

## **Innovation and sensemaking**

*Problem: What specific IM problem does the submission focus on?*

There is a small, but growing body of literature that applies a sensemaking perspective to understand an innovation (Seligman, 2006; Dougherty et al., 2000; Cooper et al., 1997). It is commonly understood that the meaning of innovation is ambiguous, and subject to multiple interpretations by organisational actors (Bessant and Tidd, 2015; Van de Ven et al., 2008). When practitioners encounter moments of ambiguities, they seek to achieve a common sense and shared understandings. This research aims to explore the extent to which a sensemaking is a useful frame of analysis to explain ambiguities of innovation.

*Current understanding: What is known about the problem, who and how it has been tackled before?*

Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework has notably been previously applied for the purposes of interpreting perceptions of innovations. Hill and Levenhagen (1995) argued that entrepreneurs or innovators make sense of the environment (sensemaking) and then communicate to others to gain support (sensegiving) through metaphors and mental models (defined as a common interpretive scheme). Research by Coopey et al. (1997) demonstrated how innovations within an IT company are socially enacted within the organisational context. Of particular note is the way this research challenged unitary models of organisation by explicitly taking power relationships into account. They further argue that the perceived novelty of supposed innovations depends on a collective process of making sense of disruptive events within the constraints of social relationships.

Dougherty et al. (2000) further showed the importance of organisational sensemaking for so-called "innovative firms". Their comparative study demonstrates the differences in how organisational members framed market and technology knowledge and the products and businesses to which this knowledge was related. Members from "innovative firms" saw themselves as engaging in knowledge practices and processes that were part of ongoing relationships with customers. They worked with shared understandings of the goal on the same problem and readily interacted to make sense of unexpected events and situations. In contrast, members from "less innovative firms" lacked a frame that trigger collective sensemaking. They understood market and technology knowledge as disconnected assets, and

their sensemaking reflected this understanding. Dougherty *et al.* (2000) emphasise a lack of inter-subjective meaning making.

Seligman (2006) specifically discusses sensemaking in respect to the innovation-decision process. Without being particularly convincing in terms of empirical evidence, the discussion nevertheless highlights the need for further research analysing stories of innovation from a sensemaking perspective. The relationship between sensemaking and innovation is seen to be affected by organisational context. Jay (2013) shows how sensemaking about paradoxical performance outcomes built the organisation's capacity for innovation. The organisation was driven by competing logics, so that any result that could be understood as a success through one lens was also constructed as a failure through the other lens. Sergeeva (2014) focuses on "social", "retrospective" and "ongoing" properties of sensemaking, but fails short in providing an overarching framework of understanding innovation through all seven sensemaking properties. These examples suggest a consistent pattern regarding the importance of sensemaking in understanding an innovation. They also suggest a demonstrable need for further research applying a sensemaking perspective to understand innovation.

*Research question: What is submission's goal?*

Two main research questions are posed: To what extent sensemaking perspective provides an explanation to innovation? How and why innovation become recognised in organisations?

*Research design: How precisely & in detail was/will the work be executed-describe the methodology/approach*

Fifty in-depth interviews have been conducted with senior managers from UK construction and infrastructure firms. The aim was to understand and explain the meaning which senior managers attach to innovation. The interviews were one-to-one and typically held in offices. Most interviews were a little over an hour. The interviewees came from a range of different backgrounds with a diversity of core qualifications. Indicative questions of interviews included the following:

- What do you understand by an "innovation"?
- Is innovation an individual or collective activity?

- To what extent are “innovations” immediately recognised as such by everyone in the organisation?
- Are the judgements about innovation success/failure changing over time?
- Do past experiences influence present and future innovations? Do you re-interpret the past in order to re-construct the future?
- What are the contextual factors that in your experience shape the innovation process?

The specific aim was to understand and explain how practitioners make sense and narrativise innovation. The interviews were tape-recorded, and then taped interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The process of transcribing was an excellent way of becoming familiar with the empirical material. The transcripts were read several times over with a focus on narratives which were mobilised regarding the enactment of innovation. The analysis involved a continuous moving back and forward between the entire dataset. The researcher started with noticing and looking for patterns of meaning and potential interests in the interview transcripts. The analysis involved coding the textual material, identifying one or more passages of text that, in some sense, exemplify the same theoretical idea. The identified themes were cross-referenced with the sensemaking properties across the interviews, and are discussed below.

### *Findings: Outcomes and results*

From a flux of ongoing activities organisational actors may or may not notice and extract cues for closer attention (Weick et al., 2005). In the context of noticing cues, organisational actors interpret and make sense of something that has already happened. A completed act may be labelled as “innovation”, from the point of view of an organisational actor (Seligman, 2006; Cooper et al., 1997). The role of the actors who impose labels on organisational activities is central in the process. Activities are labelled in ways that predispose actors to find common sense. To generate common sense is to inter-subjectively (collectively) agree about labelling. It can be argued that labelling is an inter-subjective process, meaning that two or more individuals try to find a consensus. Organisational actors continuously interact, share meanings and consensually label activities. Activities are labelled as innovations in ways that assist actors to find common sense. Labelling may be shaped by a variety of social

circumstances. For example, previous discussions and interactions with other actors may shape present interpretations and actions.

Individual and collective sensemaking processes can be described as ongoing: social actors make sense of what they did retrospectively and make sense of future actions. The sensemaking process can be described as an ongoing process: the “saying” leads to a shared, interactively developed meaning; “saying” can lead to actions, acting is part of a flux of organisational activities until communication gives the shared meaning (e.g. Weick et al., 2005). It is argued that practitioners make sense of innovation retrospectively and prospectively. From the sensemaking perspective, past experience and knowledge are brought forward and are used in a new representation in the present that make sense of the future. Sensemaking uses past orientations that provide histories, present understandings that provide contexts and future intentions that project and propose further events and situations. Prospective or future-oriented sensemaking is part of an unfolding sensemaking process that incorporates past and present orientations. Prospective or future oriented sensemaking seeks to construct and project images of future innovation.

*Contribution: What will the outcomes and results add to current understanding or theory in the IM community*

This article makes a contribution to the small but growing body of work that applies a sensemaking perspective to understand an innovation (Jay, 2013; Seligman, 2006; Dougherty et al., 2000). Sensemaking properties provide a complex framework for an understanding of an innovation, allowing the emergence of novel accounts of the organisation and ways of doing business that facilitate innovation. Sensemaking is attached to the ongoing stream of organisational activities surrounding multiple organisational actors.

*Practical implications: Who will practically gain what add in which way from the findings*

Practitioners and policy makers continuously make sense of innovation and socially construct a multiplicity of discourses, stories and narratives of innovation. They pull from different vocabularies and discursive resources to socially construct a more coherent and consistent storyline. This has important implications for policy making and industry developments. Innovation storylines are often become formalised in the form of government reports and company brochures. Practitioners and policy makers may find useful to learn more about

different viewpoints and perspectives in order to develop innovation strategies. Innovation is often discussed in relation to other organisational discourses such as “continuous improvement”, “organisational value”, “innovation culture” and “leadership”. The repertoire of these storylines shape policies, industrial and academic directions.

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