Problematising “Innovation” as a Critical Project

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


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

One line of continuity in studies of work, organizations and management has been a focus on relations between technology and labor. We maintain that focus in what follows, tracing out the rhetorical and practical traffic that flows across initiatives in new product development, work redesign and organizational change. Our interest is in developing the proposition that valuation of innovation and the “new” comprises the extension of a deeply traditional frame in Western, particularly American culture. This frame operates, moreover, within a cultural imaginary that places the individual actor over against a naturalized environment – a competitive field of action – that necessitates a certain order of response. This holds equally for corporate actors, for whom innovation is characterized as essential for “survival” in a changing competitive environment, and for workers, for whom change

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1 The word “imaginary” is a term of art in recent cultural studies (see Marcus 1995, p. 4). It shares the nice quality with the more colloquial term “imagination” of evoking both vision and fantasy. In addition, however, it is used to reference the ways in which how we imagine the world is shaped not only by our individual experiences but by the specific cultural and historical resources that are available to us based on our particular positioning within it.
involves sloughing off obsolete skills and acquiring new ones as a prerequisite for continued employment. There are no heroes and villains in our story, albeit that the benefits and costs of innovation initiatives are distributed unevenly across the various actors involved. Constrained as individual actors, corporations and workers are equally entrained in a frame of change-as-necessity. Within this frame the burden of change falls to the individual – whether corporation or worker – who must “get with the program” or be left behind.

**PRODUCING IMAGES: ACME BLACK BOX**

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

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

**Reinventing identity**

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2 We adopt this felicitous pseudonym following Newman 1998. Our purpose in using a pseudonym here is less to disguise the organization discussed than to mark the possibility that the story we tell is not idiosyncratic to this organization, but rather is emblematic of a more general direction in relations between the management of products and of corporate identities.

3 Put this way, repositioning seems a highly systematic project devised from some central place and then implemented. The actuality of the situation is far from this, characterized instead by an ongoing series of distributed and to some extent disconnected, more and less effective moves by different actors across the relevant networks. What the effects are or were of a given initiative, moreover, is subject to debate.
The first wave in Acme's reinvention of itself from a light lens copier manufacturer to a producer of digital systems began in the early 1990's, when the company launched a new "corporate identity program." This process involved the adoption of a secondary descriptor, "The Document Company" following the company name. This descriptor was intended, among other things, to define a territory for the company's products more open-ended than that suggested by the traditional copier product line. The company name ensured recognition, while the descriptor "The Document Company" afforded a strategic ambiguity amenable to expansion across new document forms and media.

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

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

Repositioning products

In order to succeed within the territory defined by the digital imaginary, Acme must not only reinvent its identity but offer products identifiable as digital. The Document Systems announced in the mid-1990's represented the first of what promised to be a lineage of digital products. Management wisdom within the company assigns primary responsibility for the success or failure of these products to sales personnel, specifically their willingness and ability to grasp the implications of the new digital product line and convey it effectively to customers. Instructions for how to sell the product are provided

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4 More accurately, perhaps, this effort began in 1970 with the founding of Acme's premiere computer research center. Cash rich, and facing the imminent loss of its exclusive patents and associated hold over the photocopier market, Acme invested in the research center as a kind of stake in the ground for what at that time seemed a distant, but inevitable, turn to the digital. It was not until the 1990's, however, that Acme made a concerted effort to reposition its core product offerings around networked, digital technologies.
in the form of "The Knowledge Kit," a collection of scripts provided in three-ring binders with accompanying video, CD ROM, and diskette of PowerPoint slides. The key message of the kit is that the Document Systems are unlike previous company offerings: that they are "a totally new category" of machine.

One aspect of the Knowledge Kit that interests us here is the extent to which the marketing of these products is oriented to the problem not of their functionality (though of course that is part of what sales people need to learn), but of their identities. In particular, the products must be presented to the customer as "new," as qualitatively different from either the company's previous products or the offering of the competition. This turns, for example, on distinctions made in the Knowledge Kit between the characterization "device" or "system." Products that would appear to be in the same class (machines that combine copy, scan, fax and print functions) are designated "multifunction devices" in charts comparing the Document System products with the competition. Sales people are instructed explicitly to be sure that their customers do not think of the Document System as a multifunction device, but instead as a "digital system." This distinction then underwrites a claim of incomparability between the Document System and its competitors, however similar their functionality might appear to be.

Another aspect of the Knowledge Kit is its status as a technology for implementing sales training for the new products. The Kit presents all of the materials needed to conduct a Document Systems "Awareness Workshop." The workshop is implemented in ten modules, including scripts (each of which takes the form of a text to be spoken and instructions for which of the accompanying PowerPoint slides should be presented). A note on the title page explains that:

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

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

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

“Acceptance of change” as a strategic category

Detailed, performance-based labels have always existed for sales agents at Midwest, usually derived from the company reward system. So, for example, “travelers” refers to agents who regularly sell enough to participate in annual bonus vacation trips. During more than four years working with the company, however, we observed the emergence and use of new categories for labeling sales agents constructed specifically around their response to the company’s innovation initiatives. In particular, we traced the emergence of a new, dichotomous system of categorization which contrasted agents accepting of the general thrust of innovative business directions to those agents who were said by their managers not to “embrace change.” While this distinction was sometimes characterized as a difference between so-called “new” and “old” agents, the difference did not appear to be organized around age or tenure per se. The key differentiating feature had to do with whether agents “bought into” the new company direction. Labels for the “resistant” agents included agents who have “plateaued,” “flatliners,” “pond scum,” “slugs,” “men of extinction” or “sleepers and squeakers.”

This kind of labeling, which forces a population of workers into two opposing camps, is a familiar one in labor relations. In this respect it is consistent with many previous divisions (manual/mental, blue/white collar, union/nonunion) that have segmented the labor force in the past (Braverman, 1974). Particularly since the 1940s, various forms of segmentation have emerged coincident with the decline of the drive system (i.e., assembly line) (Gordon et al, 1982). Here, then, is one way in which “innovation” in the

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5 While there are some similarities to Acme, for Midwest the rhetoric does not so sharply characterize the innovations as “new.” In fact, a fair amount of work is put into making connections between the old and new ways at Midwest. This might be explained at least in part by industry differences: a privately held insurance company may be less pressured than a publicly owned technology company to be “innovative,” and more inclined to maintain “tradition.”

6 Though there often was a correlation insofar as older, more experienced agents were also more skeptical of the new corporate directions.
workplace, rather than creating something new, effectively perpetuates an old - divide and conquer - managerial strategy.

**Easing the effects of “innovation” on customers**

During our period of research at Midwest we had occasion to observe, in detail, an experimental training program offered to Midwest agents in one region. The program was geared toward motivating - or more accurately re-motivating - mid-career, “plateaued” agents. One early workshop on goal-setting, for example, very explicitly focused not only on business goals but on personal goals as well. By the end of one series, the agents participating joked that the class was as much for “attitude development” as “agent development.”

Consistent with the larger agenda of the company, this training experiment was intended to encourage agents to “accept” corporate-initiated innovations. The class offered ways by which agents could maintain the older tradition of warm, friendly, customer service yet still develop “more professional” customer relations. An upper-level manager claimed that there need not be any conflict between these old and new ways. “You will have to be an agent who cares enough about policy holders to have a business relationship with them,” he explained. The director of the experimental program echoed this sentiment when he said “I have systems and I have passion.”

Beneath a surface of innovation, in other words, are companies seeking ways to buffer their customers from the rougher edges that can result from competition and rationalization (for example, voice mail replacing a helpful human voice). Very often, particularly in service industries, it is employees who are asked to fill the gap between old and new, taking up the emotional labor of “service with a smile,” or “total customer satisfaction” (Steinberg and Fighart, 1999).

**“Innovative employees”: make or buy?**

Midwest has a long history and tradition of personalized internal development of its agents. An emerging practice is a shift, at the strategic level, toward “competency-based human resource planning” in which consultants determine the “competencies” required to become a top performing agent. The intention is to use the profile to develop and assess current agents, and to recruit and screen new applicants. The key competencies include “strategic leadership, sales impact and personal impact.” Consistent with the individualist frame that underwrites the culture of competition and the imperative of continuous improvement, assessment is based on an individual psychological analysis of “competence.”

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

Across these changes in employment policies we find a consistent pattern of rhetorics and practices that reinforce constructs of individualism. The emphasis on the individual’s responsibility to acquire relevant skills and bring them to the job market is a growing trend in human resources policy, increasingly reinforced by the rhetoric of a “free agent” economy. More concretely, policies putting workers “in charge” of their own careers, benefits and pension plans all reinforce the large-scale shift in responsibility and accountability from the corporation to the individual worker. Bourdieu characterizes this process in terms of a “neoliberal” economic strategy that progressively undermines the grounds for joint action:

Finally, this competition is extended to individuals themselves, through the individualization of the wage relationship: establishment of individual performance objectives, individual performance evaluations, permanent evaluation, individual salary increases... individualised career paths; strategies of “delegating responsibility” tending to ensure the self-exploitation of staff who, simple wage labourers in relations of strong hierarchical dependence, are at the same time held responsible for their sales, their products, their branch, their store, etc. as though they were independent contractors...All of these are techniques...[that] converge to weaken or abolish collective standards or solidarities (Bourdieu, 1999).

By defining inherent traits as dominant over systemic or socially constructed realities, initiatives framed in terms of new attitudes and skills perpetuate a tradition of laissez-faire, competitive individualism. Whether by creating yet another category of divisiveness (accepting or resisting change), by personalizing skills, or by reifying individual agency, the social character of work and the innovative potential of collective action are denied.

“INNOVATION” AS A CONSERVATIVE PROJECT

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

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

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

1) Innovation and change are indigenous aspects of technologies-in-use, work practice and organizational life. Even to keep things going on “in the same way” in practice requires continuous, mundane forms of active appropriation and adaptation of available resources – discursive and material – to the circumstances at hand. And every workplace includes among its members some who take it upon themselves to reflect upon, to experiment with, and to introduce improvements to their current ways of doing things. These are often front-line supervisors, whose innovative interests contribute to their promotion to a position of oversight or monitoring, at the same time that they remain close enough to the everyday work that their change efforts are well-grounded. This stands in contrast to the view of organization members as intrinsically conservative, simply reproducing the status quo until some professional designer or organizational change agent comes along to insist that things be different. The place of designers and change agents on the alternate view is less to introduce innovation than it is to contribute to ongoing activities in a useful and productive way.

2) Sustainable innovations are dependent upon substantial investments of time and resources in infrastructure development. By “infrastructure” in this context we mean to include a range of social relations and material arrangements. Social relations develop only with time, and material arrangements require human labor to put them in place and keep them going. This means that innovation and change are inevitably costly undertakings, and require associated commitments to their ongoing, long-term development.

3) Innovation is less a question of singular inventions or wholesale transformations than a matter of what we have described elsewhere as artful integrations (Suchman 1994). The premium placed on discrete, discontinuous change events, and the generally negative value attributed to processes of
“incremental” change are part of a form of wishful thinking that aims to bring about desired transformations without the associated costs in time and human effort. In contrast, a frame of artful integration emphasizes the ways in which new things are made up out of reconfigurations and extensions to familiar environments and forms of action. While less available for ownership by individual “change agents,” innovation of this latter kind, we would suggest, has deeper roots and is more likely to produce change of lasting value.

4) Large, highly visible change agendas may actually create incentives to keep local innovations hidden. Insofar as the latter are dependent on particular social relations and ways of working, their appropriation into global initiatives runs the risk of destroying the very conditions that make the local innovations possible.

Resistance to change is commonly cited as a characteristic of organization members, arising from their (largely irrational) attachment to the status quo and something to be overcome if the introduction of new technologies and business processes is to be successful. In contrast, we might view the term “change” as one useful tool for an agenda concerned with ensuring that, under changing conditions, distributions of symbolic and material reward stay pretty much the same. We are then left to find alternative readings of resistance and change, understood as reasonable responses to actual shifts in the technological and organizational landscape. First, we need to recover a sense of “resistance” as a form of action. And second, we need to re-examine “change” as a conservative project. What are the origins of “change initiatives”? Whose interests are represented?

One implication of the alternate view that we have outlined above is that resistance to change, in the sense of resistance to the premises and consequences of agendas initiated under that banner, may in fact be a requirement for long-term, substantive innovation. The same editorial cited in our epigraph continues:

Forward thinking - for theorizing and organizing - might reside in the contiguity of the past, the present, and the future as we chart the repetition of the paths we are tracing, the small changes in which we are involved, and the possible massive consequences of those changes and repetitions as we go along (p. 372-3).

Resisting initiatives framed as heroic and global but aimed at maintaining existing distributions might give greater power to those modest and local interventions aimed at more radical forms of innovation. Rather than accept the label of “resistant to change,” then, we might embrace an alternate position of resistance and change.

References

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