

Human and Organisational Factors: Fad or not Fad?



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Abstract In this chapter, I take a step back in order to add some elements of discussion by embedding human and organisational factors within a broader historical and sociological context that has so far not been available in the literature. The reason for doing so is that there is a proliferation of various methods, ideas and models in this area. By comparing this phenomenon with the development, over the past two to three decades, of a management market in which consulting companies, business schools and publishers constitute the main actors and institutions, it is shown that human and organisational factors can also be described through similar patterns. I conclude the chapter with a suggestion that one important task for industries and regulators might be to help clarify expectations considering this diversity.

Keywords Human and organisational factors · Fads · Safety products and market · Consulting · Research · Regulators

1 Introduction

In the past 20 years in France and in other countries, the expression “human and organisational factors” (HOF) has become the standard way to refer to a wide range of contributions in the field of safety. These contributions rely on the human and social sciences to assert the importance of properly addressing the specific characteristics of humans and organisations in sociotechnical systems, a problem amplified in safety critical or high-risk systems (nuclear power plants, aircrafts, chemical plants, railways, etc.) due to their hazardous potential. A wide range of disciplines are involved, including psychology, social-psychology, ergonomics, management and sociology.

In the field of safety, this expression, HOF, very often embraces a continuum or perhaps, what could be best described as a mixture of research and practice, of academics and consultants, of regulators and actors of private companies all of whom are involved in the production, promotion and conceptualisation of methods, ideas

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and models. Safety culture, crew resource management, behavioural based safety, high-reliability organisations, swiss cheese, just culture, safety check-list, safety leadership, golden rules, vision zero, resilience engineering or safety II...are the most visible examples [14].

This proliferation of ideas, methods, practices and models has never really been studied although it is an intriguing phenomenon.

Yet, the development of human and organisational factors is parallel to a similar but even broader dynamic in the past 20–30 years which has been empirically studied by management researchers, namely the explosion of a market for management ideas in the 1980s, served by a thriving consulting industry [3–5, 11, 15, 16]. Researchers of this topic are interested in different aspects of its evolution, and their work provides highly relevant insights to thinking about human and organisational factors.

2 Studying Management as a Market

The knowledge economy, the post-industrial, information or network society are examples of expressions designed to capture some of the macro-mutations of the past decades in areas of work, organisations or capitalism in which the service economy has a central place, including consulting. In this discourse, knowledge is at the heart of the competitive advantage of companies, and managerial innovation is part of this trend, supported by a diversity of actors.

Authors writing about management consulting adopt a variety of angles ranging from historical, psychological, economic to sociological lenses. Topics include, for instance, the origin and history of management consulting, the issue of fads and fashions in management methods, the rise of management gurus, the structure of consulting companies, the identity of consultants or the client-consultant relationship. They illustrate and explain how management, over the last two decades, has evolved into a highly dynamic market, where companies consume management products available in many forms. These can be books, conferences, videos or services by consultants. Let us comment briefly on a selected number of these topics.

The increased number, size and complexity of corporations, the presence of the military industrial complex, the development of many administrations but also the expansion of business schools and business press constitute the historical background driving this explosion during the second half of the 20th Century. In a nutshell, the advent of a new class of employees differentiated from company owners at the beginning of the 20th Century, namely managers, combined with the increasing size and complexity of corporations, produced a need for education in the new area of management. Business schools were created out of this need, and research in management followed, feeding a scientific, business and management press publishing periodicals, journals and books on the topic.

The institutional view of this phenomenon, conceptualising the interactions between business schools, private consulting companies and business publishers and press, pursues this historical analysis into our present situation to show how these

key actors generate and fuel the dynamic of the past two to three decades in this area [5, 15].

Part of this dynamic of the management market has been described as having the traits of management fashions or fads [10]. Researchers have identified cycles that resemble fashion but applied to management, namely a rise and fall of methods, ideas, tools or practices which companies apply in sequence, or sometimes in combination, but which change as time passes. Well-known examples abound. Total quality management, corporate culture, balanced scoreboard, business re-engineering, leadership, six sigma, lean management, empowerment or digital disruption are some of these cases of very popular themes that anyone with working experience is bound to have heard of.

Hypothesised reasons for such cycles of fashions or fads are numerous. They range from the quality of how well these products are marketed to be appealing to consumers, to the insecurity of managers. They thus offer simple principles to deal with a still-complex management problem. They bring elements of response to the need to feel in control, and they also support the construction of a management identity by framing expectations. In addition, they are sufficiently flexible to be applied in various contexts which makes them quite unspecified and not restricted to a particular area. After a while, once a product has been sold successfully, new offers emerge which capture another way of improving management, based on alternative principles to those of the current fashion. And the cycle continues.

Now, these fashions and fads do not operate in a simplistic way, and one criticism of some of these studies is their absence of empirical analysis about the way managers and employees of corporations actually use these methods and ideas. This area, referred to as the client-consultant relationship, has various analytical facets, from critical to more neutral ones. The critical view by academics sees in these trends a capitalist drive for making profits and for ideologically influencing the way managers think about how they see people, businesses and markets.

They see consultants exploiting the need of managers to be reassured, to be helped with simplistic ideas, to impress others through cutting-edge thinking, etc. One problem is that they also tend to simplify the reality of how methods and ideas really travel from consultant to management and employees of organisations in practice, but also how new management ideas are produced. Let us comment on these two aspects. First, people in organisations are not passive recipients of management recipes. They can be highly suspicious (or even cynical) and are, at least, systematically active translators of these methods and ideas. Of course, to talk of people in organisations in general is not good enough, because it is important to distinguish categories of people here; between the diversity of hierarchical and functional layers of organisations, there are as many views as there are individuals.

For instance, it is not unusual for top management to embrace new managerial fashions when lower levels of the organisation are unimpressed by them, sometimes reluctant to deploy the fad or even resisting its implementation, whether promoted or not with the help of consultants. But the competition between consultants is also fierce, all of them competing to get the attention of their potential buyers and consumers of services. Consultants in their diversity are in very different positions with

companies, and also struggle to sell their products and expertise, depending on complex decision-making processes within organisations, between the presentations of their ideas to obtaining a contract [17].

The relationship between consultants, ideas, methods and real practices is therefore more complex than the critical, or one-way, approach suggests. People in organisations are never totally passive consumers of management products, but are active translators instead. In relation to this, and as the second point, methods and ideas advocated by consultants do not come out of nowhere...they are in many cases coming from the practices of individuals in companies that innovate. These people innovate but without necessarily conceptualising their practices then marketing and selling them; but consultants do. So, again, the relationship between organisations, consultants, methods and ideas is far more complex than a one-way vision.

3 Human and Organisational Factors in the Light of Management Market Research

This summarised picture of some of the research topics and outcomes associated with the study of the management market should be familiar to anyone involved in safety research and practice because the patterns described and analysed above correspond, at least partly, to what has happened in this field over the past two to three decades. Similarly, as introduced briefly earlier, an explosion of methods, ideas and consultants has been seen. In 1988, only a few human and organisational methods or concepts were available in comparison to the situation thirty years later in 2018.

The concept of safety culture did not really exist at the time, or was only starting to be mentioned explicitly. The practice of crew resource management was in its infancy. The notion of human error was only ten years old, with major conceptualisation still to come. High reliability organisation was not a management label and was only a recently published idea. So, it is mainly in the past two to three decades, like with management, that the explosion of a safety market has occurred.

It is very tempting to copy and paste the mode of institutional analysis applied in management research, from a historical and sociological point of view. Comparable actors and institutions are involved in the production of a safety market: consultants, academics, safety publishers and press. There are no quantitative figures which would help to substantiate a comparison between the two fields, management and safety. One can imagine without taking too much risk that the safety market is only a tiny fraction of what the management market represents but the analogy between the two is still highly informative.

One major difference is the importance and presence of active regulators. In safety, and more so in high-risk systems, regulators can be the promoters of certain methods and ideas, and cases of prescribed notions such as just culture, safety culture or resilience are now available. In concrete terms, this means that such concepts have become expected and required in various contexts through regulations. Therefore,

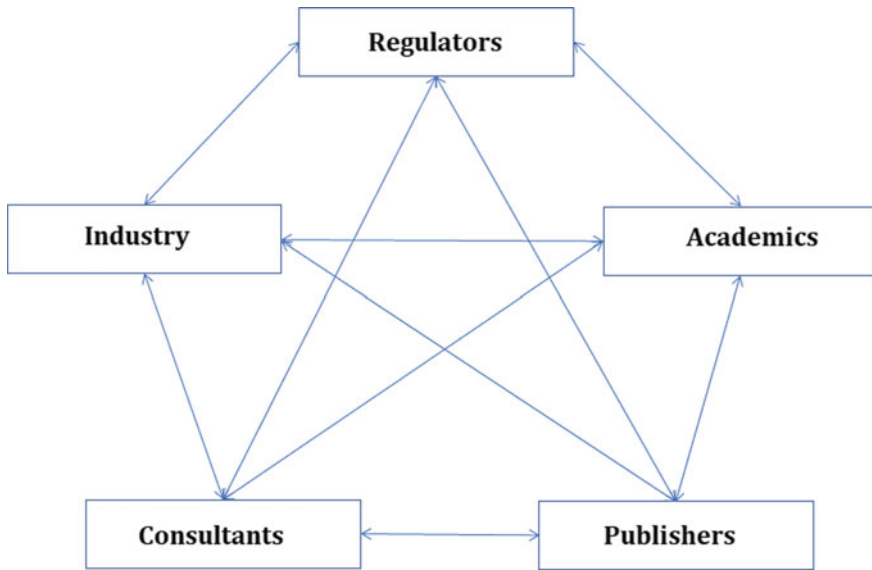


Fig. 1 Core actors and institutions of the safety market

one needs to slightly expand the key actors and institutions behind the safety market in comparison with the management market, to include the regulators (Fig. 1).

One message of this chapter is that to understand human and organisational factors, one also therefore needs to understand the complex paths followed by concepts as products of the interactions between these different actors and institutions, following and extending Laroche’s commodification approach of safety culture [12]. The methods and ideas of human and organisational factors have different historical and sociological trajectories. Let us illustrate these briefly with one example, safety culture [14].

The story of safety culture (SC) can be found in many articles and books [2]. Its origin is linked to Chernobyl and some official reports referring to this idea. From there, the concept was picked up in several directions, some more academically oriented, some more practically oriented. From the academic point of view, it is a controversial notion [1], with opposing views about its value, from scholars who produce practical versions to be implemented by multinationals (e.g. [8]) to those who reject it (e.g. [7]). Safety culture is a fairly well-established product sold by consultants when associated with the maturity principle which sets out that there are several stages of achievement [6]. And safety culture has also been introduced into regulations, such as in the Norwegian petroleum industry (for a recent discussion, see Antonsen et al. [2]).

Other cases of methods, ideas, models and concepts exist (e.g. crew resource management, behavioural based safety, high reliability organisations, vision zero, just culture, resilience, etc., see [13]). They would reveal the complexity of the interactions between the different actors generating them, and the patterns associated.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

This proliferation of available methods, ideas, models and consultants gives rise to many questions if one pursues the comparison with the management market studies, and if one considers that companies internalise as much as externalise their human and organisational factors expertise (see the case of UK railway in Ryan, this book, chapter “[Accounting for Differing Perspectives and Values: The Rail Industry](#)”). One is about fashions and fads. *Can we consider the abundance of products in human and organisational factors to be fashions or fads? Are human and organisational factors different? If yes, why and how?* A follow-up question could be *How do organisations deal with this diversity of products, whether fads or not fads? How do companies articulate this diversity? Do they? Does it differ between high-risk industries considering their diverse contexts?* Another one is about practices. *How are these safety products concretely translated in organisational practices? How do they efficiently contribute to create, improve or maintain safety?*

More work is needed if one considers these to be important questions. They are clearly quite complex ones requiring empirical investigations, but it seems obvious that facing this diversity of possibilities, companies are, for the moment, left to think for themselves about the best options to follow, and some chapters of this book illustrate this with concrete examples. Maturity in this respect depends on the resources and context of high-risk systems, aviation probably being at the high-end (Reuzeau, this book, chapter “[The Key Drivers to Setting up a Valuable and Sustainable HOF Approach in a High-Risk Company such as Airbus](#)”) while other industries at a lower end of the continuum.

If regulators are important actors and institutions promoting the introduction of human and organisational factors (Mearns, this book, chapter “[Safety Leadership and Human and Organisational Factors \(HOF\)—Where Do We Go from Here?](#)”), then one role they could play, with the support of academics, consultants and industry experts, is to offer guidance about what is expected from high-risk systems in terms of the different possibilities available offered to improve practices with the help of this diversity of methods, ideas and models. This would not imply going as far as prescribing the use of particular methods but providing clarity instead among their diversity (e.g. [9]).

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