

This is the author-accepted manuscript (ahead-of-print) of an article published by Emerald (accepted 13-Jul-2023). The AAM is deposited under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial International Licence 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0) and any reuse is allowed in accordance with the terms outlined by the licence.

Berg, C., Benders, J. and Ingvaldsen, J.A. (2023), "Do it again: revitalizing an organization concept", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-03-2023-0094>

Do it again: revitalizing an organization concept

Christopher Berg

*Department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management,
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway*

Jos Benders

*Department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management,
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway and
Centre for Sociological Research, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium, and*

Jonas A. Ingvaldsen

*Department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management,
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway*

Abstract

Purpose – By exploring the process of *concept revitalization*, this paper contributes to a better understanding of the intraorganizational retention of organization concepts. Concept revitalization occurs when an organization refocuses attention and resources toward a previously adopted organization concept. This paper investigates why and how organization concepts are revitalized.

Design/methodology/approach – The findings are based on a case study of a Norwegian energy company's revitalization of the organization concept "lean", whose initial implementation had been unsuccessful. The data were analyzed inductively by identifying how the concept was reframed during the second attempt and how the revitalization was justified.

Findings – In the case company, the revitalization was driven by (1) replacing the original label, (2) maintaining the original content in a slightly modified form and (3) altering the implementation mode. The changes were supported by a narrative of past shortcomings, lessons learned and a plan for future success, authored by internal experts in lean with a strong interest in ensuring positive results.

Research limitations/implications – Concept revitalization implies that there is more continuity in the application of ideas than is suggested in the literature on management fashions.

Originality/value – So far, the retention of organization concepts has only been studied at the field level. This study is the first to offer an empirically grounded understanding of intraorganizational concept revitalization.

Keywords Organization concept, Revitalization, Implementation, Lean, Continuous improvement

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The organizational use of organization concepts is often thought to be highly transient, reflecting the management fashion cycle (Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). While the initial adoption of a concept signals rationality and progressiveness, concepts are often rapidly abandoned when they fail to deliver on (exaggerated) promises of performance improvement or when a newer, hyped concept comes along (Abrahamson, 1996; Aksom, 2022; Perkmann and Spicer, 2008). However, some organizations retain their concepts of choice over time, despite implementation difficulties (e.g., Ansari *et al.*, 2014; Benders *et al.*, 2019; Hekneby *et al.*, 2022; Scherrer-Rathje *et al.*, 2009; Zeitz *et al.*, 1999). The explanation for this retention at an organizational level of analysis was recently identified as an important opportunity to develop the theory of organization concepts (Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020, p. 275).

This paper responds to Piazza and Abrahamson's (2020) call by exploring and theorizing *concept revitalization*, a process in which an organization refocuses attention and resources toward a previously adopted organization concept. Although revitalization is hinted at by Reinmoeller *et al.* (2019) and Røvik (2011), this study is the first to offer an empirically grounded understanding of this phenomenon. Through a case study within an energy company, we investigate how and why the organization concept "lean" (Womack and Jones, 1996) was revitalized despite the unsatisfactory results of its initial implementation. We find that the revitalization occurred through a decoupling of the concept's label, content and its implementation approach, and a successive recoupling in which the content was associated with a different label and a different implementation approach. The changes were supported by a narrative of past shortcomings, lessons learned and a plan for future success, authored by internal experts in lean with a strong interest in ensuring positive results.

Our study contributes to the literature on organization concepts in three ways. First, we propose that concept revitalization allows a concept to be retained in a critical time window when it has not (yet) delivered improvements and its internal legitimacy is questioned. This creates room for renewed effort and experimentation and increases the likelihood of eventual long-term retention. Second, we show how associating the concept with alternative labels and implementation approaches creates a sense of novelty, supporting revitalization. Although the decoupling of labels and content has been explored in previous research (Benders, 1999), by adding the implementation approach as a third component, we deepen the understanding of how concepts can be stretched and reframed (Ansari *et al.*, 2014; Benders *et al.*, 2019; Heusinkveld *et al.*, 2013). Third, by highlighting the role of internal experts in retaining concepts, we contribute to the emerging research on agency in concept implementation and translation (O'Mahoney and Sturdy, 2016; van Grinsven *et al.*, 2020).

Organization concepts, retention and revitalization

Ideational innovations in the field of management are referred to by different terms, such as management fashions, ideas, practices, panaceas, models, techniques and organization concepts (Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020; Sturdy *et al.*, 2019). We prefer the term organization concept. Organization concepts consist of prescriptive ideas concerning how to manage or organize, which are intended for consumption by managers and are referred to by a particular label (Benders *et al.*, 2019). These concepts have two main characteristics (Benders *et al.*, 2019, p. 272): (1) they promise performance improvement and (2) they feature a significant "interpretive space," meaning that their prescriptions are open to interpretation, and that they must be "translated" (van Grinsven *et al.*, 2016) or "made to fit" (Ansari *et al.*, 2010) by the adopting organization during their implementation.

The current body of research on organization concepts can be divided into two main strands: studies at the field level and studies at the organization level. Field-level studies focus on the market for ideas about management, including how concepts emerge, disseminate and

decline in popularity (e.g., Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). Organization-level studies attempt to explain how concepts are adopted, adapted and used within organizations, as well as their impact (e.g., Hekneby *et al.*, 2022; McCann *et al.*, 2015).

Research on the abandonment and retention of organization concepts has developed as an elaboration and critique of the idea of the management fashion cycle (Abrahamson, 1996; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). Originally a field-level construct, it has also been applied at the intraorganizational level, particularly in critical accounts of organizations' short-lived or ceremonial adoption of fads and fashions (e.g., McCann *et al.*, 2015; Zeitz *et al.* 1999). The management fashion cycle implies that organization concepts enjoy a short burst of intense popularity followed by decline and oblivion. This pattern is explained by organizations' need to appear progressive and rational, combined with the abundant offering of new concepts from consultancies, business schools and management gurus (Abrahamson, 1996).

The idea of the management fashion cycle has been criticized from several perspectives. Methodologically, scholars have questioned whether the use of print-media indicators to demonstrate the pattern is actually a valid indicator of organizations' use or (non-use) of a concept (Nijholt *et al.*, 2014). Empirically, it has been demonstrated that some organization concepts, such as total quality management (Zeitz *et al.*, 1999) and lean (Benders *et al.*, 2019), persist far beyond the period predicted by the fashion cycle. From a theoretical perspective, it has been argued that tendencies toward transience are offset by isomorphic pressures (Aksom, 2022) and actors' institutional work in developing technical standards, building coalitions and making concepts culturally appealing (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008). These two critiques apply to the field level.

At the organizational level of analysis, far less attention has been paid to issues of retention and abandonment (Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020, p. 275). The fashion cycle implies rapid abandonment when (exaggerated) promises of performance improvements are not fulfilled and concepts experience competition from newer fashions. However, some studies have questioned this notion of abandonment, showing that concepts may instead become dormant (Røvik, 2011) or continue to influence organizations by exerting a lasting influence on their discourses, control systems and ideologies (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2012). More active retention is observed in studies in which organizations make concepts work by adapting content and learning from experience (Ansari *et al.*, 2014; Hekneby *et al.*, 2022). However, what motivates these significant efforts to bring about the performance improvements promised by concepts remains unclear. If a concept is institutionalized at the field level (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008), the interorganizational legitimacy might spill over to create intraorganizational legitimacy and motivate continued efforts. However, this borrowing of legitimacy from the outside is likely to be fragile and limited in duration unless plausible internal success stories are constructed (Holmemo *et al.*, 2018). Further complicating the issue is the insight that performance improvements are rarely readily apparent; they are a matter of attribution. Since concepts need to be interpreted and multiple organizational changes usually take place simultaneously, it is rarely clear whether concepts actually deliver results. Consequently, individuals' beliefs about concepts are largely outcomes of how actors frame the relationship between these concepts, particular interpretations, and (positive or negative) outcomes (Benders *et al.*, 2019), creating significant space for political maneuvering by the concept's supporters or opponents.

By proposing the idea of *concept revitalization*, this study offers new insights into how and why organization concepts are retained at the intraorganizational level. We define concept revitalization as a process in which an organization refocuses attention and resources toward a previously adopted organization concept. Although organizations' repeated efforts to make concepts work have been acknowledged in the literature (Scherrer-Rathje *et al.*, 2009), to our

knowledge, this study is the first to provide a focused analysis of a repeated attempt to implement a concept.

Although no comparative studies can be used as starting points for empirical investigations of revitalization, previous research on organizations' use of concepts allows us to sketch some general features of the revitalization process. As with the initial implementation, revitalization involves the formation of meaningful interpretations and adaptations (Ansari *et al.*, 2014; van Grinsven *et al.*, 2016) and framing of concepts as rational and viable solutions to organizational problems (Benders *et al.*, 2019). The adopting organization must decide on the scope of the concept's implementation, how closely to follow the original concept and how to interpret ambiguous ideas and principles. It must also decide whether to use the original label or adapt it to avoid negative experiences (Benders, 1999) or signal a new approach. As a result, a concept's label and content tend to become loosely coupled (Benders, 1999), such as when organizations rhetorically use a label to promote a modified version of the content or try to implement the content without reference to the original label.

Unlike initial implementations, the range of possible interpretations and actions when revitalizing is constrained by the organization's previous experiences with a given concept. These experiences may function as intellectual and ideological foundations on which to build a second attempt (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2012). However, they might also feature negative associations. Overall, concept revitalization involves making sense of the partial successes of the past and reframing concepts to connect to the perceived challenges of the future. If a compelling story is constructed, the concept might once again attract resources and be put to use.

Methodology

The findings are based on a case study of the revitalization of the organization concept lean within EnergyCo (a pseudonym). When studying an untheorized phenomenon by asking *how* and *why* questions, a case-study methodology is appropriate (Yin, 2018). EnergyCo is a Norwegian multinational corporation, producing oil, gas and renewables. Its initial implementation of lean was considered to have been unsuccessful. The concept's revitalization took place in ProNo (a pseudonym), which is EnergyCo's division for Norwegian production.

Data collection

EnergyCo participated in a national research program on industrial companies' use of organization concepts. In collaboration with a contact team in the organization, 17 organizational members were selected and interviewed. These informants were sampled because they had been involved in lean-related initiatives within EnergyCo. Nineteen digital semi-structured interviews were conducted between May 2020 and November 2022 (see Table 1), two of which were follow-up interviews. The informants were asked about their understanding and use of lean within their department and affiliated projects, as well as the history of lean's application and its status within the company. The revitalization of ProNo quickly emerged as a key theme of potential theoretical interest. We therefore included questions about why this was taking place, how the new approach differed from the former, and how the initial implementation had been evaluated. The interviews, which lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, were recorded and later transcribed. They were mainly conducted in Norwegian; the quotations were translated into English by the first author.

In Table 1, we categorize the interviewees into three groups, based on their involvement in the lean initiatives. The first group, the *implementers*, played a central role in effecting lean in the organization. The second group, the *receivers*, experienced the outcomes of the lean implementation initiatives in ProNo. The third group, *senior management*, had experience with lean from strategic and leadership points of view. We also categorized the interviewees based

on their current organizational affiliation: they belonged either to ProNo or to *support*. The latter indicates different support units that, among other functions, assist in projects/initiatives, plan and implement changes, and develop frameworks and tools for the organization.

Table 1. Interviewee overview.

#	Involvement	Affiliation	Role
1	Senior management	Support	Senior vice president
2	Senior management	Support	Senior vice president
3	Senior management	Support	Senior vice president
4	Implementer	ProNo	Project owner/project leader
5	Implementer	ProNo	Improvement expert/leader
6	Implementer	ProNo	Improvement expert/leader
7	Implementer	ProNo	Product owner/project leader
8	Receiver	ProNo	Project owner/leader
9	Receiver	ProNo	Project leader
10	Receiver	ProNo	Implementation leader/subject-matter expert
11	Implementer	Support	Improvement expert
12	Implementer	Support	Improvement expert
13	Receiver	ProNo	Subject-matter expert
14	Receiver	Support	Improvement expert
15	Implementer	ProNo	Change leader/coordinator
16	Implementer	Support	Improvement expert
17	Implementer	Support	Improvement expert

Source(s): Authors work.

We also gained access to several documents, including the plans for and preliminary results of the lean initiatives (e.g., ProNo's improvement framework). Other documents described different work processes and ways of working within EnergyCo, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the actors relevant to the case. The documents were mainly used to prepare for interviews and contextualize and clarify the interviewees' responses.

Data analysis

To understand the revitalization of lean, we carefully studied and coded the interviewees' responses in relation to the following: (I) the initial implementation of lean, (II) the revitalization of lean principles and tools, (III) the evaluations and decisions made regarding the use of lean and (IV) how the revitalization differed from the initial lean implementation. This gave us preliminary findings, which we compared and sorted (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to develop a data structure, as shown in Figure 1. We performed six theoretical interpretations of the empirical clusters: (1) mixed results and persistent issues, (2) the external legitimacy of lean, (3) existing knowledge of and strengthened belief in lean, (4) the replacement of the original label, (5) the retention of the original content and (6) alterations in the implementation mode.

Subsequently, we established three theoretical categories based on our interpretations: (1) a narrative of failed implementation, (2) the knowledge and interest of internal experts and (3) the decoupling and recoupling of concept elements. As shown in Figure 1, the first two categories were related to the question of *why* lean was revitalized, while category three was related to the question of *how* it was revitalized.

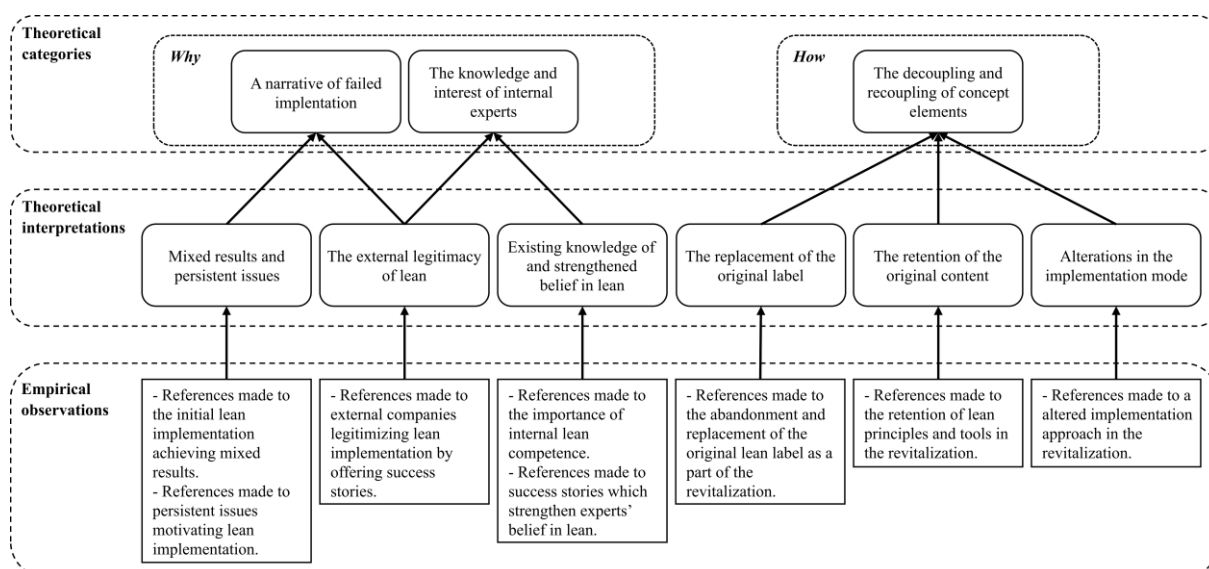


Figure 1. Data structure.

Source(s): Authors work.

Findings

Below, we briefly introduce the history of lean in ProNo before presenting the top-level categories in the following order: (1) a narrative of failed implementation, (2) the knowledge and interest of internal experts and (3) the decoupling and recoupling of concept elements.

The implementation and revitalization of lean

Our story began in 2015, when an organization-wide initiative to implement lean was initiated as an outcome of a broader cost-efficiency program. This coincided with a period of low oil prices, which further increased the need to improve operational efficiency. Although lean can be traced several years further back within EnergyCo, its previous use was somewhat fragmented, and it was not part of a unified approach. As part of the lean initiative, almost the entire organization went through a standardized 12–16-week program. This included coaching and training in lean principles and tools, as well as work on specific improvement projects. The coaching was performed by internal coaches in collaboration with external consultants. One receiver of this initiative described the process as follows:

[...] [T]here were a couple of days of sessions—with some courses and stuff. Also, there were lean coaches there, and they were following up for a period [of time]. So, a lot of resources were spent in that phase-in period—on coaching and follow-up. (Interviewee 10, implementation leader/subject-matter expert)

EnergyCo ended the partnership with the consultancy in 2017 and continued the project on their own. This had become an ambition of the company over time. Two–three years into the implementation, a mid-term evaluation was undertaken to assess the status of the lean project, involving the identification of challenges and failures. This evaluation was conducted by the company's internal lean unit, and its results were incorporated into a new continuous-improvement strategy for EnergyCo. The main principles of the continuous-improvement strategy remained close to the lean principles but became slightly more generic, and the lean label was removed. The initial implementation phase lasted five years and ended in 2020. Although some of the lean tools and principles were still in use in parts of the organization, elsewhere, they faded out or were abandoned completely. In general, the implementation of lean was considered unsuccessful. The lean label fell into disrepute also because it became

associated with the cost-cutting program that preceded its implementation:

[...] [A]nd that's the unfortunate thing, because the [efficiency] program [...] was more of a “head cutting,” cost cutting, initiative. But at the same time, [...] they also started implementing lean. So, unfortunately, [...] when you put those two together, people had the perception that lean was about cost-cutting and “cutting heads off.” Which was unfortunate. (Interviewee 17, Improvement expert)

Despite the negative experiences, in 2020, ProNo initiated a “local improvement” initiative, with the goal of developing and implementing a new improvement framework based on lean principles and tools. The revitalization of lean was a response to an increase in competition, and once again, it targeted operational efficiency:

We have worked with continuous improvement and lean for many years in the company. [...] At some places there is some life to it. Other places it is quite dead. We also do it in very different ways. And [the ProNo management's] wish was for us to put more effort into this, because we have such major challenges ahead [...] that if we do not work systematically on continuous improvement and actually get effects, and focus on getting effects, out of the improvement work that we do – towards our most important processes— then we won't be competitive anymore [...]. (Interviewee 5, improvement expert/leader)

A narrative of failed implementation

An important part of the revitalization was to learn from the previous organization-wide implementation of lean:

[...] And that is what this initiative is really about: what are the lessons from the [initial] lean implementation? And what is our next step, to build a sustainable continuous improvement culture? (Interviewee 4, project owner/project leader)

ProNo set out to learn from both internal and external actors:

[...] What we did was simply to come up with some critical questions that we wanted answered. [...] So, we used the same questions [...] in Teams meetings with different external actors. Companies. [...] We had some reflection rounds with them. [...] We had them introduce, and present, their thinking and approach. And then we got to ask some open questions [...]: why did they choose to do it in that way? What results has it given? [...] And, with that, try to understand how this is connected. [...] So, it was a form of [...]: presentation, outreach activity and [...] group interviews, in plenary, you could say. [...] Internally, in [EnergyCo], we had the exact same questioning as well. Exactly the same approach. So, we found a method for how we wanted to move forward. (Interviewee 15, change leader/coordinator)

The external companies were mostly found through networking and outreach activities in different arenas (e.g., lean conferences/forums and business associations) and by conducting small-scale research into which external actors were succeeding and which were not. The external companies' success stories seem to have cemented the belief that establishing a lean-based continuous-improvement culture would be both possible and highly beneficial:

[...] It was probably this external company that came in and told us about their achievements. How they work. Their achievement is that their operators on “the floor” run their own improvement work. And then it was a bit like “yes” because that is what we want

too. Yes, okay. How are we going to achieve that? (Interviewee 4, project owner/project leader)

Internally, group interviews were conducted with units that had been successful in their improvement activities:

[...] [I]t's been units that stood out as ... yes, they are a bit ahead on improvement work and structure and the way of working. So, it's been both the onshore side ... that is, the onshore facilities in [EnergyCo], also beyond [ProNo], and internally in [ProNo]. Yes. Then, it's been ... they have selected which of their own is the best to present it to us [...]. (Interviewee 15, change leader/coordinator)

Furthermore, although the internal experts within ProNo received insights into the type of organizational engagement that they perceived as necessary for success, they found that this engagement could easily disappear:

[...] I have been a part of it since day one of the initial implementation of lean. And the realization was that there was a fierce engagement in the beginning. We saw that co-workers were engaged and interested in it as well. But we were unable to maintain the focus. We did not manage to keep the pressure up, and the engagement up. And that is the intention and ambition here [in the local improvement initiative]. We want to turn it a bit around again, and say that: yes, the creation of local engagement, ownership, is very important in order to establish continuous improvement as a part of everyday work life. (Interviewee 6, improvement expert/leader)

Learning from internal failures was found to be challenging, as the managers and change agents were more reluctant to share their unsuccessful attempts than their accomplishments. However, they did obtain some insights into the typical pitfalls of the implementation of lean by examining previous research.

As the lean experts gathered and interpreted the external and internal experiences, a common narrative emerged regarding why the initial implementation had failed. The coaches and the consultants in particular had focused excessively on lean tools (e.g., 5S, A3 and value-stream mapping) and failed to properly teach the lean principles. As one improvement expert noted:

[...] Unfortunately, during the lean implementation, the focus was more on, you know, like in any consultancy, or any implementation, it sometimes focuses on the tools. Tools, tools and methods. Rather than what's the really critical principle. What are you trying to do? And [the lean group] had made that evaluation, and see that: ok, we're not gaining traction, because people aren't really understanding what are the real fundamentals here. It was very tool focused. (Interviewee 17, improvement expert)

This narrative supported the notion of a transition from external consultants to internal experts, strengthening *support's* position as an internal provider of knowledge and expertise:

[...] I think that it is up to the individual leader [whether to "hire" internal or external support]. [In *support*] we are of course a bit "protected," since we are an internal supplier. [However], there is no doubt that many also use external consultancies [...]. And, of course, in certain areas external consultants are a lot better than us – at the things they know. So, when we were building our lean effort, [consultancy] had a major role. During the first years, right. And eventually it became an ambition for us to take over. [...] But then [the consultancy] are the ones that has developed our people, so that [the EnergyCo people]

actually could perform those roles themselves. Also, of course, with the firm belief that we, ourselves, are the only ones that can build an enterprise with a company culture based on continuous improvement. That is well versed with lean. We have to do that ourselves. A consultancy cannot do that for us. But [the consultancy] have helped us in periods. (Interviewee 1, senior vice president)

Additionally, a lack of understanding—especially amongst the managers—was identified as one of the main shortcomings of the initial implementation of lean:

[...] I think that one of the root causes [of why there is a need for a second initiative] is anchoring. Management anchoring. Because, it was not properly anchored at the top, really. [...] And then it's impossible to make it work. [...] It goes all the way from the top and down [...] It [the initial implementation] was a corporate initiative. It was going to be rolled out to the entire [EnergyCo]. [...] And then everyone must, in a way, [...] take that in. And perhaps look at the way one is working. What one must do differently. And what that means. And, in a way, communicate that down through the organization. And, right, when we started with that implementation, [...] the leaders were not coached in advance. It was a simultaneous roll-out to both leaders and employees. So, the leaders were not enabled before it was supposed to go out to the whole department. (Interviewee 16, improvement expert)

In summary, the established narrative was that the tool-based, consultancy-driven approach to the implementation of lean did not create a unified, high-level understanding of the concept throughout the organization. However, the internal inquiries found success stories, making it possible to frame the results of the initial implementation as mixed rather than simply unsuccessful. Additionally, by finding external success stories, the actors within ProNo were able to reinforce a narrative of lean's potential benefits and blame the previous implementation approach for the lack of internal success.

The knowledge and interest of internal experts

The narrative of failed implementation draws attention to the internal *implementers* of the lean ideas, both as the main authors of the narrative and as the prospective agents of change in the second attempt. As shown in Table 1, implementer roles were found in both ProNo and *support*, and they typically combined improvement expertise and the leadership of change projects. Many of them had a long history within EnergyCo, having held managerial and staff positions in different parts of the organization. While the degree of dedication to specific concepts varied between the individuals, some had spent significant time on becoming experts in lean (and related improvement methods):

[...] [A]nd, among other things, [I] got certified as a lean coach. And that is a pretty demanding undertaking within the company—to get through such a certification [process]. It is a pretty large conversation-program and documentation-program. And a pretty demanding exam as well. [...]. (Interviewee 11, improvement expert)

Therefore, many had a professional interest in making lean succeed, as well as proving their value through competition with external consultants (cf. quote from Interviewee 1, senior vice president, above). Both for the internal experts and for the employees more broadly, the internal investment in the development of knowledge about lean was also used as an argument to revitalize lean in ProNo:

Yes, I will claim that we did [consider other concepts than lean]. But, again, you are so dependent on enough competence among the management and others. And not only have the competence, but also the ability to operate on those principles [...]. (Interviewee 15, change leader/coordinator)

Although they had a foundation on which to build, the lack of deep understanding of lean among the managers and other employees was still considered an important barrier to future success. Hence, their own scarce expertise increased in value, particularly since external consultants were no longer used in direct interactions with the receiving employees.

The internal experts were the links between the company and external knowledge arenas, such as lean conferences, research institutions and business associations. This lent them credibility and probably reinforced their belief that lean could, in fact, be turned into a success. Furthermore, participation in these arenas afforded them access to reference cases and scripts with which to make sense of their company's experiences. Some of the main components in the narrative of failed implementation echo the Norwegian discourse on lean at that time, according to which tool-centered approaches and external consultants' standardized solutions were to be used with caution, and companies were instead encouraged "to make lean [their] own" through more bottom-up approaches (Rolfesen, 2014).

The decoupling and recoupling of concept elements

Table 2 presents an overview of the changes incorporated into the revitalization compared to the initial implementation of lean. To summarize, the revitalization was driven by (1) replacing the original label, (2) maintaining the original content in a slightly modified form, and (3) altering the implementation mode. In the following sections, we elaborate on these changes.

Table 2. Comparison of the initial implementation and the revitalization.

Concept element	Initial implementation	Revitalization
Label(s)	○ Lean	○ Continuous improvement ○ Local improvement
Content	○ Lean principles, methods, and tools ○ Tools as main priority	○ Lean principles, methods, and tools ○ Principles as main priority
Implementation approach	○ Centrally driven ○ Organization-wide ○ Front-end consultant use	○ Division-driven ○ Local (divisional) ○ Back-office consultant use

Source(s): Authors work.

The initial implementation resulted in a negative association with the lean label, creating a need for new labels in the subsequent revitalization: *continuous improvement* and *local improvement*.

[...] I think that it was a quite broad agreement [within the workgroup] that the expression lean [...] had just [become] such a negative thing, right. And, [...] it is continuous improvement that we will be doing here, right. [...] It is plain Norwegian, and everyone understands it. OK, that simply makes sense. So, I think that it is a combination of [the bad reputation] lean has gotten, and that [...] [lean] faded away again, right. So, [...] are we going to try this again? No, it ... I think that it was simply [about] giving it a new suit, and make it more vernacular. (Interviewee 15, change leader/coordinator)

The choice to replace the lean label did, however, cause some confusion amongst the employees even though the intention was to avoid resistance and simplify communication:

[...] But we had a workshop last week, to onboard local elected representatives [and] the safety representatives. And then someone asked: what exactly is this? Is it lean? Is it continuous improvement? Or what is this? [...] (Interviewee 4, project owner/project leader)

Furthermore, ProNo decided to attempt a different implementation approach from the initial method while retaining the concept's content. As part of this effort, they decided to develop an internal framework built on lean principles, methods, and tools. The development of this framework had a dual purpose: to increase managers' understanding—as they were included in the process—and clarify aspects of lean which had previously been perceived as unclear. As noted by Interviewee 4 (project owner/project leader), “[...] what was missing [in the implementation] back then? [...] we were actually missing this framework with the rules of the game. [...]” The new framework was intended to highlight lean principles and reduce the emphasis on specific lean tools. In addition to internal participation, an external consultancy was hired to support the development of the new framework. In response to the perceived mistakes in the initial implementation, the consultancy was used in a back-office capacity rather than in direct interaction with the receiving employees. It should be noted that this was not the same consultancy as that used in the initial roll-out of lean, but that it had previously been used to support EnergyCo in other lean activities.

Pilot projects were conducted to provide local examples of the use of frameworks in success stories. These local pilots were also intended to aid in the development of the employees' understanding of lean, in addition to overcoming local resistance:

[...] We know that if you get to a [oil] platform, nothing sells better than their own examples. If you use too many examples from another platform, then they will almost “black-out,” right. [...] So, as we take this from place to place, we have to find examples that they themselves work out. Their own experiences. [...] (Interviewee 5, improvement expert/leader)

The internal experts also focused on communicating the principles in a simpler manner than previously and attempted to make the lean principles more understandable for all the actors involved. This meant using tribal language rather than consultant speak:

[...] It's not supposed to be only lean-nerd terminology. It should be possible for anyone to understand what we are talking about. [...] We should describe it in such a way that you can understand, independent of which background you have [...] (Interviewee 5, improvement expert/leader)

Discussion and conclusion

Concept revitalization implies that there is more continuity in the application of ideas than is suggested by the management fashion cycle (Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). When organization concepts are revitalized, users receive a second opportunity to make them work. This creates room for renewed experimentation and increases the likelihood of the eventual long-term retention of the concept.

Theoretical contributions

By offering an empirically grounded understanding of concept revitalization, this study makes three contributions to the literature on organization concepts.

First, the term *revitalization* makes it possible to conceptualize how organization concepts regain attention and resources when organizations re-attempt their use. It is distinct from broader field-level processes of re-adoption (Reinmoeller *et al.*, 2019) and more passive

forms of organization-level retention through dormancy (Røvik, 2011) or sedimentation (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2012). Revitalization is a form of retention, and by extending the time during which organizations work with concepts, it increases the likelihood that (perceived) successes are created, ensuring that the concept is also retained in the long term. Furthermore, our analysis of revitalization draws attention to how the pressure to abandon concepts associated with the fashion cycle (Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020) is offset by prior investment in a concept. For recurrent problems facing an organization (such as that of improving operational efficiency), it appears convenient to rely on modified versions of known solutions, rather than adopting new, less familiar concepts. This especially holds as long as the concept to be revitalized enjoys field-level legitimacy. If this is not the case, or the problem facing the organization is genuinely novel, revitalization may not be an obvious solution.

Second, this study adds to the knowledge of how concepts are stretched and reframed (Ansari *et al.*, 2014; Benders *et al.*, 2019; Heusinkveld *et al.*, 2013) by broadening the understanding of decoupling and recoupling. Decoupling and recoupling were previously used to describe the relationship between a concept's label and its content (e.g., Benders, 1999). In our study, the *implementation approach* was found to be another element that can be associated with or disassociated from particular labels and contents. Its inclusion broadens the understanding of potential evolutionary paths for concepts within and outside organizations. For example, in a manner that is similar to the replacement of a label to avoid negative associations, the implementation approach might be altered to signal novelty or a departure from earlier attempts. In both cases, the content can remain the same and persist for longer than if the failure to implement a concept directly calls its value into question.

Third, we add to the knowledge on agency in concept implementation and translation. The importance of internal experts in translating concepts and implementing change has been addressed previously (Holmemo *et al.*, 2018; van Grinsven *et al.*, 2020), but their role in ensuring that concepts persist was not explored. In addition to their role in translating and reframing concepts, our findings suggest that internal experts and implementers engage in power games with external consultants and internal critics. By taking part in networks and communities devoted to concepts, internal experts and implementers manage the boundary between internal and external discourses about concepts. Hence, they can draw on external networks and success stories to construct compelling, tailor-made narratives, thereby gaining power over meaning (O'Mahoney and Sturdy, 2016).

Limitations and future research directions

The findings from a single case study are not generalizable in a statistical sense (Yin, 2018). However, our results and contributions might stimulate the further exploration of concept revitalization and organizations' retention of concepts. Specifically, we encourage future research on concept revitalization to explore the different ways in which organizations balance continuity and renewal in their revitalization efforts. In our case, content represents continuity, while changes in labelling and implementation approaches signal renewal. In other cases, these elements might be configured differently. Another interesting question not covered in the current study pertains to the conditions under which revitalization leads to long-term retention. Future studies might approach this question by collecting longitudinal data, especially from those experienced the outcomes of revitalization processes.

Practical implications

Organizations pursuing improvement might consider revitalization a viable option even if the initial implementation of a concept is unsuccessful. The successful application of concepts is driven by adopting organizations (Ansari *et al.*, 2010), and the unpredictable nature of organizational change means that several attempts might be necessary to ensure positive

outcomes (Scherrer-Rathje *et al.*, 2009). As Reinmoeller *et al.* (2019) point out, the repeated dedication of resources to similar organization concepts “[...] only to withdraw them again can lead to wasteful patterns and exhibits a lack of learning capabilities.” (p. 251). Rather than starting again with new concepts, labels and tools, organizations might learn from experience and refine their interpretations and implementation approaches.

References

- Abrahamson, E. (1996), “Management fashion”, *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp.254-285.
- Aksom, H. (2022), “Reconciling conflicting predictions about transience and persistence of management concepts in management fashion theory and new institutionalism”, *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp.430-453.
- Ansari, S., Fiss, P.C. and Zajac, E.J. (2010), “Made to fit: how practices vary as they diffuse”, *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp.67-92.
- Ansari, S., Reinecke, J. and Spaan, A. (2014), “How are practices made to vary? Managing practice adaptation in a multinational corporation”, *Organization Studies*, Vol. 35 No. 9, pp.1313-1341.
- Benders, J. (1999), “Tricks and trucks: a case study of organization concepts at work”, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp.624-637.
- Benders, J., van Grinsven, M. and Ingvaldsen, J.A. (2019), “The persistence of management ideas: how framing keeps ‘Lean’ moving” in Sturdy, A., Heusinkveld, S., Reay, T. and Strang, D. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.271-285.
- Corbin, J.M., and Strauss, A.L. (2008), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3rd ed., SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Hekneby, T., Ingvaldsen, J.A. and Benders, J. (2022), “Orchestrated learning: creating a company-specific production system (XPS)”, *International Journal of Lean Six Sigma*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp.361-381.
- Heusinkveld, S. and Benders, J. (2012), “On sedimentation in management fashion: an institutional perspective”, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp.121-142.
- Heusinkveld, S., Benders, J. and Hillebrand, B. (2013), “Stretching concepts: the role of competing pressures and decoupling in the evolution of organization concepts”, *Organization Studies*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp.7-32.
- Holmemo, M.D.-Q., Powell, D.J. and Ingvaldsen, J.A. (2018), “Making it stick on borrowed time: the role of internal consultants in public sector lean transformations”, *The TQM Journal*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp.217-231.
- McCann, L., Hassard, J.S., Granter, E. and Hyde, P.J. (2015), “Casting the lean spell: the promotion, dilution and erosion of lean management in the NHS”, *Human Relations*, Vol. 68 No. 10, pp.1557-1577.
- Nijholt, J.J., Heusinkveld, S. and Benders, J. (2014), “Handling management ideas: gatekeeping, editors and professional magazines”, *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Vol. 30 No. 4, pp.470-484.
- O’Mahoney, J. and Sturdy, A. (2016), “Power and the diffusion of management ideas: the case of McKinsey & Co”, *Management Learning*, Vol. 47 No. 3, pp.247-265.
- Perkmann, M. and Spicer, A. (2008), “How are management fashions institutionalized? The role of institutional work”, *Human Relations*, Vol. 61 No. 6, pp.811-844.

- Piazza, A. and Abrahamson, E. (2020), "Fads and fashions in management practices: taking stock and looking forward", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp.264-286.
- Reinmoeller, P., Ansari, S. and Mehta, M. (2019), "The re-adoption of management ideas: how they come, how they go, and why some come back" in Sturdy, A., Heusinkveld, S., Reay, T. and Strang, D. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.251-270.
- Rølfesen, M. (Ed.) (2014), *Lean Blir Norsk: Lean i Den Norske Samarbeidsmodellen*, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen.
- Røvik, K.A. (2011), "From fashion to virus: an alternative theory of organizations' handling of management ideas", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 32 No. 5, pp.631-653.
- Scherrer-Rathje, M., Boyle, T.A. and Deflorin, P. (2009), "Lean, take two! Reflections from the second attempt at lean implementation", *Business Horizons*, Vol. 52 No. 1, pp.79-88.
- Sturdy, A., Heusinkveld, S., Reay, T. and Strang, D. (2019), "Researching management ideas: an introduction" in Sturdy, A., Heusinkveld, S., Reay, T. and Strang, D. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.1-22.
- van Grinsven, M., Heusinkveld, S. and Cornelissen, J. (2016), "Translating management concepts: towards a typology of alternative approaches", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp.271-289.
- van Grinsven, M., Sturdy, A. and Heusinkveld, S. (2020), "Identities in translation: management concepts as means and outcomes of identity work", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 41 No. 6, pp.873-897.
- Womack, J.P. and Jones, D.T. (1996), *Lean Thinking: Banish Waste and Create Wealth in Your Corporation*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Yin, R.K. (2018), *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed., SAGE, Los Angeles, CA.
- Zeitl, G., Mittal, V. and McAulay, B. (1999), "Distinguishing adoption and entrenchment of management practices: a framework for analysis", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 20 No. 5, pp.741-776.