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by Liv Gish and Christian Clausen, DTU Management Engineering, Technical University of Denmark

Panel no 79 - On the road: journeys of innovations and prospects

Title

The transformative journey of a product idea and the stabilising role of particular knowledge objects.

Abstract

An increasing focus on companies' ability to innovate has developed over the last decades. Especially the work with ideas is perceived as a central activity in the innovation process. In this line Van de Ven (1986) characterizes the process of innovation as: "the development and implementation of new ideas by people who over time engage in transactions with others within an institutional context".

In this paper we will develop an understanding of how such transactions unfold over time. This is done through an analysis of the development process of the "A" labelled Alpha Pro circular, launched by Grundfos, a Danish pump manufacturer. We will especially pay close attention to how ambitious visions, trends in society, new technologies, as well as new constructions of users and markets have influenced the engineering designers' work with ideas over time. However, this journey has not been without disputes and controversies. But instead of perceiving these disputes as obstructing we argue that they should be viewed as constructive controversies which offer the opportunity to yield new perspectives and outcomes for the future.

Moreover, contrary to common presumptions in innovation management the journey of a product idea is seldom a stable or linear endeavour (Akrich, Callon, Latour 2002). Perceptions of what constitute a relevant product idea seems to transform several times before stabilized in a viable and marketable product. But if we say the content and identity of a product idea is not stable, how can this transformation be characterized and understood? What is the stabilizing or transformative role of particular knowledge objects in this process and how do they interact with, defend themselves from or enact institutionalized frames and dominant understandings in established organizational practices?