WORK FLEXIBILITY AND TECHNOLOGY: MANAGERIAL RHETORIC OR ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE?

THE IBM MOBILITY PROJECT

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July 2006

Paper presented to
ItAIS 2006 – III Conference of the Italian Chapter of AIS
Section 2006.03
ABSTRACT

The evolution of the managerial discourse – what is said and written about managerial issues - is the result of fashion lifecycles, which sometimes have no rational economic foundations and sometimes find no real application within the firms (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). Taking our cue from the new-institutionalism perspective, we propose an analysis of the new technological solutions for flexible working as managerial fashions.

This research explores the consequences of the managerial discourses on flexible work mediated by technology and associated with the mobile worker rhetoric.

Our study - based on a significant case analysis - enables us to develop several considerations on the rhetoric in line with the specificity of the Italian context.

Our preliminary results are aligned with the “time-lag” theorized by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999), which characterise managerial discourse and practice. Further, the substantial adoption of technology based work systems proves that rational adoption is possible. Specifically, in terms of the flexible work rhetoric, our results confirm that organizations can decide to adopt technologically based managerial solutions in a rational way.

The case study also enables us to identify some critical issues and guidelines inherent the design and implementation of technology based work systems, such as the double perspective approach (the organizational and the employer viewpoint) during the needs-analysis and goal-setting phases; the relevance of coherent organizational culture and human resource systems (i.e. especially appraisal and reward systems); the removal of organizational structural constraints; the management of cognitive resistance; and the importance of the evaluation and monitoring phases during the project processes.

Finally, we examine the Italian socio-economic context and the previous empirical research carried out on the managerial fashion lifecycle to develop considerations about the specific difficulties faced by the managerial discourse in terms of practical implementation.
Introduction

Many economic business analyses confirm the strategic relevance of both internal resources and organizational flexibility: in the global scenario, modern firms can remain competitive if these are able to continually develop distinctive competencies (Levitt, 1960; Wernerfelt, 1984; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990, Grant, 1991), maintaining their agility and efficiency (Sambamurthy, Bharadwaj, Grover, 2003). According to this double imperative, firms invest in their human capital to generate new knowledge and skills and yet are also on a continual search for organizational solutions capable of addressing changes that are unpredictable. These dynamics have a substantial impact on the organizational structures and operating systems that influence the working practice and relationships within the firms (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993, Kogut & Zander, 1992, 1996).

The new technological opportunities seem to bridge the two diverse outlooks of flexibility and knowledge development, yet have a huge impact on the employee-organization relationship.

In recent years, the academic and managerial literature (the “discourse”) on the employee-organization relationship mediated by technology has developed by also taking into account the impact of the technology on work flexibility (Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994).

Some scholars suggest that the evolution of the managerial discourse – what is said and written about managerial issues - is the result of fashion lifecycles that sometimes have no rational economic foundations (DiMaggio, 1988; Abrahamson, 1996) and which do not always find valid application within the firms (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

While, from this theoretical perspective, the ‘technology and work flexibility’ issue is widely cited in the managerial discourse it seems to be applied in different and non-homogeneous ways in actual business practice. Are ‘mobile work’, ‘distance work’ and ‘work mediated by technology’ just managerial fashions or real practices? Do firms invest in technology to support new ways of working to create real business opportunities or only to enhance their legitimisation among the business community?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

Are organizations the result of rational planning or of a process of adapting to their institutional environment, which may have a more social than rational foundation? According to the new-institutional theory, institutional pressures lead to convergence in
an organization’s structural characteristics through a process of isomorphism. Indeed, the isomorphism of organizations that share a common context helps to legitimise the actual organizational methods, thereby increasing the likelihood of survival (Powell & DiMaggio 1983, 1991; Hinnings & Greenwood, 1988).

These institutional pressures include the legal aspects that characterize the socio-economic context, but also, and more generally, ideas, values, and beliefs that are exogenous to the organization (Oliver, 1991). Isomorphic processes are social processes that could be the result of the dissemination of fashion waves, which induce organizations to adopt (sometimes only formally) specific practices to enhance their legitimation among customers and stakeholders.

Management fashion-setters propagate management fashions, by which we mean “transitory collective beliefs that certain management techniques are at the forefront of management progress”. These fashion-setters—consulting firms, management gurus, mass-media business publications and business schools—do not simply force fashions onto gullible managers. Indeed, to sustain their images as fashion-setters, they must lead the race to (a) anticipate the emergent collective preferences of managers for new management techniques; (b) develop rhetorics that describe these techniques as the vanguard of management progress; and (c) disseminate these rhetorics back to managers and organizational stakeholders ahead of other fashion-setters (Abrahamson, 1997, Barley & Kunda, 1992; Guillen, 1994).

Several management scholars have recognized two contradictory types of employee-management rhetoric (Guillen, 1994; Kaufman, 1989, 1993; McGregor, 1960; Scott, 1992). Barley and Kunda (1992), adopting the terms "rational" and "normative" to distinguish between the two.

The key assumption underlying the rational rhetoric is that work processes can be formalized and rationalized to optimize productivity. Therefore, management’s role is to engineer or reengineer organizational machines and systems to maximize production processes and to reward employees for adhering to such processes.

The key assumption underlying the normative rhetoric is that employers can boost employee productivity by shaping their thoughts and capitalizing on their emotions. The role of managers is to meet the needs of employees and to channel their unleashed motivational energy through a clear vision and a strong culture. Therefore, the normative rhetoric prescribes methods of hiring and promoting those employees who possess the most suitable cognitive and psychological profiles, as well as techniques that satisfy the psychological needs of employees through benefits, enriched tasks and empowered management styles. These offer ways to survey and shape employee thoughts and
loyalties with visionary leadership and organizational cultures in order to channel the motivational energy and creativity that these techniques release.

Adopting the new-institutionalism perspective, we propose analyzing the new technological solutions for flexible work as managerial fashions. In fact, this “fashion perspective” suggests two key considerations of interest - which we want to test through our research project - related to the technology and work flexibility issue: first, management can adopt technical solutions in a rational way to enhance their productivity or in a normative way (i.e. socio-affective adoption) only to legitimate themselves with their stakeholders; second, managerial fashion techniques could have less impact in practice than in managerial discourse (Abrahamson, 1996); indeed, we can find specific evidence relating to the difficulties inherent a fashion-setting process.

The aim of this research is to explore the consequences of managerial discourses on flexible work mediated by technology, associated with the distance worker rhetoric, associated with “the new places of work” (space flexibility). Specifically, our study enables us to develop some considerations about the rhetoric in line with the specificity of the Italian context.

**New Work Places: Rhetoric of the “Distance Worker”**

The advent of information and communication technologies (ICT) is changing the traditional ways of working as well as affecting the space of the individual’s relations within the company.

In particular, the new technologies are the harbinger of what is known as the “wired organisation” (McKinlay, 2002; Stover, 1999; Turati, 1998), where a large part of the work relations are mediated by technology.

The changes underway in the ICT sphere enable the progressive abandonment of the old work logics because sharing space is no longer a constraint to which to subject all kinds of workers. Indeed, not only does the organisation transfer certain types of knowledge through electronic channels to the workforce, but also the people working inside and outside the company exchange information and knowledge electronically.

Potentially, these factors translate into a gradual leaving behind of the traditional concept of work space that is the basis of the “distance worker” rhetoric, according to which technology is a mediator of the relation between the employee and the company and enables the work to be moved from inside to outside the organisation.

However, in terms of the new work spaces, we can enumerate several presumed failures of this method in Italy, where, overall, working outside the company appears to be a little
diffused practice and is certainly a long way from replacing that of working inside the company. A number of companies that chose or offered this method of distance work have retraced their steps and “e-working”, cited in the managerial discourse as a flexible and innovative solution, is finding it hard to get off the ground. Therefore, is the e-worker just managerial rhetoric or can we really put it into practice? And with what outcomes?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In line with the explorative nature of the research aim, we have adopted a qualitative research strategy based on a case analysis (Yin, 1993). The emblematic case we have examined is the design and the implementation of the European Mobility Project of IBM EMEA; a project that aims to optimise work mobility in IBM by harnessing technological solutions.

The relevance and the significance of this project for our research is underpinned by the following aspects: (a) it has a cross-cultural project perspective, but with a particular Italian focus; (b) the presence of advanced technology solutions; (c) the specific and original organisational project context and conditions (the project is managed by the IBM Real Estate division and is not an HR project); (d) the presence of metrics to measure project success; (e) its longitudinal perspective (from needs analysis to the implementation and evaluation phase).

We analyzed the application of the rhetoric of the “distance worker” in the IBM project, taking into account the organisational solutions and the managerial processes relative to it.

Our key viewpoint is organisational, where we identify the organisational constraints and facilitators.

WORK FLEXIBILITY AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE IBM EMEA CASE

IBM started operating in Italy in 1927. In September 1990, IBM changed its name to IBM EMEA and took over the management of IBM operations in Portugal, Greece, Israel, Turkey and more than 30 other countries in the Middle East and Africa. In October 2000, IBM radically upgraded its core hardware product lines, regrouping these into a new family of servers for e-business development.

Following, we outline the experience of IBM as an emblematic organisational solution in terms of the new work methods, without trying to generalise, but investigating the possible impact of the two managerial rhetorics in a specific corporate context.
IBM Mobility Project. Managerial Rhetoric or Real Practice?

In November 1999, IBM launched its Europe-wide Employee Mobility Project, an international and inter-functional project the goal of which is to develop and increase the work mobility initiatives offered by IBM, pinpointing and implementing technical and organisational solutions for mobile work and providing the tools needed to support it. The project is still underway and has already produced numerous effects. The project was sponsored internally by two of IBM’s vice-presidents: Gunnar Lundestam (VP EMEA Business Operations) and Federico Castellanos (VP EMEA Human Resources) and involved the identification and assignation of specific responsibilities, as well as the definition of organisational roles (Mobility Leader) and coordinating bodies (Regional Mobility Steering Committee and Mobility Project Team).

Project Design and Project Implementation

The project coded each IBM employee in line with a specific category that defines them in relation to their prevailing place of work. This enabled the identification of the home workers – who carry out almost all their work at home (otherwise known as e-workers); the mobile workers – meaning those who carry out almost 50% of their work off-site and who share a desk; the customer workers – those whose work mainly involves them at the customer’s offices and who are not allocated a desk, but if necessary can use a shared desk, and the transition worker – those who carry out part of their job off-site (30% on average), but who are allocated a fixed desk for their exclusive use.

These combined workers are on the rise compared with earlier years and currently account for 41% of the total workforce. In addition, all those employees who do not occupy a fixed desk account for around 35% of the total. These data attest, on the one side, to the size of the mobility phenomenon in IBM EMEA and, on the other, to the fact that 35% of IBM EMEA’s total workforce does not work regularly in the company’s premises and does not have a fixed workstation. Clearly, this has an important impact from the perspective of space and infrastructure management.

Technological advancement is clearly the vehicle that makes it possible to activate and diffuse mobile work. The possibility of always being “connected” to the company’s offices using technical tools, such as the personal laptop computer and cell phone, makes it practical to work from “a distance”. IBM’s Employee Mobility project also counts as one of its goals the study and implementation of technical supports.

Currently, 85% of IBM employees have been given personal laptop computers to provide an incentive for e-working.
Further, the company carried out a survey in Italy that has enabled it to segment the total IBM Italia employee population according to the time and uses of the remote connection method. This segmentation met the need to associate the different user segments with the most appropriate technical tools and supports in terms of efficacy and efficiency.

**User Segmentation**

The survey produced three user segments: a) the *Anywhere & Always* segment, which classifies those employees who normally use the remote connection to communicate with the company, who do not have a fixed desk and who use the remote connection for e-mails and to access the internet and the company’s intranet, who spend an average of 18.5 hours per month online; the *Touchdown* segment, which groups those workers who normally connect remotely from home for an average of 8.5 hours per month, and who use this access to hook up to the internet and the corporate intranet and, prevalently, to send/receive fairly hefty documents via e-mail; and c) the *Occasional* segment, which comprises all those workers equipped with a laptop computer for remote access and who use it for a maximum of 11.5 hours per month, but not in a systematic way. These employees account for 22%, 43% and 35%, respectively, of the total number of users.

After identifying these three segments, the company studied specific support tools that would respond to the diverse needs in an efficacious and efficient way. In particular, the Anywhere and Always workers are slated to get a laptop PC and a GPRS cell phone for connecting to the network. In addition, a small number of the Touchdown segment was wired with a dedicated ADSL line at home and, naturally, a laptop PC, while the Occasional group was equipped with a laptop computer.

Ultimately, to support the possibility of remote access, a dedicated corporate intranet website was designed specifically for IBM Italia. The website was launched in September 2001 and streams a quantity of useful information for distance working and promotes these methods also by presenting the direct testimonials of the mobile workers.

**Organisational setting of the Project**

The IBM EMEA Employee Mobility project is part of the Business Operation function, a unit to which all the activities supporting the group’s core business are assigned, which, on the other hand, is related to sales and research and development.

An international project group has also been created, which is dedicated to the project on an ongoing basis. The project group is not only international, but also inter-functional, enabling the convergence of the different project members who head up the HR, Technology Development, Real Estate Management and Internal Communication corporate functions.
Measuring the Results

The Employee Mobility project also envisages the opportunity to heighten IBM’s competitiveness through a number of expected benefits for the different categories of recipients, defined at the beginning of the project and which currently can be reported as follows:

The company. The project has enabled the company to improve its economic health, thanks to the development of a corporate image in line with the e-business era, the improved management of the infrastructure, and increased work productivity. This latter thanks to IBM’s greater appeal in the job market and its improved capacity to retain the high-potential employees, reduce absenteeism, and increase the time that the employees dedicate to customers, but, above all, thanks to the quantifiable and easily monetised cost-savings in real estate management. In particular, much prominence is given internally to the improvement in the results related to real estate management, which are directly attributable to the project and which have freed up financial resources.

The number of people sharing a desk at IBM EMEA has increased and currently the average number of employees per shared desk is 2.6. In addition, the density of the workforce has increased from 180sq.m. to 170sq.m per person.

Another result in Italy following the increase in mobile workers is the imminent quitting of two office buildings in the Milan and Rome areas in the current year, which will enable the company to more flexibly manage its work spaces.

In Spain, branch office premises will be closed in the Madrid area and an increase in the use of shared desks is envisaged, which will lead to further cost-savings and rationalisation of the spaces used.

Finally, the launch of new e-place projects are planned for some IBM offices in the Southern Region (Istanbul, Lisbon, Tel Aviv), which will enable a more efficient use of the work spaces (open-space concept for all types of employees).

The employees. The percentage of employees who use this work method has increased, despite the reduction in the overall number of staff employed by the EMEA group. Project-related results cited include an improvement and strengthening in the satisfaction of people generally; a more balanced management of family and working life; and greater flexibility and autonomy in the time management of clients (on a par with the hours worked). The employee’s decision to join the project is usually voluntary and is discussed with their manager. More and more people in IBM interpret this new method of working as an opportunity.
The clients. The IBM client has experienced concrete benefits in the form of higher satisfaction, which derives from the greater amount of time dedicated to them by the IBM staff; a speeding up of the transmission times of critical information; and the more optimal response of the organisation generally.

Nevertheless, some critical issues related to the social and interpersonal dimension of the work do exist, including the possible diminishing of the sense of belonging to the work group; the possible loss of identification with the IBM group; the loss of social relations with colleagues; the resistance related to the loss of status, tied to the symbols of space.

Some difficulties also exist in terms of the inadequacy of the tools and/or human resource management logics, with people remaining anchored to the “traditional” places of work. Situations have arisen where the employee has complained of a feeling of being poorly valued by their boss, who, for their part, have reported a fear of losing control over their own staff.

Lastly, practical hurdles have been reported related to the need to have an “alternative work space”, one that adequately meets needs, which is not always available at the employee’s home, and to have access to the use of efficacious technological supports.

CASE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE INITIAL RESULTS

IBM’s experience attests to the feasibility and the usefulness to the parties in question of the new work methods and solutions, which emphasise the flexibility of the work space.

The employment market currently is the object of a far-reaching cultural revolution that is affecting the work relationship. Values and principles, such as loyalty to the company and a job for life are gradually giving way to concepts such as employability, professionalisation and entrepreneurship.

The companies explain (and justify) this trend as instrumental to flexibility and to the reduction of the costs imposed by an increasingly competitive and global scenario. However, one might assume that all this would lead also to a change in the context and in the forms of social interaction between the individuals in the company and between the company and the employee. Indeed, in this sense, the companies are moving towards organisational forms that increasingly force them to make a trade-off between greater flexibility and the diminishing of the organisational identification of the people who work for it.

Therefore, it is interesting to understand how the changes underway in the workplace modify the forms of social interaction between the people who work for the companies and, above all, if and how this can compromise social stability. So we need to ask
questions about the long-term sustainability of the social model induced by the changes underway. In essence, how do the new ways of working affect the relationship between company and employee and that between the employees themselves? What are the ensuing costs for the individual and for the company? These solutions presume a new way of looking at the work relationship, which is progressively becoming a contract of a professional nature, in which the relationship that ties the employee to the company is increasingly that of an agency rather than a subordinate job. This implies new methods of working to which we first need to associate new logics and tools for managing the people in the company.

These factors, in terms of our initial research questions, lead to a number of considerations.

Firstly, our case seems to confirm a substantial coherence between the managerial discourse and the effective situation analysed, even though the scenario investigated seems privileged from this viewpoint and that even the actors describe it as unusual. This corroborates the theory of Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) on the temporal divergence, in some cases, between managerial discourse and practice, but, on the other hand, also helps us to better understand the dynamics that can favour or hinder the convergence of the practices with the managerial discourse.

In addition, the significant level of use of technology supported management systems in the case studied falsifies the hypothesis by which the managerial techniques in question are merely a fashion trend that serves to legitimise the job of management (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In fact, in the organisation where the flexible solutions have been introduced, these are adopted and used, not nominally, but substantially.

While we have not observed a perfect correspondence between managerial discourse and practice in terms of the flexible work rhetoric, it is possible to note a progressive nearing of the practice to what is said and written, with all the parties involved in the process progressively achieving satisfaction.

Therefore, our investigation attests to the feasibility and the practicability of alternative, though flexible, solutions, aimed at marrying not only individual needs, but also those of the company itself. Indeed, thanks to flexible e-working solutions, the people often are able to carry out their work more efficiently – cutting down travelling time and autonomously choosing how to manage their time, in some cases also in a more efficient way – increasing their client focus and optimising the network sharing of the information.
Generally, however, this working method does not seem at all widespread, so it is certainly appropriate to speak of a managerial fashion that still seems to lack a consolidated following.

Among the reasons for the failure to adopt this method, which we will explore more fully later on, it is noteworthy that, in this specific case, the presence of cultural constraints and a normal resistance to change was compounded by the objective difficulty in adjusting the staff management practices and systems to the new work method (for example, performance appraisal systems).

In terms of the implementation of these managerial practices, the IBM case can help us to identify some useful guidelines

**FLEXIBLE SOLUTIONS: SOME GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTING THE MANAGERIAL DISCOURSE**

The literature on managerial fashions cites the gap that sometimes distances theory from practice as one of the reasons hindering the diffusion of these practices. This paragraph has the objective of trying to partly bridge that gap. Below, we indicate several practical guidelines to help address the different critical issues encountered in the process of designing and implementing flexible solutions, aimed at facilitating the “rational and aware” diffusion of the managerial discourse on the subject of technology and flexible work.

Our analysis indicates clearly the importance of a logical development that envisages a first phase of (a) analysis and design; a second phase aimed at (b) the effective introduction of the flexible forms mediated by technology; and a third and final phase aimed at (c) the monitoring and measuring of the results achieved by the project.

**Bilateral Needs Analysis and Definition of the Goals**

The redesign of the work times and spaces assumes the upstream production of a feasibility study that not only analyses the needs of both company and employees, but defines concrete and realistic objectives. These bases will enable the company to introduce new forms of flexible work capable of marrying and reconciling the diverse needs of the company with those of the individuals, without running the risk of designing projects that lack coherence and which are de-contextualised from the real needs of the interested parties.

These premises pave the way for another essential step, that calling for the clear definition of the objectives to be achieved: the lack of a defined and common goal makes it hard, if not impossible, to embark on the project process.
**Introduction of Flexible Work Forms Mediated by Technology**

The managerial techniques used for dealing with the flexibility of the work space require the evaluation and overcoming of constraints (within and without the company) and the development of some organisational preconditions capable of maximising adoption and acceptance.

In many cases, technology is a facilitator, a tool that enables new forms of flexible distance work, but there are other kinds of hurdles to surmount, ones that are structural, regulatory, cultural and even psychological in nature.

Firstly, we come up against structural constraints to the introduction of flexible work models. Some workers need to be in direct contact with the machinery and plants installed in the company, which thus restricts their presence to the place and time of machine operation, loading and control: this constraint is typical of an industrial organisation, but affects an increasingly lower number of workers. Other jobs involve direct contact with the client - where this latter physically comes to the company at set times - or with employee colleagues or even with colleagues who are members of the work group. Other restrictive factors might include information and documentation centres that cannot be decentralised. So flexibility is not suitable for everyone: the corporate population needs to be segmented in line with the feasibility and the practicability of the various, possibly graded solutions. This is also so in the case presented, even though the context is certainly more technology and service-oriented, the presence of different types of employees required the implementation of different solutions.

On the regulatory front, our case underscores how Italian labour legislation has long impeded the approval of provisions aimed at introducing flexibility to the space-time aspect of the work performance, because it has not yet been updated to cover the new working possibilities offered by technology. For example, the restrictions and clauses that still today obstruct the use of part-time or distance work methods, which, while governed by collective contracts and many company agreements, is not currently regulated by an organic law. Legislation on security and safety is also still lacking in this sense. However, the case of IBM attests to the feasibility of flexible solutions despite such constraints.

When it comes to cultural constraints, the prevailing culture on the significance and the forms of “traditional” work and the values that this rewards or, to the contrary, penalises, is a particularly critical aspect when addressing the subject of the adoption of flexible work forms. In Italy, the idea of “always being present” is still widespread, by which “presence = productivity”. This logic is clearly antithetic to that of “working outside the company”. It is necessary to communicate value and to associate status with the new forms of work and not to consider them as residual and sub-optimal.
Finally, a factor that can also impede a company’s adoption of flexible work forms - at least in the initial phases - is traceable to the psychological resistance of the employees themselves. In the case of IBM, diverse measures were taken to address the natural resistance to change, deriving from the fact that any change in working methods necessarily and inevitably has an impact on the daily routines of the individuals due to the fears and anxieties triggered by these changes. Companies need to focus carefully on these aspects and start by preparing a communication plan capable of both providing all the information and indications on the new solution to be introduced into the organisation and of guaranteeing a response to any requests for clarification by the employees. Our case study also suggests that companies should not propose such solutions as compulsory, but as a choice to be made by the employee.

Closely connected to the subject of the constraints to overcome is then that of the organisational preconditions needed to ensure the good outcome of the project, which therefore need to be planned in parallel with the other project design aspects. These comprise the corporate culture and the human resource management systems.

If the corporate culture tends to penalise (perhaps in terms of career) the flexible management of the work time, it will be difficult to get the employee to accept it. Therefore, flexibility needs to be given value and this value needs to be diffused throughout the company, rewarding it wherever it is represented.

The designing of human resource management systems - thanks to which the value of flexibility is tangibly supported - is also closely related to this theme. Management systems are an indispensable organisational precondition for the adoption of flexible work forms. The existence of an organisational system of work processes to meet goals, which must be accompanied by a employee performance appraisal system to measure the results achieved, is an essential part of the effective project. It is necessary to switch from a logic centred on the physical presence of the employee, their activities and their duties, in the company to a logic oriented to achieving results in line with programmed yet flexible processes. This translates into new tools, but also new management logics that need to be transmitted across all levels of the organisation.

**Monitoring and Measuring Results**

The last step in the introduction of flexible work forms calls for both the continuous monitoring and the final measuring of the results achieved for the company and for the employees. Continuous monitoring is a fundamental factor in enabling the correction of any errors and to identify any required changes; while the accurate measuring of the results achieved (better if concrete, tangible, quantitative) is of significant importance.
because it enables the objective assessment of the outcome of the project implemented and, above all, to support future projects of a similar nature, as well as supporting the decision-making process. This aspect of the case presented is especially significant because it has known how to marry qualitative measures and indicators with other more quantitative parameters, which also have an immediately recognisable economic-financial impact, such as the real estate implications for IBM. Therefore, evaluating the results is only possible when the objectives have been accurately defined.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The IBM project attests to the business opportunities sparked by the new technological solutions in supporting work flexibility, in terms of both time flexibility and space flexibility. In a preliminary way, this would confirm the alignment of the managerial discourse with organizational practices.

However, the specificity of the case in question means it is difficult to generalize this conclusion. For this reason, we analysed the IBM Mobility Project as a successful example on which to base the study and identification of a number of best practices and to develop theoretical proposals on the nominal and/or rational adoption of the technology, and not as an example of a recurrent organizational and managerial solution.

Our preliminary results are aligned with the “time-lag” theorized by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999), which characterises managerial discourse and practice.

Further, the substantial adoption of technology based work systems proves that rational adoption is possible (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

With specific reference to the flexible work rhetoric, our results confirm that organizations can decide to adopt technologically based managerial solutions in a rational way.

The case study also has enabled us to identify several critical issues and guidelines for the design and the implementation of technology based work systems – to sustain the contamination of practices - such as: the double-perspective approach (the organizational and the employer viewpoint) during the needs-analysis and the goal-setting phases; the relevance of coherent organizational culture and human resource systems (i.e., especially appraisal and reward systems); the removal of organizational structural constraints; the management of cognitive resistances; and the importance of the evaluation and monitoring phases during the project processes.

Finally, in addition to the already developed considerations on the constraints and organisational preconditions of the development and implementation of a work mobility
project, relative to the case analysed, and taking into account the Italian socio-economic context and the previous empirical research on the managerial fashion lifecycle, we express below some considerations related to other specific difficulties faced by the managerial discourse at the time of its practical implementation.

First, the adoption of specific technical-management models seems to differ sharply depending on the competitive scenario in which a company is positioned. Companies that operate in more dynamic environments, subject to greater competitive pressure, report a higher acceptance of the new management models, as the project surveyed has shown. Size also seems to be a key variable. The importance of size attests to the fact that the larger companies take less time to be contaminated by or are more sensitive to managerial discourse. The poor diffusion of some logics could therefore be explained by the smaller average size of Italian companies.

Second, given the distinctive characteristics of Italian companies (Barca, Bianchi, Briosi et al., 1994), the differentiated use of particular flexible work methods could be explained by their institutional structures – closely held and controlled – where it is difficult to find a clear-cut separation between owners and management and where, in any case, the adoption stimuli are lacking.

Third, the theory on managerial fashions suggests that the diffusion of the managerial discourse goes through a “theorisation” process (Strang & Meyer, 1994), which has the goal of making the adoption of specific techniques interesting for entire organisational categories, also those which group dissimilar forms between them, but which share the exposure to the same environmental stimuli. The non-homogeneous diffusion of the techniques in question can be explained by the weakness of that theorisation process or, alternatively and more likely, by the difficulty Italian companies have in seeing themselves as similar, independently of size. Further, still referring to the weakness of the theorisation process, we underscore the failure to identify the tools and univocal management systems required to manage the updated working models (Partial theorisation process). The literature supports the flexible work forms without, however, suggesting or prescribing new human resource management techniques and tools to align with the new work models (e.g., new methods of controlling and assessing performance).

Fourth, the theory on managerial fashions suggests that, in periods of expansion, the companies show a greater contamination of “rational” discourses, or those that promote job productivity through techniques that emphasise efficiency, while in periods of recession it is easier to find the implementation of techniques that emphasise the regulatory aspects of management and that implicate investments in the relationship between individual and company (Barley & Kunda, 1992).
Fifth, Guillen (1993) shows how the contamination is also influenced by the degree to which the companies are trade unionised. A higher level of unionisation translates into a higher probability that the companies will adopt the diffused techniques of the managerial discourse. In recent years, Italy has seen the power of the trade unions diminish and, therefore, this variable could explain the irregular diffusion of the techniques in question.

Sixth, the institutional context can favour or inhibit the theorisation process and in Italy both the legal-judicial context and the cultural context do not seem ready yet to accept flexible solutions.
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