PART 4

CONSULTANTS AND MANAGEMENT FASHION

CHAPTER 16

CONSULTANTS IN THE MANAGEMENT FASHION ARENA

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16.1 INTRODUCTION

THE change in tastes and convictions as a reaction to past tastes and convictions has been called 'fashion' (Blumer 1969). Fashion is ubiquitous. No area of social life is immune to it. Fashion denotes artefacts that are in accordance with the ruling taste or with ruling convictions. Kawamura (2005: 4) proposes that fashion provides 'extra added value [. . .], but the additional value exists only in peoples' imaginations and beliefs', thus implying that following the crowd offers some—if subjective—advantages over deciding independently on the acquisition of clothes or other items. One advantage is that, according to Czarniawska (2008: 849), 'fashion is one of the ways of introducing order and uniformity into what might seem like an overwhelming variety of possibilities' (see also Esposito 2004). At the same time, fashion, to some extent at least, fosters innovation: individuals imitate approaches that appear to be attractive, which 'leads them to translate management ideas, objects, and practices for their own use. This translation changes what is translated and those who translate' (Czarniawska 2008: 851). Thus, fashion is paradoxical: individuals follow fashions to demonstrate their uniqueness (Esposito 2004). Fashion combines the orientation towards generally accepted examples with the need for distinction (Simmel 1957). Often, fashions are not necessarily reasonable at first sight (Veblen 1949: 115). To drive an off-road vehicle off-road is not necessarily fashionable. To drive it in a city, perhaps is.

Management knowledge is a field in which fashions are highly relevant phenomena. If one takes a look at the field of management over the past decades, one will notice that

large fashion waves such as corporate culture, total quality management (TQM), or business process re-engineering (BPR) rolled over it and left some traces. Each of them was the focus of attention for some years, then faded from the management discourse either because they became matter of course—a practice generally implemented—or because they turned out to be flops. To speak about management without speaking about fashions seems to be as impossible as it is to speak about fashions without speaking about the consulting industry and its tremendous growth (see Part I of this Handbook). Not only are the names of consultants such as Tom Peters or James Champy closely linked to the creation of some of these fashionable concepts, consultancies also play a major role in the dissemination and local adaptation of management fashions. But how can consultants as 'rational experts' in a seemingly rational business world create and foster fashions whose implementation is not only paradoxical, but perhaps might not even be reasonable to some extent?

The existence and mode of operation of management fashions and the particular role(s) consultants play in this context will be in the focus of this chapter, which will give an overview of the existing literature on the topic and conclude with some further thoughts on the future of fashions and consultants. In the following, the chapter will first describe some characteristics of management fashions as identified in the extant literature. The next section will present the different actors in the 'management fashion arena', as discussed in the literature, and a model that has been proposed to highlight how different circumstances and particularities of fashions and consulting services collude to create a 'vicious circle' that leads to an ever new demand of consulting services and management fashions. Subsequently, the chapter will discuss the nature of the rhetoric that has been identified in the literature as helping consultants to establish management concepts as cure-alls and fashions. Drawing on the research about the relationship between consultants as producers and disseminators of a fashion and managers as its consumers, the chapter will then deal with a critical examination of current developments on the part of clients and their potential influence on the effectiveness and power of consultants' strategies discussed so far. The last section will point out new directions for future research on management fashions and consultants.

16.2 Defining Management Fashions

Abrahamson (1996: 257) characterizes management fashion as 'a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads to rational management progress' (see also Carson et al. 2000). Whereas this definition suggests that a management fashion is triggered by an increasing number of people being convinced that a specific management technique increases performance, for other definitions it is the discourse around a management concept that constitutes a management fashion. The management concept is vague and usually gets vaguer during

the discourse as different consultancies develop variants and other actors contribute interpretations. In this vein, Benders and van Veen (2001: 40) define fashions as 'patterns of production and consumption of temporarily intensive management discourse, and the organizational changes induced by and associated with this discourse'. Such a definition is in line with Kawamura's (2005: 78) definition of fashion in clothes, according to which fashion 'emanates from many sources and diffuses in various ways to different publics'. Actors in this system are fashion forecasters, fashion editors, department store buyers, fashion magazines, and periodicals. In the management fashion system—or arena—different actors play an important role, too, as will be discussed in the next section.

That a management fashion is rather the discourse around a concept than the actual changes triggered by it is also reflected in its measurement. Usually, a fashion is measured through the publications or citations that refer to it. However, bibliometric measures of this kind do not necessarily reflect a high rate of adoption and vice versa (Clark and Greatbatch 2004; see also Nijholt and Benders 2007). Of course, a management fashion as a discourse can nourish the strong collective belief in the rationality and potential for success of the underlying technique mentioned by Abrahamson (1996: 257). Changes induced by a management fashion discourse may become institutionalized and thus persist long after the respective discourse has come to an end (Perkmann and Spicer 2008). It is also perceivable that the organizational changes triggered by a fashion discourse are only of a peripheral nature and might even get revoked, or that a fashion discourse triggers changes that misrepresent the discourse. As Benders, van den Berg, and van Bijsterveld (1998) point out, it is not uncommon for consultants to interpret the contents of a management fashion like re-engineering differently, according to their customers' expectations or cultural backgrounds (see, e.g., Woywode 2002). In other words, it may be advisable to decouple a management fashion from the traces it leaves in organizations (Vastag and Whybarl 2003). Thus, a definition of management fashions as *management concepts that relatively speedily gain large shares in the public management discourse* seems to find broad acceptance.

But what is a management concept? Management concepts are 'fairly stable bodies of knowledge about what managers ought to do' and consist of 'a system of assumptions, accepted principles and rules of procedure' (Birkinshaw, Hamel, and Mol 2008: 828). Usually, a management concept starts with a text. A book or an article describes a new approach to solving a management problem or a bundle of problems. This text triggers comments, other articles, reports of applications of the concept, and so on. Sooner or later a label like 'TQM', 'lean production', or 'scientific management' is assigned to a new concept that is about to gain popularity. It is difficult to find out retrospectively which was first, the practice or the buzzword. Usually, an organization or a group of organizations that apply a certain practice become the object of a broader interest because this practice seems to solve a problem that many organizations are struggling with (Nicolai, Schulz, and Thomas 2010). The following two sections will take a closer look at the issues that define management fashions.

16.3 The Management Fashions Arena and Its Participants

The literature suggests that the participants of a discourse around a management fashion can be seen as acting in an arena—the arena of the respective management fashion (Clark 2004a; Faust 2002; Green 2004; Kieser 1997; Parush 2008; see Figure 16.1). These actors include consultants, gurus, management scholars, editors of management magazines, commercial seminar organizers, and managers (see also Abrahamson 1996: 264). All these actors except managers are united in their goal to increase their profit or the profit of their organizations by increasing the discourse arena through luring further participants into it. Consultants, publishers, and seminar organizers can increase the sales and profit of their organization if managers or other interested people buy management books on the fashion, subscribe to management magazines that publish articles on the fashion, and attend and commission seminars. For academics, a fashion opens a field for publications—be they critical or supportive—and for occasional paid lectures.

Consultants, including academic consultants like Porter, Kaplan, or Norton, are seen by many authors (e.g. Abrahamson 1996; Clark 2004a; David and Strang 2006; Faust 2002; Fincham and Evans 1999) as creators of the majority of management fashions. They not only label a practice with a buzzword, but also feed the fashion discourse with the basic goals, principles, and advantages of a fashionable concept, and market this concept as a frame for potential consulting projects. Successful fashions like BPR meant projects of more than US$7 billion worldwide (Jackson 1996). The consultancy business
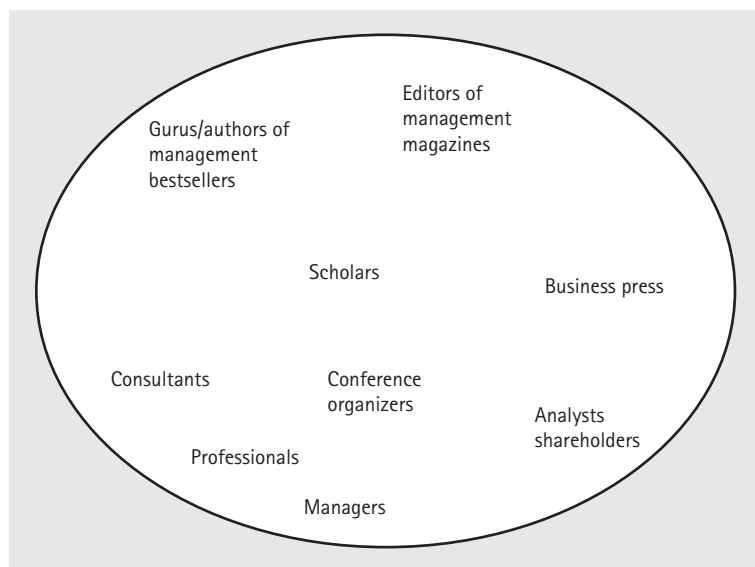

FIGURE 16.1 The arena of a management fashion

of James Champy, CSC Index, increased its turnover from US$30 million in 1988—that is before his co-authored book *Reengineering the Corporation* appeared—to US$150 million in 1993 (Jackson 1996: 576).

Another group of actors in the fashion arena are *management gurus* (see also Clark, Bhatanacharoen, and Greatbatch, Chapter 17, this volume). Gurus and consultants are sometimes difficult to distinguish and are often used interchangeably in the literature (Fincham 2002). Gurus are different from consultants insofar as they usually are not aiming in their public communication at generating consulting contracts, but rather at selling books and seminars in which they appear as stars (Clark and Salaman 1996; Greatbatch and Clark 2005; Huczynski 1993; Jackson 2001; ten Bos 2000). The guru seeks 'ideas suitable for mass appeal' (Fincham 2002: 203); he (with very few exceptions gurus are men) is a master of tastes and activates emotions (ten Bos and Heusinkveld 2007), whereas the consultant looks for techniques that he or she sells on the basis of rational arguments (Fincham 2002). Gurus primarily celebrate basic values and ideologies—values and ideologies that are not controversial among managers (for a study on the relationship between ideology and management fashion see Parush 2008). They transport these values and ideologies through gripping stories, many of which are hero stories (Collins 2007; Greatbatch and Clark 2005). Common laughter triggered through jokes by the guru performer creates the impression of easiness and group cohesion (Greatbatch and Clark 2003). However, as ten Bos (2000: 21) emphasizes, 'it is virtually impossible to become a management guru without being a consultant'. But he also maintains that 'while it must be granted that many gurus are consultants, only a few consultants will become gurus' (ibid.: 21).

Management scholars are not suppliers of management fashions unless they fall into the category of 'scholar-consultants' (Adler and Beer 2008: 552; Werr and Greiner 2008: 94). Critically reflecting on management fashions and thus transferring them into the scholarly discourse is typical for management scholars, as Barley, Meyer, and Gash (1988) show with regard to the concept of organizational culture. Management science and consulting, it is suggested, follow different logics with the effect that not only the complexity of scientists' knowledge is higher than that of consultants, but that management science's overall structure of communication is more complex as well (Kieser and Leiner 2009; Kieser and Wellstein 2007). The consequence is that it is extremely difficult to transfer scientific management knowledge into practical problem-solving knowledge (Kelemen and Bansal 2002; Nicolai 2004). Nevertheless, communication in the management science arena can stimulate communication in the fashion arena (Astley and Zammuto 1992). Moreover, by theorizing popular management concepts (Colwyn-Jones and Dugdale 2002; Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings 2002; Scarbrough, Robertson, and Swan 2005)—even if in a critical and sceptical manner (see, as an example of a critical assessment of organizational culture Alvesson 2002)—academics contribute to the legitimization of the respective management fashions. Sometimes consultants and gurus enlist academics as legitimators. Thus, in their bestselling management book, Peters and Waterman (1983) refer to, among others, Chester Barnard, Herbert Simon, and Karl Weick as providers of insights relevant for their work.

As a consequence of the different logics of management and academia, *popular media*, especially management books and professional journals—not scientific media—are seen as the main mediators of management fashions (Mazza 1998; Spell 2001). Publishers and editors provide a forum for the presentation of attractive management concepts— as sensationalistic as possible—and for their discussion from different perspectives, above all from the perspective of managers who have implemented them. Thereby, publishers and editors only increase the interest in the fashion and the number of actors, but the sales of management books and magazine subscriptions. Thus, in this phase they are the consultants' allies. However, in a fashion's downswing they could as well become its enemies if they come to the conclusion that denouncing the fashion raises more interest than its continued support.

Professional groups also play a more active role in the dissemination of management fashions than scholars (Dooreward and van Bijsterveld 2001; Fincham and Roslender 2004; Scarbrough 2003; Scarbrough, Robertson, and Swan 2005). Professional groups such as accountants or IT experts have been identified as gatekeepers for fashions and often have a substantial voice in assuring their adoption. In order to maintain legitimacy, professional groups feel called upon to develop an independent view of concepts that are propagated by consultancies. In this role, they often question the packaged solution of consultancies that leave little room for their participation in implementation processes (Heusinkveld and Benders 2005). As Scarbrough, Robertson, and Swan (2005) point out, the professionals' reinterpretations often lead to specific variants of a management fashion.

Moreover, *shareholders and analysts* have a role in the fashion arena. While Staw and Epstein (2000) found that companies which were reported to have implemented management fashions did *not* achieve higher economic performance, these companies nevertheless received more positive coverage in the press than their competitors and were perceived to be more innovative and better managed. Thus, following management fashions can generally contribute to a company's legitimacy. Last but not least, there are a number of other fashion intermediaries in the arena such as companies *offering training to managers* or *conference organizers* who also profit by making a concept more fashionable and a management fashion even more accessible and fashionable.

Besides the groups just mentioned, *managers* are important and often overlooked players in the management fashion arena. On the one hand, they are held up as the creators of some management fashions (Clark 2004a). For example, TQM emerged out of US companies' efforts in the 1980s to improve quality in response to the market losses to Japanese companies offering better quality (Cole 1999). Government initiatives like the foundation of the Baldrige Award in 1987 supported this movement of companies and of industry associations that resulted in the TQM fashion (Zbaracki 1998). Benchmarking is said to have been invented by Xerox managers (Camp 1995) and Six Sigma by managers from Motorola and General Electric (Pande, Neumann, and Cavenagh 2000). However, in these cases, the discourse seems to be fed mainly by consultants, including the inventing managers who increasingly take on the roles of consultants.

More importance is assigned to managers by the literature in their role as *consumers* of management fashions—the fashion arena would not exist without them. But why are managers attracted to fashions? One factor is that first movers, that is, managers who adopt a practice before it turns into a fashion, might be able to achieve a first mover advantage. However, since the advantage of a fashion is extremely hard to support empirically, managers often implement a fashion or a management concept as it emerges as a fashion simply because innovations are expected of them: 'The ideology of good management [...] associates managers with the introduction of new ideas, new organizational forms, new techniques, new products, or new moods' (March 1981: 573). What Simmel (1957: 548) wrote in 1904 about fashion in general still applies to managers: '[T]he individual derives the satisfaction of knowing that as adopted by him it [the fashion] still presents something special and striking, while at the same time he feels inwardly supported by a set of persons who are striving for the same thing [...].'

Following this logic, by adopting a management fashion, managers appear innovative while, at the same time, they feel safe since many others have already implemented the concept and many more will follow. In an increasingly complex and dynamic and thus rather uncontrollable inner and outer environment, the adoption of management fashions provides both an enhancement of (felt) control by the managers and legitimacy for the organization. According to the neo-institutional theory, this isomorphic behaviour is not an outflow of irrationality; rather, it can be interpreted as 'collective rationality' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). What several other organizations do cannot be wrong; if one does not achieve an advantage by also doing it, one at least does not suffer a disadvantage with regard to others, because these others are also doing it, that is, they are also spending comparable amounts of money on the same measure. As Kant (2006: § 71) formulated: '[I]t is always better... to be a fool in fashion than a fool out of fashion.'

Managers are also seen to find management fashions attractive because they provide an ideological framing of restructuring programmes. For example, empowerment programmes (Ezzamel and Willmott 1994) as well as programmes for the implementation of internal markets (Eccles and White 1988), which are sold under the labels of decentralization and self-co-ordination, can in reality serve to make hierarchical control more effective. And by offering 'package solutions'—commodified instruments (Abrahamson 1996; Fincham 1995; Heusinkveld and Benders 2005; Suddaby and Greenwood 2001)—consultants legitimize projects and relieve the managers of a detailed reasoning and implementation design. Moreover, the management fashion delivers a pattern of argumentation that helps to interpret a complex restructuring project as worthwhile and successful—a matter in which initiators of the restructuring process typically have an elementary interest.

A proper evaluation of such projects, most authors agree, is not possible mainly because too many factors within the organization and its environment have changed during its progress, because the implemented concept is, to a large extent, an intangible product, and because many consequences of the project will only become evident some time in the future (Alvesson 1993; Clark 1995; Ernst and Kieser 2002; Meyer 1994). In such a situation, a fashion delivers 'ideas, metaphors, models, and words that impose

order on a confusing world, thus reconstructing our appreciation of experience' (March 1991: 29). This is illustrated by Brunsson and Olsen's (1993) analysis of several large restructuring processes in the public sector. In several of these projects they found that next to nothing had changed at the level of operations—predominantly the communication about some management processes had changed—but management nevertheless expressed satisfaction with the results. In this way, management fashions facilitate reaching consensus that a reform was successful without having to prove that on the basis of empirical evidence. With the help of consultants the organization introduced a practice that everybody labels a 'best' or at least an appropriate practice.

However, as Ernst and Kieser (2002) argue, because there is an abundance of management concepts that all promise simplification, complexity actually increases. Moreover, the wave of projects along the current fashion is likely to intensify competition with regard to criteria that are at the centre of a fashion. Most competitors have, for example, improved quality, reduced personnel costs, sped up processes, or increased their customer orientation. Ultimately, insecurity has not only not been reduced, it has probably risen. In this situation, Ernst and Kieser (2002) suggest that receptivity towards a new management fashion tends to increase again. And managers who were not able to deal with previous fashions without the help of consultants are highly likely to call on consultants again. They have gained the impression that consultants are necessary to keep up with competitors that increasingly engage consultants. They are caught in a 'vicious circle'.

In this logic, consultants and managers are seen as the key actors in the fashion arena. Consultants generate fashions because fashions create demand for their services. With fashions, they simultaneously create certainty and uncertainty with clients. Uncertain clients often feel dependent on consultants. Here, a basic motivation of managers to follow fashions is that they can initiate innovations without having to take the risks that are usually connected to innovations.

16.4 COMMUNICATION IN THE FASHION ARENA

Several authors (Furusten 1999; Green 2004; Kelemen 2000; Kieser 1997; Røvik 2002) point out that whether a management concept turns into a fashion or not is, to a large extent, dependent on the rhetoric that the consultancy and other creators and intermediators apply in propagating it. The literature sees the *buzzword* or *label* that arouses attention as a first important ingredient of this rhetoric (Furusten 1998; Swanson and Ramiller 1997). Good buzzwords are metaphors. *Re-engineering*, for example, implies more than a repair of the organization, it calls for a total redesign, while, at the same time, creating the impression that the organization can be engineered in a rational engineer-like manner. The *Balanced Scorecard* (Kaplan and Norton 1996) triggers associations of sports events, fitness, and championships.

Exemplification, personification, and dramatization are additional rhetorical ingredients regarded as important in the extant literature. Fashion setters, it is pointed out,

should not present new management concepts as their own creations but as the condensed master plans of ingenious practitioners. Peters and Waterman, for example, do no more than explain *Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*, as the subtitle of their book implies (Peters and Waterman 1983). Lean production is presented as being the masterful discovery of the 'young Japanese engineer' Eiji Toyoda and his 'production genius' Taichi Ohno (Womack, Jones, and Ross 1990: 53). As pointed out by, for example Collins (2007) as well as by Greatbatch and Clark (2005), stories are easier to remember and to communicate than abstract principles or numerical data.

The core of a management concept is identified as a *vision* or *Leitbild* that consists of a number of goals and principles (Christenson and Walker 2004; van den Steen 2005). Visions that communicate management concepts fulfil, as Ramiller and Swanson (2003) explain, three basic functions: *interpretation, legitimization, and mobilization*. The vision provides a focus for interpretation efforts. On the basis of a vision, managers can reinterpret problems within their companies and initiate discourses that attract the attention of colleagues and subordinates. Legitimization can be derived from the cases of best practices that 'prove' the validity and power of the concept. The higher the reputation of early adopting companies, the higher the degree of legitimization that managers can derive from the management fashion. The values that a *Leitbild* conveys motivate—and mobilize—the addressees.

The literature further suggests that management concepts appear particularly attractive if they suggest simple solutions for solving problems that appear highly complex (Collins 2000; Furusten 1999; Huczynski 1993). Fashion setters achieve *simplification* in several ways, for example by concentrating on only one factor that is identified as being the most crucial factor for success, such as organizational culture (Peters and Waterman 1983), quality, leanness (Womack, Jones, and Ross 1990), intrapreneurship (Pinchot 1985), or virtuality (Chesbrough and Teece 1996). It also helps that the labels are most often metaphors: internal entrepreneurs are much more effective than powerful bureaucrats (Pinchot 1985), tent organizations more flexible than palace organizations, network organizations more adaptable than centralized conglomerates (Peters 1992), and boundaryless and virtual organizations are the most flexible of all. As has been highlighted by several authors, such strategies also result in a *vagueness* of the concept (Alvesson 1993; Fincham and Roslender 2004; Giroux 2006; Graham and Williams 2005) or, as Benders and van Veen (2001) term it, an 'interpretative viability', which is fostered by the discourse itself. Different actors, especially different consultancies, publish variations. The managers who follow the discourse interpret these variants as possible options and as design latitude. Such ambiguity is not only unavoidable but functional, as it, for example, permits managers to project the problems they perceive in their companies into the concept and this evokes the impression that the help of consultants is needed to concretize and implement a fashion.

Indeed this vagueness, the literature points out, requires that a management fashion is adapted into specific contexts (see, for example, Benders, van den Berg, and van Bijsterveld 1998; Fiss and Zajac 2004; Sanders and Tuschke 2007; Boxenbaum and Battilana 2005; Morris and Lancaster 2006; Woywode 2002; Rolfsen and Knutstad

2007). The fashion discourse itself describes a management fashion only vaguely so that the implementation process is not covered in any detail (Benders and van Veen 2001). The institutionalization of management fashions needs political, technical, and cultural work for adapting the concept and preparing the receiving organization (Perkmann and Spicer 2008). Here, an intra-organizational fashion arena is seen to build up, encompassing several actors and resembling the 'big' fashion arena. For instance, professionals and consultants who specialize in certain industries and countries assume important roles, adapting broad concepts into company-specific solutions. David and Strang (2006) show that, as a management fashion loses popularity and impact, generalist consultancies with weak links to the technical foundations of the fashion are increasingly replaced by specialist consultancies focusing on technical aspects.

In sum, since, as the literature has shown, the performance of a fashion's implementation is hardly assessable, a fashion's success—that is, the number of client organizations following the fashion and the volume of their investments into it—depends very much on the rhetoric with which the fashion is communicated. The fashion is communicated through a *Leitbild* or vision whose main characteristics are simplicity and vagueness. Simplicity increases the fashion's plausibility and vagueness permits the linking of the fashion with specific organizational problems.

16.5 Recent Changes: Whither Management Fashions?

As the extant literature suggests, the success and effects of management fashions and the profits these yield for consultants largely depend on the consultants' abilities to stimulate the clients' needs with the help of processes such as those examined in the two previous sections. But while the critical literature has traditionally portrayed the client as very trusting towards consultants and as a 'victim' or 'marionette' of consultants' rhetoric, manipulation, and impression management (Clark 1995; see also Clark and Salaman 1996; Kieser 2002; Kipping and Armbrüster 2002), this notion is increasingly being questioned (Sturdy 1997a; Sturdy 1997b; Czarniawska and Mazza 2003; Hislop 2002). The distribution of power and control between clients and consultants today is regarded more and more as dynamic and dependent on situational characteristics, such as the competence and sophistication of the client in dealing with consulting projects (Fincham 1999; Sturdy 1997a; Sturdy 1997b; Werr and Styhre 2003).

In this context, recent empirical evidence suggests that clients have started to replace their hitherto rather informal, individual, and unsystematic approaches towards consulting projects and their 'lack of emphasis on outcomes' (McGivern 1983: 381; see also Dawes, Dowling, and Patterson 1992; Stock and Zinszer 1987; Wright and Kitay 2002)

with more professional, sophisticated, and control-oriented ways of managing consultants (Bäcklund and Werr 2005; Lindberg and Furusten 2005; Mohe 2005; Werr and Pemer 2005; Werr and Pemer 2007). Clients, it is suggested, tend to increasingly formalize, centralize, and rationalize their management of consulting projects and show themselves to be quite critical and distrustful with respect to the consulting industry; they treat consultants and the 'buzzwords' they bring along more matter of factly or even cynically (Engwall and Eriksson 2005; Jung 2008; Sturdy 1997a, 1997b). Such developments might have consequences for future trends with regard to both the power of fashions in general and consultants' role in their creation and distribution more specifically.

Whereas, for example, a few years ago the IT sector was a breeding ground for important fashions such as ERP (Benders, Batenburg, and van der Blonk 2006), e-commerce, or the dot.com hype at the beginning of the millennium (see also Bloomfield and Danieli 1995; Bloomfield and Coombs 1992), Jung's (2008, 2010) qualitative study in eight client companies suggests that it is no longer sufficient that an (IT) solution is regarded and propagated as up to date for managers to have a detailed justification for its introduction (e.g. Ramiller and Swanson 2003). Instead, formalized project applications and cost-benefit analyses that demonstrate the business value of each investment are required to start a consulting project, and the consultants' performance is said to increasingly evaluated *ex post* (see also Haferkamp and Drescher 2006). Moreover, the personal ties between managers and consultants are being intentionally broken more and more often (Bäcklund and Werr 2005) by involving purchasing departments as central gatekeepers in the selection and buying process (Lindberg and Furusten 2005; Jung 2008). Such arrangements could make it more difficult for consultants to sell their concepts to clients on the basis of their personal relationships with specific managers or by directly addressing managers' personal needs without offering real fundamental and verifiable improvements for the company as a whole.

Moreover, the individual managers themselves also seem to be eager to develop strategic aspects and the big picture by themselves and to only bring in consultants later on (Jung 2008, 2010) as well as to achieve tangible outcomes rather than only a concept on paper that is in danger of disappearing into a drawer (Richter 2004; Richter and Niewiem 2006). This also reflects the relative decline of strategy consultants indicated by Kipping (2002). Moreover, the clients in Jung's (2010) study increasingly attach importance to concepts or ideas that have already been successfully introduced in other companies. It seems difficult to impress them with the kind of dramatized stories of outstanding managers or companies described in the previous sections. They rather look for proof that the solution is used in companies 'within reach', that is, companies of the same industry or size and/or those that are known to the clients and where experiences with the solution can be sought. In this context, Nikolova, Reihlen, and Schlapfner (2009: 295) recently report a tendency in consultants' rhetoric to focus on tangible reference projects: 'Clients were not only presented with success stories, which were common to all other consulting companies, but also got to see "empirical evidence" as a support for the presented story.'

However, the latest academic research also reveals that some of the clients' developments towards a more sophisticated and tightly controlled management of consultants are predominantly rhetoric (Werr and Styhre 2003) or façades of rationality and organizational hypocrisy respectively (for these concepts see Brunsson 2002; Nystrom and Starbuck 1984; see also Meyer and Rowan 1977). Thus, many of the measures introduced in the course of 'professionalizing' the purchase and management of consultancy services were not adhered to in everyday organizational life (Lindberg and Furusten 2005; Jung 2008; Bäcklund and Werr 2005). Often, many organizational members, including top managers, are not really interested in completely giving up their valued and trusted long-term relationships with their consultants and their freedom to select the consultants and projects they assume to be the best (see also Höner and Mohe 2009). However, in a business climate characterized by reproaches such as the uncontrolled growth of consultants within client companies (Mohe 2005) and the public denouncement of the consultants' tricks and misconduct, clients must increasingly and 'demonstrably' justify the use of consultants to shareholders and stakeholders. At the same time, in many cases neither the design nor the enforcement of centralized and formalized evaluations is as comprehensive as it might be (Jung 2008).

The literature also points out that the (organizational) benefits and effects calculated in the run up to projects are very seldom re-audited and followed up on (Jung 2008; see also Grant et al. 2006). In many cases, it seems to be sufficient that any presentable and communicable result is achieved at all—for example, the error-free running of the information technology—even if the intended organizational changes were not realized. Moreover, if there are formalized *ex post* evaluations of the consultants' performance they still seem to be very subjective. In Jung's (2008) study, for example, these evaluations turned out to be short questionnaires to be completed by one person, for example the project manager, and contained subjective assessments rather than measurable results of the project's effectiveness and the consultants' contribution. Lindberg and Furusten (2005: 170) found similar evidence: 'There are even cases when the evaluation criteria included in the contract document are developed together with a specific consultant so as to fit that consultant perfectly.' Moreover, even if some clients apparently increasingly want to determine the cornerstones of their projects and strategies themselves, only bringing in consultants later on in the projects, this does not mean that consultants no longer influence idea generation or problem recognition. They still play an important role in shaping decision-makers' imagination of what is possible with the help of fashionable concepts, and through (informal) dialogues or regular workshops (Jung 2010).

Thus, while the more recent literature hints at potential restrictions in the future power of fashionable concepts and consultants' use of them, it also highlights the fact that there continues to be a place for management fashions, and that these fashions do not really have to deliver what they promise. These and other developments and issues discussed throughout the chapter, as well as their relationships, open up new directions for future research on the role of consultants and management fashions. The conclusion will point out some of the more important ones.

16.6 NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

A first important direction for future research concerns the way management fashions are presented. Consultants and other participants in the management fashion arena might generally have to adjust their *rhetoric* in the future, moving away from the very broad visions and nowadays often critically viewed all-embracing 'buzzwords' as well as the universal validity of concepts towards more 'tangible', implementation-oriented rhetorical elements, as some of Nikolova, Reihlen, and Schlapfner's (2009) results suggest. Rhetoric that aims at exemplification might perhaps put a stronger focus on stories of 'successful' adoptions of management concepts in companies that are known to clients or similar to their own companies and where experiences can be exchanged, rather than on success stories of famous, outstanding companies. In this context, it might be interesting to take a look at the future *form and structure* of fashions. It may, for example, be small or local fashions, or variations of large ones, which are promoted and sold under different labels adjusted to a specific clientele, that gain in importance—concepts that do not create the impression that one merely follows a 'real' fashion.

Furthermore, it might be asked whether consultants continue to play one of the most significant roles in the fashion arena and to what extent *actors* other than consultants could become more important. For instance, it is up to future research to gain a more comprehensive insight into whether clients' current efforts to 'professionalize' their approach towards consulting projects will erode consultants' impact and legitimation or whether the present changes might even rebuild the power of the consultants. For instance, if Jung (2008, 2010) is correct in thinking that clients' new formal, half-hearted evaluations of consulting projects are not necessarily more valid or comprehensive than the informal ones that had been carried out before, these evaluations will not help to break the 'vicious circle' of creating demand depicted above. Rather, they might foster it. If these evaluations—which are still very subjective, easily manipulable, and thus seldom really negative—are taken as official, reliable, and objective assessments of the consultant's performance, they become 'proof' of the success of the consulting project. Thus, when insecurity rises again after some time, the cycle might continue with an even higher receptivity of managers towards a new management fashion. Carried to extremes, one might wonder whether being critical, evaluating, controlling, planning, and railing against consultants is just another fashion itself (Clark 2004b).

Furthermore, hitherto largely neglected participants in the management fashion arena and their interrelationship with consultants deserve a closer investigation. For projects, for example, where it is important to be innovative and up to date, Jung (2008, 2010) found that managers had more trust in the expert knowledge of software houses than in the consultancies, and believed the software providers to be more capable of real innovations; however, they also feared the software houses' biases and self-interests in assessing clients' situations and needs. Therefore, occasionally different—and thus more instead of fewer—external advisors were called in, with consultancies being used

to review the concepts proposed by the software houses. In other areas of knowledge, it would be interesting to know whether financial analysts might perhaps gain importance as some kind of more trustworthy, 'independent' supra-experts and to what extent they might sanction clients' reliance on fashionable concepts. Do companies that explicitly distinguish themselves as followers of specific fashions like TQM or BPR impress analysts and investors and thereby increase shareholder value (Nicolai, Schulz, and Thomas 2010)?

Last but not least, a group scarcely explored not only in the literature on fashions but also on consulting per se are former consultants. Client managers with a background in consulting often seem to have 'created a more knowledgeable and potentially sceptical clientele for consultancy services' (Kitay and Wright 2003: 35). On the other hand, many consultancies establish and cultivate large and powerful networks with their former members (e.g. Byrne and McWilliams 1993; Wright 2002). Moreover, Sturdy and Wright's (2008) empirical results reveal former consultants' difficulties in identifying with their new employers. One might thus wonder what influence the growing linkages between clients and consultants, resulting from the consultants' diaspora, are going to have on future decisions with respect to consultants and management fashions, and to what extent clients might further develop their role not only as consumers, but also as producers of management fashions. Thus, much remains to be done in terms of future research on consultants in the management fashion arena.

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