INNOVATION CAPABILITIES AND INABILITIES

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Abstract

Change is everywhere – at least as rhetorics. Change tools are offered everywhere – with guarantee. Real change is really rare. Why? Due to cognitive and volitive barriers? Psychology is everywhere, either. Does every change project make sense per se? For which ones make failure sense? What prevents organizations from change, what from senseless change? How can we explain inertia, resistance, learning barriers and innovation inabilities beyond the dominating home-made psychology, and psychology at all?

We ask and answer questions like that in an empirical project based on the theory of Institutional Reflexivity [1], [2], [3]. This approach is located in the fields of modernization theory, theory of the firm and organization theory. It works with reflexivity as a fundamental category of the social sciences and focusses on dilemmas of organization and innovation, like the one of efficiency and flexibility (or routine and change).

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of Institutional Reflexivity, which we understand as a proposal to classify and to measure the “inclination” of organizations to change in all dimensions. With this concept we address the innovativeness of firms or organizations in general as we focus on the question, how firms keep their procedures and premises open to revisions. The concept offers an analytical frame for the evaluation of a firm’s body or rules that allow revising their rules and practices.

Empirically, we studied the diffusion and the effects of “reflexive practices” in organizations (private and public) in quantitative surveys as well as in case studies (observation, document analysis, semi-structured expert interviews with promoters and implementers of more or less reflexive practices in knowledge intensive entities). In this paper, we will present and discuss data from a recent case study in a German federal government agency. The use of an integrated health management was examined in order to find out how reflexive this instrument is being used. One of our findings supports a methodological insight which was one of the premises in the project: In organizational settings where control is prevalent as well as the pressure of legitimation, reflexivity hardly may unfold its capability of innovation and learning.

Keywords: institutional reflexivity; innovation research; innovation capability, barriers of learning, sustainable resource management, reflexive modernisation