Chapter X
Knowledge Management and IT Research and Analysis Firms: Agenda-Setters, Oracles and Judges

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ABSTRACT

The chapter discusses the role of IT Research & Analysis firms in the diffusion of knowledge management. The research is based on content analysis of reports and research notes concerning knowledge management, issued by the most influential analyst firm Gartner in years 1997-2003. It identifies three predominant roles of analysts: agenda-setters (focusing the public discourse on selected issues), oracles (offering ambiguous promises) and judges (selecting concepts, technologies and vendors). While critically evaluating the influence of IT Research & Analysis firms, the chapter documents important passages in the history of knowledge management.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter presents a critical perspective on knowledge management, analyzing the involvement of IT Research & Analysis companies in promotion and subsequent rejection of the approach to organizational IT-enabled changes. Literature emphasizes the rhetorical aspects of recommendations and points to fundamental errors in knowledge management initiatives (Fahey, Prusak 1998; Nonaka, Reinmöller 2001). Dramatic changes in the adoption of this approach can also be interpreted using the model of management fashions (Abrahamson 1991; Kieser 1996; Czarniawska, Joerges 1996; Swan- son, Ramiller 1997). Faced with the stunning popularity of knowledge management, consulting firms and software vendors started re-branding
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solutions and services, previously offered under other „labels”. They were joining the bandwagon since 1996, but later modified their marketing literature once again as soon as the concept lost its commercial appeal around 2001 (Klincewicz 2006). The inherent „interpretative flexibility” of knowledge management opened opportunities for its incommensurable interpretations by various professional communities (Swan, Robertson 2001). Management ideas diffuse through translations into objects and institutions (Czarniawska, Joerges 1996), and the original concepts may acquire new meanings in this process.

Management fashion arena brings together multiple parties, deriving commercial or other interests from promoting the fashion (Kieser 1996), among them: book authors, consultants, academics, software vendors, website owners, conference organizers, publishers and headhunters. The chapter focuses on a selected group of players in the arena: IT Research & Analysis (IT R&A) firms such as Gartner, IDC or Forrester Research. They monitor and interpret industry events and trends. Even though often perceived as „the voices of independent reason, interpretation and analysis” (Franson 1997), their interpretative activities can also make sense of technologies, establish markets and create new value (Swanson 2000). As the research will demonstrate, they played an underestimated role in defining the concept of knowledge management, promoting related technology solutions and re-defining the market several years later to trigger the abandonment of the knowledge management theme by IT vendors and customers.

The chapter discusses revenues streams and scope of activities of IT R&A firms, as well as differences from traditional market research and consulting firms. It outlines their difficulties in balancing between two sometimes contradictory tasks. IT R&A firms serve the general public by publishing impartial technology and market reports, including quantitative forecasts and vendor evaluations. The reports are used by technology customers as „shopping lists”, and by the financial community as indicators of potential future investments (Franson 1997). At the same time, IT R&A firms work closely on consulting or copywriting assignments with individual customers - technology companies, which are at the same time evaluated in published reports (Konicki 2001). The arising ethical dilemma is parallel to experiences of the investment banking industry, especially as IT R&A firms cannot actually be held accountable for their predictions and recommendations.

The case of knowledge management popularity seems particularly well-suited for the analysis. The concept has multiple interpretations, is very popular but promoted in incommensurable ways by diverse professional communities. The analysis helps identify direct influences of IT Research & Analysis firms, contributing to the conceptual „buzz”.

The chapter presents translations of ideas into objects and institutions. It does not intend to criticize IT Research & Analysis companies, nor „denounce their wrongdoings”. Proposed interpretations would rather focus on the intertextual character of these translations and unintended influence mechanisms. From this analytical perspective, „being objective” is not a feasible intent for market participants due to the nature of perception and decision making processes, and the interpretative role of opinion leaders can become an important source of power.

IT RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS FIRMS

Analyst firms, which specialize in high-technology markets, are often referred to as IT Research and Analysis Services or IT R&A (comp. Firth, Swanson 2005). They inform potential technology customers and vendors about changes in the marketplace, including opportunities and challenges related to innovations, thus influencing custom-
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