Legitimizing New Ways of Working: discursive and material dimensions of a transformation project

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In recent years several third-sector companies have committed to modernisation processes of their internal organization by claiming to implement "*New Ways of Working*" (NWoW) projects. Although an abundant managerial literature on the topic has progressively bloomed[2], academic and analytical contributions on *"NWoW"* have remained scarce (De Leede, 2017). Few studies have been looking into how such "NWoW" projects progressively became legitimated within and beyond organizations. The aim of the present paper is therefore to understand, through a longitudinal and empirical study of a process of organizational transformation, the genesis of such a managerial project, its progressive normalization in discourses and practices, and the mechanisms through which it ends up being a legitimate reference in its organizational field (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Processes through which managerial projects acquire both internal and external legitimation have been theorized by "new institutionalists" (Greenwood & Hinings, 2016). This perspective emphasizes the "institutional work" carried out by "competent" and "vigilant" actors of an organization to alter their organizational contexts (Perkmann & Spicer, 2008). Seminal authors on new institutionalism suggest that redefining and reconfiguring organizational contexts mainly occur through discursive acts (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Following Leca et al. (2006), we wish to complement this approach with insights from the sociology of translation, which emphasizes the material dimension of institutional change. Sociology of translation is mainly concerned by the temporary organization of heterogeneous networks through which actors attempt to solve controversies (Callon, 1986). A conceptual framework based on both institutionalist approaches and the sociology of translation allows us to grasp the discursive and material dimensions of the institutional work performed by the actors who build and deploy a "NWoW" project.

Our research focusses on a Belgian insurance company (BIC) employing approximately 4000 workers. In 2012, BIC undertook a reflection on a vast modernisation project of their workspaces and work practices. We had the opportunity to perform a three-years longitudinal and qualitative study of their change process from 2014 to 2017, during which we gathered our empirical material comprised of 45 semi-structured interviews (with project leaders, strategic actors from top management and operational actors), 3 months of non-participant observation and 98 internal and external documents. We built a narrative based on our data through which we account for the genesis of the project and its subsequent implementation through three stages constitutive of the legitimation process: problematization, deployment and diffusion.

The first section of our empirical account describes the emergence of a series of issues and constraints constitutive of the problematization stage. What triggered the transformation process at BIC was a need for the company to relocate its activities as their leasing contract would expire in the years to come. Progressively, the factual "necessity" to move was translated by strategic actors into an "opportunity" – to review the company's branding strategy, to rethink management methods, to reduce the necessary space and to promote a new corporate culture. A small project group sponsored by the human resources director of BIC launched several studies, organized visits of other companies with an "NWoW" experience and set up think tanks in order to build a "convincing business case" for the modernisation project which

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[2] With the successive books of Veldhoen (2005), Bijl (2009), Baane et al. (2015) and Broere (2016) among others

was eventually approved by BIC's top management. In a second stage, the project team began to diffuse internally strong strategic narratives arguing for the "need" of a "NWoW" project to "*innovate*", to "*differentiate*", to "*save money*" and to "*remain competitive*". To conduct the change process, the team was expanded to new actors – building specialists, workspace designers, IT experts, HR professionals, communication officers and external consultants. The projects' ambitions were translated in material devices – open and flexible workspaces, remote working and paperless environments – and in discursive objectives – autonomy, responsibility, connectivity and trust. As soon as it was unveiled, the "NWoW" project received strong support from most middle managers and employees. Some of them were invited to join the project as "ambassadors", becoming spokespersons of the "NWoW" rhetoric within and beyond organizational boundaries. As BIC was among the first companies in Belgium to implement a "NWoW" project, they progressively began to organize visits of their workspace for external companies. In the end, BIC became an active trendsetter that now participates to the diffusion of "NWoW" discourses and practices.

Relying on a longitudinal case study, our research illustrates the internal and external legitimation processes of a "NWoW" project in an insurance company by analysing successively the stages of problematization, deployment and diffusion. By accounting for the institutional work performed upstream, for its gradual embodiment in material and discursive devices, and for the diffusion work that took place downstream, this paper is the first to our knowledge to fully account for a "NWoW" transformation process in an analytical perspective. We also reflect on the combined use of new institutionalist contributions and the sociology of translation, pursuing Leca et al. conclusions (2006) and testing the articulation between both approaches through an empirical case study.

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