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## **From flexibility to work-life balance: Exploring the changing discourses of management consultants**

What is the role of management consultants in the diffusion of fashionable ideas? This article addresses this question by drawing on an ethnographic study of management consultants in the UK. The study examined how the consultants made sense of a newly emerging discourse of work-life balance. Using the metaphor of a 'bandwagon', the study reveals the shifting interpretations of the work-life balance discourse as the consultants found themselves 'riding alongside', 'cashing in', 'steering', 'steering clear of' and 'falling off' the bandwagon. These findings question the idea that fashion-setters always 'jump on' to fashion bandwagons, thereby acting as passive channels in the diffusion of popular discourses. Instead, the study highlights the similarities between fashion-setters and their audiences in the reflexive and strategic ways in which discourses can be interpreted, enacted and appropriated.

Keywords: Fads, fashion, discourse, innovation, management consultants

## **Introduction**

The literature on organizational fads and fashion comprises an important contribution to our understanding of management knowledge and practice by moving beyond the assumption prevalent in the ‘innovation diffusion’ literature that management comprises a technical activity of applying rational tools and techniques (Newell, Robertson and Swan, 2001; Clark, 2004). For example, we now have an understanding of the role of socio-psychological forces such as managerial anxiety (Gill and Whittle, 1992), institutional forces such as norms of rationality and progress (Abrahamson, 1996) and structural tensions and contradictions (Sturdy, 1997) in influencing the uptake (or otherwise) of management ideas and techniques.

This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the diffusion of fashionable ideas by drawing on an ethnographic study of management consultants in the UK called ‘FlexiTeam’ (all names are pseudonyms). To do this I explore how the consultants made sense of the discourses that were a medium and outcome of their work. The paper addresses the following questions: Why do fashion-setters change the discourses they peddle? How do fashion-setters respond to changes in the popularity and prominence of discourses? To what extent and in what ways do fashion-setters adopt or adapt new discourses? These questions are important for developing an understanding of the management consulting industry – an industry that few of us escape the impact of (Fincham and Clark, 2003).

The study focuses on how FlexiTeam - a group of consultants who sold flexible working consulting services - made sense of the increasing popularity of the concept of ‘work-life balance’ (hereafter WLB). In the last

decade, the idea that work should be ‘balanced’ with non-work activities has risen to become “common currency” (Jones, 2003: 4). In the UK, shifts in the political, legislative and social landscape have put work-life balance firmly on the agenda for workers and employers alike. For example, new legislation now grants certain groups such as working parents the right to request to work flexibly (DTI, 2003).

It is therefore not surprising that FlexiTeam were keen to explore the potential of this new ‘hot button’ (the term used by the consultants) that was often high on their client’s agenda. However, the study reveals that the consultants did not act as a passive conduit for the flow of this new WLB discourse. The analysis of the empirical data reveals the shifting and diverse interpretations that were constructed as the consultants made sense of the WLB discourse as (a) a PR exercise, (b) an instrumental source of income, (c) an opportunity for re-appropriating client concerns, (d) to be resisted and rejected, and (e) to be re-evaluated and disengaged. These findings help us to move beyond the assumption that fashion-setters (gurus, popular academics, consultants etc.) automatically ‘jump onto’ fashion bandwagons. This suggests that fashion-setters, like their audiences, cannot be regarded as ‘transparent ciphers’ (McCabe, 2000) for the transfer of the latest discourse. Indeed, the study reveals the processes of critical and politically-informed reflection through which the consultants attempted to re-enact the WLB discourse in line with their own interests.

The article is structured as follows. The first section offers a short overview of existing literature on fads and fashions. The second section considers the value of viewing fads and fashions as ‘discourses’. Following

an overview of the research methodology, I move on to briefly discuss the different contexts in which the terms flexible working and work-life balance have emerged in the UK context. The empirical data is then presented in five sections, which outline the five distinct interpretations of the new WLB discourse that emerged during the study. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for our existing understanding of the fashion-setting industry and future research in the field.

### **The changing discourses of fashion-setters**

The understanding of management fashion has to date been advanced via three main approaches. The first approach has attempted to chart the rise and fall of new management discourses by tracking their lifecycle (Gill and Whittle, 1992) or mapping the ‘bell-shaped curve’ produced by references in relevant literature (Abrahamson, 1991). While this approach has been valuable in understanding the impact and trajectory of new discourses, the breadth of insight is obviously a trade off against gaining depth of insight into how and why these discourses gain or lose prominence (Clark, 2004). Moreover, the insight derived from this approach is limited by the fact that literature may not only lag behind, but may also fail to reflect, management practice (ibid).

A growing body of literature that takes a more qualitative and in-depth approach has addressed some of these concerns and offered us a richer understanding of how fashion-setters ‘enrol’ their intended audiences (senior managers, clients of consulting firms, guru audiences etc.) and how these

audiences react and respond. For instance, the literature on management consultants has revealed how consultants attract and retain clients through invincible rhetoric (Berglund and Werr, 2000), multiple stories (Legge, 2002), symbolic artefacts (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 2002) and impression management techniques (Clark, 1995).

A third, much smaller, body of literature has begun to tackle the question of how fashion-setters craft their discourses and organize their work. For example, we now have insight into how consultants work within ambiguous organizational cultures (Robertson and Swan, 2003), how they relate to professional bodies of knowledge (Robertson, Scarborough and Swan, 2003) and the role of identity in constructing organizational loyalty (Alvesson, 2000). However, this body of work has to date tended to neglect the issue of how and why consultants change the discourses they produce and promulgate. Change is clearly an important issue in the sense that fashion-setters must be seen to be progressive and innovative (Abrahamson, 1996) and failure to adapt to changes can render consulting firms obsolete (Kipping, 2002).

Where authors have focussed on the sources and drivers of new concepts and ideas, a contradictory picture emerges. Fosstenløykken et al (2003) suggest that the development of new consulting ideas was driven primarily by external sources, namely “first-hand learning from clients” (p. 869). In contrast, Thomas (2003: 791) argues that internal context dictates the process, as consultants evaluate the effort required to ‘re-contextualize’ new discourses and re-appropriate them for their own purposes. This work not only offers a somewhat ‘one-sided’ view by ignoring the interconnected

and dialectic nature of the client/consultant relationship (Sturdy, 1997), but also fails to provide sufficient empirical grounding to the claims about how fashion-setters respond to changing discourses. More detailed research seems to be needed to understand how and why change within the fashion industry occurs.

The consulting literature has nevertheless provided some important insights into the role of consultants in ‘diffusing’ discourses. Crucini and Kipping (2001: 571) suggest that consultants “play a significant role in the translation and dissemination of management ideas into a local context” and thereby act as agents of global homogenisation and isomorphism. Fincham and Evans (1999: 33) highlight the role of consultants in translating ideas popularised by so-called ‘management gurus’ into “solutions to specific problems as opposed to more generalized managerial advice”. However, this research portrays consultants as ‘funnels’ or ‘filters’ concerned only with sifting, sorting and translating popular management discourses for local contexts. This leaves the question of whether fashion-setters could seek to re-interpret, re-appropriate or even dissociate themselves from popular discourses unaddressed. Indeed, the findings of this study point to a more active, strategic and reflexive role for consultants than a ‘funnel’ metaphor suggests.

### **Fashion or discourse?**

The reader may have noticed the use of the term ‘discourse’ in favour of other terms such as ‘ideas’, ‘fashions’ or ‘knowledge’ (cf Thomas, 2003). A short note of explanation is appropriate here. There are many reasons why

the term 'discourse' is preferred. First, discourse refers to more than simply 'rhetoric', which implies a de-coupling from organizational reality. The term discourse is valuable for drawing attention to role of assemblages of texts, ideas and practices in the social construction of reality (Grant, Keenoy and Oswick, 1998). In other words, discourses are understood to shape the way we make sense of, relate to and act upon ourselves and the world around us (Knights and Morgan, 1991). For instance, discourse is understood to play a role in shaping the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, meanings and actions of organizational members (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000).

Discourse can be seen as *organizational* not simply because it is produced at work but because it is implicated in the social construction of organizational reality (Grant, Keenoy and Oswick, 1998). For instance, the 'vision' presentations given by the FlexiTeam consultants to senior managers of client organizations began with the phrase "work is an activity, not a place". In the background was an image of a man wearing casual clothes, working on a laptop in the garden at home with a mobile phone in one hand. This example can be seen as a "structured collection of meaningful texts" (Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy, 2004: 636) - in this case a combination of visual images, technology, written text and talk - that "constitutes a way of talking and writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue" (Watson, 1994: 113). For example, if the consultants' presentation was effective in influencing the client, significant changes could ensue for the client workforce as their work was rearranged to involve home-working, hot-desking, virtual teamwork or mobile working.



Discourse can be studied at different levels of analysis. For some, the concern is with large-scale historical changes in power/knowledge regimes (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). For others, the emphasis is more on micro-analysis of the organization of talk and text as a local performance (ibid). This study takes an approach that is appropriate to the study – the ethnographic approach means that broad historical shifts are outside the remit of the data-set. Instead, the talk, texts and practices of the consultants are understood to portray ‘work’ and how to ‘organize’ it in particular way. Of course, flexibility has different meanings depending on the interpretations of different groups (Tienari and Tainio, 1999) and FlexiTeam were not always effective in ensuring their preferred interpretation prevailed. The aim of this paper is therefore to examine how one particular group – a group of management consultants – constructed and re-constructed their own interpretation of what flexibility ‘is’ and can ‘do’.

Third, the term discourse is also valuable in taking us beyond a narrow concern with language use to explore the role of practices, techniques and technologies in shaping organizational reality. For instance, the consultants at the centre of this article used focus groups, interviews, surveys, spreadsheets, charts and reports in their attempts to construct a new reality of ‘flexible working’ for clients. Hence it makes sense to talk of ‘discursive practices’. However, this does not mean a myopic concern with individual texts produced by the consultants at the exclusion of broader discursive changes. Indeed, the aim of this study is to examine how and why FlexiTeam sought to engage with (or otherwise) the emergence of a discourse of ‘work-life balance’.

Fourth, the term discourse helps us to question the idea that the fashion-setting industry consists of purveyors of 'knowledge products' by examining the process through which notions of rational knowledge or 'truth' is constructed. In other words, discourse is both a site of and a stake in the exercise of power (Fairclough, 1993). Discourse is therefore seen as an important medium through which power relations can be reproduced and strengthened or, alternatively, contested and re-cast (ibid).

Finally, the study did not treat discourses as existing 'out there' as discrete and bounded entities waiting to be 'discovered' and 'represented' by the researcher (Fournier and Grey, 1999; Watson, 2000). The boundary and meaning of discourse was instead the very focus of the analysis. The terms 'flexible working discourse' and 'work-life balance discourse' are therefore used merely as shorthand and are not intended to reduce ongoing discursive practices to a fixed or homogenous whole. The term 'bandwagon' is used simply as a metaphorical device to create a particular image in the mind of the reader.

## **Methodology**

The ethnographic study comprised nine-months of intensive non-participant observation and numerous follow-up visits conducted between 1999 and 2003. FlexiTeam were a team of ten management consultants employed by UK-based telecommunications company TeleCo<sup>i</sup>. The consultants sold 'flexible working' consulting advice that encouraged clients to use technology to change the time/space organization of work. The consultants

were themselves ‘flexible workers’ organized into a ‘virtual team’, based at home-offices but also working at client sites, hot-desks, company offices and ‘on the road’. To adapt to these flexible working patterns, the fieldwork was ‘mobile’ in the sense that I followed the consultants wherever they worked, and ‘virtual’ in the sense that I sought to observe their work regardless of how it was mediated.

The ‘mobile’ element involved travelling to attend team meetings, client visits, exhibitions, lunches, appraisal meetings, home visits and social activities across the UK. Field-notes were written up either at the time or shortly after, depending on what seemed appropriate and least obtrusive. The ‘virtual’ element involved gaining access to the consultants’ technology-mediated interactions. While access was not granted to study private emails and phone calls, I was granted access to group-wide emails and allowed to tape-record the weekly audio-conferences, which typically lasted around an hour. I also conducted tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with all the consultants (except one who was always “too busy” when asked). The interviews invited the consultants to discuss their experience of flexible working, their current job and their career in general, although the discussion was often redirected onto topics initiated by the consultants. The final dataset comprised four notebooks of field-notes, over one hundred emails, numerous documents and more than forty hours of interview and audio-conference recordings.

Analysis of the data was broadly-speaking inductive but grounded in a dialectic movement between theory and data. Data was transcribed and then read and re-read to identify not only common themes but also contrasting

interpretations (such as those presented in this article). However, since data is never entirely 'theory free' (Silverman, 1993), it was reading and re-reading existing literature that enabled new aspects of the data-set to be 'seen'. For instance, the literature on fads and fashions enabled the metaphor of a 'bandwagon' to be related to the data presented in this article. The 'findings' therefore did not simply 'emerge' but were the active outcome of a process of moving between emic interpretations (my understanding of the meanings prevalent in the group) and etic interpretations (my understanding of academic theories and concepts).

A short note on the process of writing up field-note data is relevant here. Data extracted from field-notes is represented using a form of 'ethnographic fiction science' (Watson, 2000; 2003) that blends both imagination and ethnographic experience. This enables the short 'snippets' of conversation and words and phrases written in field-notes (conversations were generally too fast to act as a 'human tape-recorder') to be worked up into a form that resembles the author's recollection of events. This enables data collected without the intrusion of a tape-recorder - arguably the most open conversations and most insightful ethnographic experiences - to be represented. This is valuable because it helps to circumvent the tendency to abandon 'hard-to-represent' field-note data in favour of the more 'accurate' but typically 'staged' tape-recorded data such as interviews. Indeed, this is the very richness of experience that differentiates ethnography from interview-based studies. The use of such 'fictional' styles is also part of a more general trend away from viewing language as an unproblematic representation of the world (Rhodes and Brown, 2005).

### **From flexibility...**

FlexiTeam's discourse of 'flexible work' is important not only because it comprises the focus of this article but also because FlexiTeam were prominent actors in shaping the broader trajectory of discourse about flexible work in the UK. For instance, FlexiTeam's influence extended beyond client organizations to more general promotional activity at conferences, seminars and in national newspapers, industry journals, websites and magazines as they sought to promote their services and influence the terms of the debate in the UK.

While the term 'flexible work' has a long history with many actors vying to act as spokespersons, FlexiTeam's particular discourse of 'flexible working' started life as an internal change programme led by team leader Eric<sup>1</sup>, who was at the time employed in TeleCo's property department. Eric narrated the story in his interview as follows:

There was the MBA project that I sold to the company about flexible working basically. The 'Work-anywhere' programme emerged out of that ... on the back of a big property project - moving out of London. Then in '97 we were doing quite a lot of work outside of TeleCo. Clients kept coming to us [for advice], so we approached the TeleCo division board and suggested that we could take this outside TeleCo.

Having established one of the largest corporate flexible working programmes in the UK, which now boasts over 7,000 home-based workers and 60,000 remote access workers, FlexiTeam were able to turn their experience into 'intellectual capital' to be sold as a consulting offering. Indeed, this 'success story' was used by FlexiTeam to sell themselves as 'experts' on flexible

working. Clients were keen to realise the ‘benefits’ TeleCo had derived from their Work-anywhere<sup>i</sup> program – what TeleCo call the “triple win” for employers, society and the environment. For instance, the company claims that the Work-anywhere programme saves 12 million litres of car fuel every year. However, FlexiTeam often emphasised the ‘business case’ for flexible working in order to attract the attention of senior executives, particularly in terms of cost rationalisation. For example, the following extract is taken from a keynote speech delivered by Eric to an international conference on telework:

Through [Work-anywhere] we have saved approximately £180 million in terms of property savings ... Now we are reaping the dividends... We were very open about that to our people - we wanted to save money for all sorts of reasons, but primarily to maintain our competitiveness. ... We now have a new target to reduce our property costs by 40%.

### **...to work-life balance**

The concept of ‘work-life balance’ (WLB) has arisen from a very different set of contexts and agendas. Given that discourses vary historically and geographically, I will focus on the most recent manifestation of WLB in the UK. A recent surge of interest has been prompted by new legislation dubbed ‘Flexible Working – the Right to Request’ (DTI, 2003). The legislation focuses on flexibility for working parents, of which the right to request working from home is just one aspect. This can be understood in the context of New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ agenda, which represents a shift away from the emphasis of Conservative policies of 1979-1997 on free market forces and individualised responsibility for care (Meriläinen et al, 2004). A new

*discourse* of ‘work-life balance’ could be said to have emerged insofar as these socio-political and legal changes make it possible for employers, employees, unions, families etc. to conceive of and act upon ‘work’ in new ways. For instance, these changes have helped to establish the legitimacy of demands by working parents for more flexible working patterns to manage child-care arrangements. However, it is important to note the persistence of traditional views of the ‘ideal worker’ in the UK, involving presenteeism, long working hours and an unbroken career - with clear implications for gender relations (Lewis, 1997; Simpson, 1998; Tienari, Quack and Theobald, 2002; Meriläinen et al, 2004).

Having briefly outlined the emergence of notions of ‘flexible work’ as defined by the consultants and a discourse of ‘work-life balance’ in the UK more generally, I move on to discuss the findings of the study and examine how the consultants made sense of the emerging discourse of ‘work life balance’ (WLB).

### **Riding alongside the bandwagon**

The consultants were surprisingly open about their views on ‘PR’ and ‘spin’. Indeed, analysis of the data reveals an opportunistic and somewhat superficial engagement with the new WLB discourse. Given the popularity of the concept of WLB, the researcher expected the consultants to ‘jump on’ the bandwagon but instead found them ‘riding alongside’, only tapping into its momentum while it proved popular. Surfing also provides an appropriate

metaphor, generating an image of the consultants ‘riding the wave’ while staying ‘out of the water’.

The consultants were open about seeking to ‘ride’ whatever new crisis or concern beset their clients, what they termed “hot buttons”. For example, the following conversation occurred during a coffee break when I asked consultant Barry about the possibility of shadowing him for a day:

Barry: How about coming along to see a client presentation? No, on second thoughts, I bet you’ve seen you’ve seen the standard presentation a hundred times before.

Researcher: Actually I’d love to. I bet they are all presented differently anyway.

Barry: [laughs] Hardly! I just change the title slide – flexible working, HR in 21<sup>st</sup> century, changing the way you work, getting balanced! Yeah – last week I stayed up till 3am working on a work-life balance presentation – what an irony! [laughter]

Rather than any ‘deep’ commitment to the new WLB discourse, Barry seemed to regard it in an instrumental and somewhat cynical manner, ‘spinning’ their standard presentation according to whatever was likely to ‘excite’ the audience.

Eric, the founder and head of the consulting team, was also open about his approach to spin in our interview:

I’m a storyteller. I tell stories to TeleCo and our client base. ... Journalists want stories, yeah? And if you give them the best story you get more chance of [getting your story published]. You can use the story for your own means. You can tell a story in a hundred different ways. ... I get at least a couple of calls a week about an opportunity to do a story. ‘The Times want to do an article about flexible working’. We did five last week. So what’s the story this time? Whenever there’s a shortage of news, or a train strike, petrol crisis, recruitment issue - you could do any spin on it.



As a result, no substantial change to their flexible working discourse was required to ‘tap into’ the marketing potential of the bandwagon. For instance, the term work-life balance was added to their latest consulting brochure (bullet point four below) as yet another “hook” (a fishing metaphor they used frequently) that aimed to attract potential clients:

Are you looking to:

- Reduce costs through property rationalisation?
- Achieve better customer service through greater flexibility?
- Increase productivity by focusing on work activity rather than place of work?
- Meet new legislative requirements on flexible working?
- Increase employee satisfaction and staff retention?

FlexiTeam can take you and your company through a clearly defined roadmap to flexible working success.

(Source: FlexiTeam Consulting Brochure)

However, treating the WLB discourse as a marketing exercise was not simply a matter of using the latest fad/fashion to peddle their discourse. In trying to make their definition of flexible work ‘centre stage’ in the debate, FlexiTeam also attempted to define what work-life balance ‘was’ and how it should be ‘done’ in order to become ‘obligatory passage points’ (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995) for clients interested in WLB.

### **Cashing in on the bandwagon**

For FlexiTeam, the surge of interest in WLB also represented new market opportunities. For example, the researcher witnessed many excited

conversations about the Work-Life Balance campaign launched by the British Prime Minister in March 2000, which aimed to increase awareness and uptake of work-life balance practices by employers. Yet the consultants also took a careful, considered and strategic approach to ‘cashing in’ on the £10 million of consultancy funding available through the Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund allocated by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). For instance, not only did FlexiTeam actively pursue new clients through this process, they also sought to manipulate the system by encouraging clients they were already ‘courting’ to apply for funds, as the following email exchange suggests (spelling and grammar as per original):

From: Barry To: Team Subject: Dfee funding
Chaps,  Who are we pitching to now that could benefit from Dfee funding? We need them to apply asap!  So lets interest employers we are working with now in applying for forms before 8th March via Dfee website.  Regards  Barry

From: Eric To: Team Subject: RE: Dfee funding
OK  I have forwarded details to : [ClientA, ClientB, ClientC, etc. - anonymous for confidentiality]  These are all clients who have budget problems  Eric

From: Eric To: Team Subject: RE: Dfee funding
---

ClientA put in apploication via snail mail yesterday  
- too late to get our input  
Eric

From: Barry  
To: Team  
Subject: RE: RE: Dfee funding

Even without our input thats good news. Even if they are matched with someone else we have the relationship! They can change horses from whoever they are matched with initially by Dfee - its in the 'rules'!  
Barry

This email exchange highlights the strategic and opportunistic approach these consultants took to the WLB discourse. The aim was to turn the DfEE funding to their advantage by ‘helping’ clients that had already been “reeled in” (a fishing metaphor they used frequently) but had “budget problems” (see Eric’s email above) preventing them buying consulting. Although the original aim was to influence how the client wrote the application to ensure it ‘matched’ their offering, they were confident that “having the relationship” (see Barry’s email above) meant they would still win the business. The DfEE funding represented an easy way to secure revenue without the need to change their flexible working ‘pitch’, as exemplified in the new ‘slogan’ they created for the DfEE funding exercise:

From: Barry  
To: Team  
Subject: Dfee Fair 19th July - update

Our slogan on handouts (although cheesy) will be  
'Don't tie yourself in Knots, let [FlexiTeam] help you staighten out your work life balance'

This DfEE bidding process illustrates the ‘cashing in’ strategies used by the consultants to try and ‘milk’ or ‘siphon off’ potential income from the new WLB discourse, without any wholesale shift to ‘jump on’ the bandwagon.

### **Steering the bandwagon**

While the ‘riding’ and ‘cashing in’ responses described above involved a somewhat cosmetic and transient engagement, for one consultant in particular WLB required a more substantive shift in their discourse. Kevin was leading the design of a new consulting product - a work-life balance questionnaire - designed to audit client’s employees to create a ‘before’ and ‘after’ picture to demonstrate the impact of their consulting efforts. At one of the monthly team meetings, Kevin showed his colleagues the latest version of the questionnaire:

Kevin: So here’s the latest draft of the work-life balance questionnaire. It’s coming on really well and should be up and running in a couple of months or so. I’m really excited about this because it creates hard measures for soft issues. ... We’ll be able to give [clients] real numbers and do some sexy charts with this data. Clients are happy when they get some sexy output.

Georgina: I think this is great Kevin – we’ll get quantitative data about qualitative issues.

Kevin: One of the best features is these comments boxes – people can put in their comments in response to each question, but other people get to rate it, say whether they agree or not.

Georgina: This is great, because one of the big problems we face is finding out whether its just one person that feels that way. One person will say they don’t like the idea of working from home and you can’t tell whether that’s widespread or not.

Eric: This is definitely one of our key priorities. Maybe we

could pilot it with the DfEE clients?

Kevin: I was thinking we could do it for free, to show it works in real organizations and get some benchmarking data to they can compare with other people in their sector (mimicking client voice) “Oooh, look what they got, they’re in our sector and they did better than us. Maybe we’d better do something”. So in terms of getting them to sign on the dotted line...

Martin: I don’t know, I think we should err on the side of caution with this one. Make sure it’s working first. And you know what happens when we offer something for free. Clients don’t take it seriously. They don’t think it’s worth anything unless we charge for it.

Kevin: Yeah, you’re right.

This extract from a team meeting suggests that, for some of the consultants at least, changing their consulting discourse to include a new WLB product was worthwhile and could be ‘steered’ to further their interests. Kevin described the potential of the new questionnaire for tapping into and exploiting what clients wanted (“hard measures for soft issues”, “sexy output” etc) and sparking clients into paying for advice (to “sign on the dotted line”) by benchmarking them against their competitors to stimulate anxieties about ‘lagging behind’ (“look what they’ve got”). Consultant Martin’s comment is noteworthy for his concern that the new WLB offering should only be pursued if it could be translated into a profitable endeavour.

From this analysis we can see that the consultants did not uncritically jump onto the bandwagon but instead sought to re-appropriate it to their own advantage. The new WLB questionnaire was designed not only because WLB was *popular* but because it designed to stimulate more demand for their existing consulting offering. In contrast to the metaphor of aesthetic fashion, where recipients are portrayed as impressionable ‘victims’ who are

duped into following the latest trend, FlexiTeam seemed to be *steering* as opposed to jumping on the WLB bandwagon.

### **Steering clear of the bandwagon**

Not every consultant concurred with the idea that they should be ‘steering’, ‘cashing in’ or ‘riding alongside’ the WLB bandwagon. Business development manager Nigel was particularly vocal about his concerns as he added his thoughts about Kevin’s new WLB questionnaire at the team meeting detailed above:

Nigel: I’m not trying to knock this down or anything, but I’m just trying to understand what we hope to get out of this thing?

Kevin: What do you mean?

Nigel: I mean, so what if they do this index thing, what do we get out of it? A piddly 5K or something, it doesn’t mean they want to buy any kit [TeleCo products] at the end of it ... they could just want flexible hours or something.

Kevin: No, the point is that, if work-life balance is a hot button, then we’ve pressed it -

Martin [chair]: - OK, OK, we’ve been through this before, we’re going to have to move on now. We’ve got a lot to get through today.

Martin’s final comment suggests this was an ongoing debate. Indeed, Nigel had more chance to elaborate on his concerns in our interview:

The DfEE is a case in point. [Those clients] are not going to spend much on technology. They may not buy any. So where is the value added? Yeah, so FlexiTeam can say we’re DfEE work-life approved. But what kudos does that bring you in industry? Not a lot. It’s a bit like Investors in People, it’s another rubber stamp. ... Remember the

conversations at the last team meeting where ... Kevin's developing the questionnaire? They're going outside of the flexible working bit, they're getting into corporate culture, and 10 people can't do a culture change program. You need a massive capability. And there are hundreds of people out there who are capable of doing cultural program changes. ... If they're diversifying to that degree I see even less reason to charge the client, let's add value to the selling relationship. ... But who am I to say.

In this interview extract Nigel articulates a series of persuasive arguments against their involvement in the new WLB discourse. Nigel first suggests that the profits would be too small ("a piddly 5K") because clients interested in WLB would be unlikely to buy any TeleCo products. Second he suggests that associating with the WLB discourse (by being "DfEE work-life approved") is merely a worthless "rubber stamp". Nigel's third argument is that FlexiTeam "can't do [the] culture change" associated with WLB consulting ("you need a massive capability"). Fourth he adds that this market is too competitive to be worth entering ("there are hundreds of people out there"). Fifth and finally, Nigel questions the very idea of being fee-charging management consultants by suggesting they should 'stick to their knitting' and instead support the process of selling technology solutions ("lets add value to the selling relationship").

Nigel's resistance to the WLB discourse was articulated around the notion of the 'business case' for its engagement. He dismisses the 'riding', 'cashing in' and 'steering' approaches preferred by his colleagues on the grounds that they are, in his view, unprofitable. In the context of the substantial performance related pay incentives for generating 'profitable'

levels of consulting revenue, in addition to the widespread fear about redundancies in ‘unprofitable’ business units following the announcement of record levels of corporate debt, it is understandable that Nigel wanted FlexiTeam to ‘steer clear’ of the bandwagon altogether. Nevertheless, Nigel’s interpretation did not prevail - a few weeks after our interview he left his job as FlexiTeam consultant for another position in the company and the DfEE tendering and WLB questionnaire development went ahead. Hence it is important to note that Nigel’s rejection of the bandwagon was not simply a post-hoc rationalisation of their failure. This brings us to the final section, where the consultants found themselves ‘missing’ the bandwagon.

### **Missing the bandwagon**

FlexiTeam were not always successful in their attempts to ‘ride’, ‘cash in’ and ‘steer’ the WLB bandwagon. One such example observed by the researcher involved a meeting between consultant Barry and two managers from a potential client firm. During the meeting, the managers described their interest in work-life balance as promoted by both the recent ‘right to request’ legislation and staff retention concerns (which they described as a “stick” and “carrot” respectively). At the time I noted their enthusiastic response to Barry’s ‘sales pitch’. However, when I saw Barry the following week:

Researcher: So did you get invited back to that advertising agency? They seemed pretty keen didn’t they?

Barry: No, but I wasn’t surprised to be honest. I got the impression on the day they were just ‘courting’ us.



They often do that. And we have to be careful not to give away too many ‘nuggets’ before they’ve signed on the dotted line - sometimes they just want free information to make their own proposal to the board, ‘do it yourself’ style. And besides, it turns out they were a bit too small for us anyway, not enough employees to be worth bothering with unless they decided to make it a corporate thing and roll it out across all their branches.

Barry rationalised this example of ‘missing the bandwagon’ in terms of a cynical and manipulative client who was not serious about enlisting consulting advice. He also dismissed the business as “too small” to be worried about. This could be read as an example of a ‘warranting device’ (Potter et. al, 1990: 213), where blame for failure is shifted from intrinsic to extrinsic causes and the significance of failure is underplayed.

This example suggests that popularity among clients does not always correlate with popularity among consultants. This is because fashion-setters rely upon discourses being seen as *problematic* (not easy to understand or do-it-yourself) as well as *desirable* in order to stimulate demand for advice (consulting packages, guru speeches, academic books etc.) (Whittle, 2006). In other words, bandwagons can be ‘missed’ by the fashion-setting industry while still ‘hitting’ their intended audiences.

FlexiTeam’s attempt to ‘cash in’ on the DfEE funding was another example of ‘missing’ the bandwagon. As news of rejections came in from clients that had chosen other consultants, FlexiTeam reflected on and reinterpreted their engagement with the WLB discourse:

From: Barry
To: Team

Subject: Dfee - Update on clients dont hold yer breath!

Guys,

[ClientA] have picked another consultant. They felt although we were a team of 10 they had worries about our scale against their few people. They thought we had a technology focus, which was interesting, as we did the standard 'technology not answer' pitch.

I always felt it was a bit out of our remit anyway so wont cry too much over it personally.

Count currently 14 misses

Now depressed, I need a holiday.....

Barry

PS surprised on [ClientB] - they were in our ball park for property angle.

From: Georgina

To: Team

Subject: RE: Dfee - Update on clients dont hold yer breath!

Well - no news is good news and just because some of them said no, it doesn't mean they all have.

If those we lost just wanted flexitime, job sharing and part time working it would have been a waste of their funding and our resources. And let's not forget our others in the pipeline ie - [ClientC], [ClientD] etc

Suggest we review what went so "wrong" at the BD / Consultancy Review - will talk with Mr J on his return from leave.

Pragmatic of Tilehurst

Having 'missed' the bandwagon on this occasion, the consultants seemed to re-evaluate their relationship. For instance, at the review meeting mentioned in Georgina's email above, I observed how Martin, the new team leader, sought to construct boundaries around where they *could* and *should* engage with WLB:

I know they messed up royally with the matching and put us with the wrong people, but if we didn't get a single client from this and it cost us *how much* in time and resources, we really need to be careful about these sorts of things in the future.

By interpreting the ‘failure’ as a result of their lack of ‘fit’ (see Georgina’s email) or their failure to convince clients otherwise (see Barry’s email), the consultants subsequently began to distance and disengage. Missing the bandwagon seemed to lead to a more cautious and pragmatic approach.

## **Discussion**

This study of UK management consultants has revealed five different responses to a newly emerging discourse of work-life balance. First, by ‘riding alongside’ the bandwagon, the consultants saw an opportunity to further their interests by superficially engaging with the discourse as a PR exercise. Second, the consultants sought instrumentally to ‘cash in’ on the new income opportunities generated by the new discourse without any significant change to their consulting products or consulting advice. Third, by attempting to ‘steer’ the bandwagon, they sought to re-appropriate the surge of interest caused by new government legislation by inventing a new product to attract clients to their preferred version. However, a fourth interpretation was also present, where the WLB discourse was considered incongruent with their interests and to be resisted. Finally, a fifth interpretation emerged as the consultants re-evaluated their engagement with the WLB discourse and sought to distance, disengage and establish new boundaries.

The findings of this study suggest a number of contributions to the literature on management fashion and innovation diffusion. Firstly I have shown that whether, and to what extent, fashion-setters engage with new

discourses can be subject to variation, negotiation and contestation. It therefore seems inadequate to categorise fashion-setters as ‘innovation diffusers’ who automatically ‘jump onto’ bandwagons by promoting and promulgating whatever discourse is ‘in vogue’ at the time (Fincham and Evans, 2003; Thomas, 2003). Of course, FlexiTeam were not the only ‘medium’ through which discourses of WLB were produced and reproduced and the discourse continued to gain prominence in the UK in spite of the consultants’ responses. Nevertheless, the findings of this study do show that discourses can be adopted superficially, strategically, adapted, avoided or dissociated by fashion-setters. This adds to a body of literature that warns against over-emphasising the fragility and passivity of subjects in relation to discourse (Newton, 1998; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) – even those normally assumed to be the ‘evangelists’ (Wright and Kitay, 2004) of fashionable ideas.

Second, the findings of this study question Kipping’s (2002) ‘obsolescence’ thesis. Drawing on historical data, Kipping (2002) suggests that while consultants may seek to keep pace with changes in management fashion, the evidence suggests that firms can be rendered obsolete by shifts in the demand for particular consulting services. This portrays consultants as lagging behind in the ‘race’ to keep up with changing fashions. In contrast, this study reveals that consultants may actually seek to actively ‘leave the race’, to continue the metaphor, in this case by rejecting or disengaging from the WLB discourse. Failing to ‘jump on’ a bandwagon, then, is not necessarily due to failed market entry (cf Armbrüster and Kipping, 2003) but can instead arise from strategic ‘re-contextualisation’ (Thomas, 2003), where

the value of the discourse is re-assessed and re-articulated according to the social context of its recipients.

Third, the study has highlighted how re-contextualisation (Thomas, 2003) occurred as the consultants sought to articulate and further their interests by constructing different interpretations of *whether* and *how* the WLB discourse could be used to 'hook' and 'reel in' potential clients (to employ the fishing metaphors used by the consultants themselves). This provides empirical grounding for the proposition made by Thomas (2003), who argues that understanding the diffusion of management discourse requires an understanding of the power relations in which their authors are enmeshed. For instance, consultants such as FlexiTeam operate in the context of pressures of revenue generation and ratios of billable time (ibid). The WLB discourse was hence evaluated not only for its perceived potential to appeal to clients' interests but crucially also the interests of the consultants themselves.

A fourth point raised by the study concerns the fashion metaphor itself. Viewing management knowledge as an aesthetic fashion conjures up images of 'fickle' recipients caught up in either childlike excitement, group conformity or mass hysteria (Abrahamson, 1996). In contrast, the consultants at the centre of this study were more cautious, considered and strategic than the metaphor of a 'fashion victim' suggests. Fifth, the popularity of institutional theory has led to a view of management consultants as isomorphic agents that generate conformity by diffusing ideas within a given institutional field. While existing literature has pointed to the nuances of this process by highlighting how, for instance, consultants adapt

ideas to local contexts (Crucini and Kipping, 2001) and turn generic guru recipes into specific managerial solutions (Fincham and Evans, 1999), this remains a somewhat linear picture of the diffusion of popular discourses. The findings of this study, on the other hand, suggest that fashion-setters can have an instrumental, transient, tangential or detached relationship to popular discourses. Understanding the diffusion of discourse therefore requires an understanding of the processes through which discourses become possible and desirable to fashion-setters as well as their audiences.

Finally, it is worth noting the resonance with the findings of research into the intended audiences of the fashion-setting industry. Research has uncovered a similar range of responses amongst managers and employees confronted with discourses such as teamwork (Knights and McCabe, 2000), total quality management (Knights and McCabe, 1999), corporate culture (Casey, 1995) and enterprise (du Gay, 1996). For instance, these studies have revealed how subjects act strategically and instrumentally by performing commitment, compliance, resistance, rejection, re-appropriation or 'lip service' to fashionable discourses, or moving between these various positions in different contexts. This study contributes to this body of work by further questioning the idea that subjects are passively 'colonisation' by the latest management discourse. In short, fashion-setters may not be as dissimilar to their audiences as first thought.

## **Conclusion**

How do fashion-setters respond to changes in the discourses they are enmeshed within? This article has tackled this question by examining how a

team of UK management consultants reacted and responded to a newly emerging discourse of work-life balance (WLB). Notwithstanding the many differences between management consultants and other fashion-setters such as gurus, academics etc (Fincham and Evans, 2003) and the heterogeneity within the management consultancy market itself, the study offers some important insights into how change within the fashion industry occurs.

Existing literature has focussed on the role of consultants in diffusing popular discourses and/or translating them for local contexts (see eg. Fincham and Evans, 1999; Crucini and Kipping, 2001). However, this study found that the consultants did not uncritically 'buy into' or 'jump onto' the WLB 'bandwagon' in spite of its prevalence and popularity amongst clients. This suggests that the diffusion of discourses amongst fashion-setters is not a linear process but can instead involve active manipulation, resistance, distancing and re-appropriation. Thus, while consultants may perform the role of evangelists seeking to 'convert' their audiences (to employ a religious metaphor), this study failed to find evidence of 'conversion' on the part of the consultants themselves. This extends Benders and Van Veen's (2001) argument - that adopters do not have 'blind faith' but rather take a more pragmatic and reflective approach to fashions - by showing this also occurs within the fashion-industry itself.

This study adds to a growing body of evidence that casts doubt upon the image of fashion-setters as powerful 'witch doctors' (cf Clark and Salaman, 1996) capable of 'brainwashing' their audiences (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Fincham, 2003; Sturdy, 1997; Werr and Styhre, 2003). It also adds further evidence to literature that questions the idea that managerial fashions

travel through a series of pre-defined stages, from invention, dissemination and acceptance to disenchantment and decline (Clark, 2004). In this study, the consultants did not simply accept and disseminate the discourse of WLB but rather re-interpreted and re-articulated it in line with their own agenda. This supports Clark's (2004) argument that fashions are adopted *selectively* by those with a vested interest in their adoption.

The findings of this study also contribute to our understanding of organizational discourse more generally. While existing literature has pointed to the fact that discourses do not arrive 'fully formed and would-be 'dominant'' (du Gay, 2000: 179), more insight is needed into how and why 're-contextualisation' (Thomas, 2003) of the meaning and significance of a discourse occurs. This study has revealed how and why a group of consultants sought to avoid 'jumping onto the bandwagon', in spite of its popularity amongst clients. This suggests that the reactions to a discourse by fashion-setters, in this case consultants, cannot be assumed or 'read' from its impact upon their audiences, in this case clients. Future research could therefore seek to examine empirically how and why particular discourses accumulate status while others lose legitimacy amongst their proponents. This insight is important for advancing our understanding of the management fashion industry - an industry that is significant in shaping the ideas and practices of organizations across the globe (Abrahamson, 1996; Crucini and Kipping, 2001; Newell, Robertson and Swan, 2001; Kipping and Engwall, 2002; Fincham and Clark, 2003, Clark, 2004).

## Notes



<sup>i</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

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