

IPMA Education and Training Series¹

PROJECT MANAGEMENT - “TRENDSLATOR or FASHION RETAILER”?

By Donncha Kavanagh

This short paper is based on a study of the diffusion of project management, as a set of technologies, in different European countries. The study highlights the role of two distinct types of external change agents: *Trendslators* and *Fashion Retailers*.

Trendslators are centrally concerned with institution building and with creating a—not yet present—professional community that will prosper over the longer term and emulate longer-standing professions. Thus they either mimic or build linkages with other institutions, especially academic entities, and work hard at creating educational programs, research, newsletters, publications, public events, etc. Trendslators play a key role in advocating, educating and promoting a management technology.

Examples include the embryonic versions of the quasi-professional project management associations now present in many countries, as well as new academic units engaged in teaching and researching the subject.

A trendslator’s work is done once the formal institutions are in place and the movement has been institutionalised to the point where it re-generates itself. For instance, the discipline of accountancy is institutionalised to a much higher degree than project management, in that it is a business function, academic discipline (with well-established departments in universities), and profession (a profession being characterized by prolonged training, formal qualifications, strict regulations on practice, a regulatory body or bodies with disciplinary powers, and some monopoly rights).

Management consultancy firms are typically not understood as trendslators, unless they are centrally engaged in building institutions. However, a business guru might be considered a trendslator if he or she adopts the role of a prophet or evangelist, seeking to lead a new *movement*.

Fashion retailers are similar to, but different from, trendslators. While trendslators construct institutions around a management technology, the fashion retailer is focused on selling a technology that has become well understood or ‘blackboxed’. A good example of a ‘fashion retailer’ is a management consultancy firm that enters and leaves the market as the management fashion moves through the stages of pre-boom, boom and bust. The difference between trendslators and fashion retailers is that the former do not envisage that the movement will end, while the latter

¹ This series of articles is by members of the IPMA Education and Training (E&T) Board or other IPMA leaders on the subject of project management education, training, careers and related topics. More information about the IPMA E&T can be found at <http://ipma.ch/education>.

understand that they are selling a fashion, which will run its course and, in time, be replaced by another fashion. For example, ISO 9000 could be understood as a fashion—with the term featuring in the non-scholarly literature for only ten years—while project management is more illustrative of a movement (within which a series of fashions might be discernible) with little difference in the citation count of the term between 1984 and 2010.

While trendslators become powerful by building institutions, fashion retailers are by no means powerless. As the novelist Tom Wolfe makes this clear in *The Painted Word*—his acerbic study of fashion in the art world—a small clique can set a fashion that, in turn, can be taken up by the bohemian world, the art world, and ultimately *tout le monde*.

Nations and state institutions (such as universities) are faced with a dilemma when a new management fashion emerges. They recognise that new management technologies are important because foreign direct investment decisions may be partly determined by perceptions on how up-to-date (i.e. fashionable) a country is in terms of management technology. In response, the state and/or its institutions can invest resources to support an emerging management fashion, by, for instance, assisting teaching, research and professional development, but this can be expensive if the fashion is short-lived. However, neither does the state nor its institutions wish to be tied to unfashionable practices, or to those that might be perceived as unfashionable.

Thus, they must develop abilities, firstly, to recognise the emergence of management trends, secondly, to distinguish between longer-term movements and shorter-term fashions, and, thirdly, to create structures and processes that are sufficiently flexible to support and/or disengage from new business practices, especially through strategic engagement with (emergent) professional associations.

For instance, the recent award of Royal Charter status by the UK government to the UK Association of Project Management is perhaps a good example of such a three stage process recognizing the outstanding contributions of an original trendslator.

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