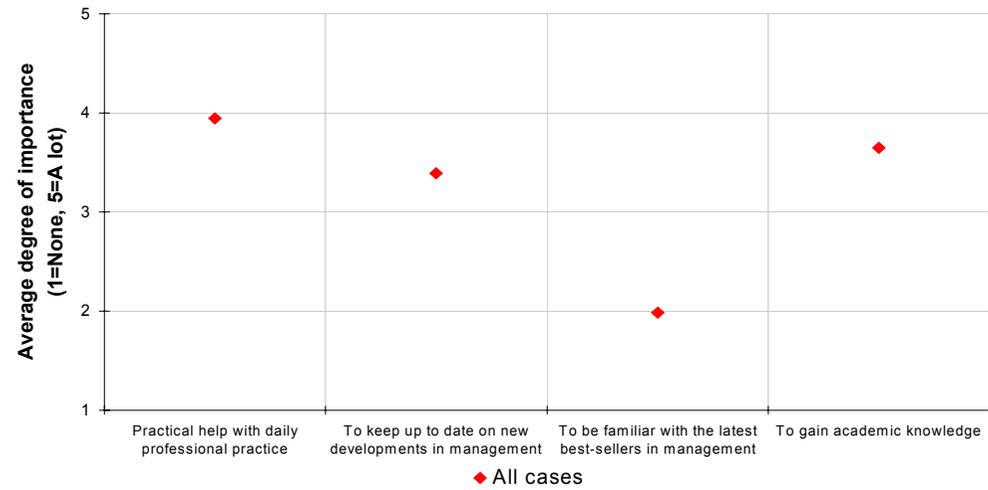


Figure 2
Prestige and Usefulness of sources of information on new management practices

