

The Diffusion of Human Resource Management Innovations

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Résumé de l'article

Les chercheurs intéressés aux innovations en matière de gestion des ressources humaines dans les entreprises n'ont accordé que peu d'attention à la question de leur vulgarisation. Cette déficience dans la littérature devient d'un intérêt accru étant donné que les organismes gouvernementaux dans de nombreux pays ont, au cours des dernières années, cherché à encourager la diffusion de ces innovations dans un grand nombre d'usines et d'industries. À ce sujet, on peut citer la tentative norvégienne de favoriser des projets de remaniement des méthodes de travail, la tentative britannique d'établir des comités conjoints de santé et de sécurité et diverses initiatives américaines visant à encourager certaines mesures destinées à accroître la productivité et la qualité du travail. Cet article se fonde sur un échantillon de quelque 300 établissements en Grande-Bretagne en vue d'examiner la portée et la nature de la vulgarisation d'innovations d'une organisation à l'autre. L'innovation considérée a trait à un programme conjoint syndicat-employeur de traitement de l'alcoolisme sur les lieux du travail. L'intérêt de considérer cette innovation en particulier repose sur les coûts considérables de l'abus des boissons alcooliques au travail, sur le fait que de tels coûts ne sont pas confinés à des établissements et à des industries spécifiques et sur le fait que la participation des syndicats est fort importante si l'on veut implanter et maintenir un tel programme.

Une constatation fondamentale a permis de se rendre compte qu'une entreprise sur cinq seulement avait appliqué une telle mesure. Dans cet article, on se demande si les entreprises qui ont instauré pareille mesure de leur propre initiative n'avaient agi que par coïncidence ou si elles présentaient certaines caractéristiques communes. Les résultats de l'enquête ont démontré que celles-ci constituaient un groupe distinct relativement homogène. Ce qui les caractérisait, c'était qu'elles s'intéressaient jusqu'à un certain point à des innovations en matière de gestion des ressources humaines (il s'agissait d'entreprises assez considérables ou regroupant plusieurs établissements) et elles accordaient une grande priorité aux questions de santé et de sécurité au travail (c'est-à-dire qu'elles faisaient appel à un personnel médical spécialisé et qu'elles avaient établi volontairement un comité conjoint de santé et de sécurité).

Le deuxième objet de cet article était de vérifier si l'initiative d'une tierce partie avait réussi à propager la connaissance de semblables mesures au-delà des frontières du groupe d'entreprises qui les avaient appliquées sur une base volontaire. Cela consistait à analyser le nombre et la nature des firmes qui s'étaient procuré une copie du Code de pratique publié par le gouvernement recommandant la mise en vigueur de telles politiques. En fait, un petit nombre d'entreprises seulement avaient en main une copie de ce Code (environ quinze pour cent) et, de même, celles-ci ne se trouvaient pas au nombre de firmes distribuées comme au hasard. Leurs caractéristiques essentielles étaient fort semblables à celles qui avaient implanté volontairement une politique de lutte contre l'alcoolisme. En réalité, l'existence d'une telle politique était l'une des principales indications pour se rendre compte que l'entreprise s'était procuré une copie de ce Code de pratique. Ces résultats indiquaient clairement que l'initiative d'un tiers, présenté à titre informatif, avait peu d'influence quant à l'implantation et au fonctionnement de mesures relatives à la lutte contre l'alcoolisme.

Une des conséquences importantes de ces constatations, c'est que tant les chercheurs que les décideurs doivent en savoir davantage à propos des sources d'information qui exercent une influence sur les innovations en matière de gestion des ressources humaines. On a cité une ou deux initiatives à ce sujet, mais il faut souligner que la diffusion des informations peut être une condition nécessaire bien qu'insuffisante pour la vulgarisation des innovations en matière de gestion des ressources humaines.

The Diffusion of Human Resource Management Innovations

P.B. Beaumont

This paper uses a sample of some 300 plants in Britain to examine the extent and nature of inter-organisational diffusion of human resource management innovations.

One of the basic objectives of organisation change is to bring about changes in the internal *behavioural patterns* of employees¹. In seeking to bring about such changes, existing conceptual and empirical work has overwhelmingly been based on the traditional three stage Organisation Development (OD) model²: the first stage concerning the initial stimuli to consider change; the second focussing on the decision to commit the organisation to a change programme; and the third concentrating on the institutionalisation of the change programme over time. However, there have been increased calls for the development of improved paradigms or models of the change process³. One major response to these calls has been the development and testing of models that incorporate the dynamics of union-management interaction⁴. This has been done through recognition of the importance of divergent aims, institutionalised power and conflict, which are concepts

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** Thanks are due to participants in an industrial relations seminar at MIT and a workshop on organisational development at the London Business School for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1 Larry E. GREINER and Louis R. BARNES, «Organization Change and Development» in Gene W. Dalton and Paul R. Lawrence, eds, *Organizational Change and Development*, Richard D. Irwin, Homewood, 1970, p. 2.

2 K. LEWIN, «Frontiers in Group Dynamics», *Human Relations*, Vol. 1, 1947.

3 R.L. KAHN, «Organization Development: Some Problems and Proposals», *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, Vol. 10, 1974.

4 Thomas A. KOCHAN and Lee DYER, «A Model of Organizational Change in the Context of Union Management Relations», *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, Vol. 12, 1976.

that have traditionally received little attention in the relevant body of literature given that «OD has had little to say about the role of unions and the part they play in OD»⁵.

The potential importance of developing yet *another* line of response to these calls for improved models of the change process is suggested by the following observation:

Diffusion refers to the extension and adoption of a new work behaviour in a social system. That is, it concerns the spread of innovation from one setting to another. In planned organisational change, diffusion refers to the spread of the change effort from one target area to another. Institutionalisation and diffusion are different but interdependent concepts. Diffusion includes the concept of institutionalisation. Diffusion cannot occur completely without institutionalisation⁶.

The above quote provides the starting point for the present paper which argues that the concept of diffusion must be more fully and centrally studied by researchers concerned with human resource management. Specifically, we argue that diffusion must figure more prominently in studies of the institutionalisation of change (stage 3 of the traditional model), or else a fourth stage solely concerned with the subject of diffusion must be added to the traditional (three stage) model. That is, if one is solely interested in *intra*-organisational change then diffusion should be treated as an important part of the institutionalisation stage of the traditional model, but if one is interested in *inter*-organisational change then one needs a societal wide change model with diffusion as the fourth stage.

In practice human resource management researchers have done remarkably little work on the subject of diffusion. The major exception has been Richard Walton, whose examination of eight work restructuring experiments clearly revealed that the failure to diffuse the innovation to new systems seriously weakened the level of institutionalisation in the original target system⁷. This work was solely concerned with the subject of *intra*-organisational change. On the subject of *inter*-organisational change, where the concern is to try and spread relevant changes beyond the confines of individual organisations to others unrelated in ownership or control terms, there have been no 'landmark' studies of either a conceptual or empirical nature. The need for such studies, however, is becoming increasingly evident as we see more and more evidence of the *failure* of attempts by

⁵ E.F. HUSE, *Organisation Development and Change*, West Publishing Co., St. Paul, 1975, p. 65.

⁶ Paul S. GOODMAN, Max BAZARMAN and Edward CONLON, «Institutionalisation of Planned Organizational Change» in Barry M. Staw and Larry L. Cummings, eds, *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, Vol. 2, JAI Press, Greenwich, 1980, p. 222.

⁷ R.E. WALTON, «The Diffusion of New York Structures: Explaining Why Success Didn't Take», *Organisational Dynamics*, Winter 1975.

Government and quasi-government bodies in various countries to encourage an *across the board* adoption of what they regard as desirable changes in industry. Three examples from three different countries provide useful illustrations of such failed attempts. In Norway it was the limited diffusion of voluntary job redesign schemes that lay behind the passage of the *Work Environment Act 1977*,⁸ while in Britain the Safety Representative-Safety Committee Regulations 1977 (of the *Health and Safety at Work Act 1974*) were considered necessary because of the limited, voluntary establishment of joint health and safety committees⁹. And finally, the failure of various bodies, such as the National Center for Productivity and Work Quality, in the United States, to bring about a widespread diffusion of QWL projects undoubtedly lay behind the call of one leading academic for legislation in the area of the quality of working life¹⁰.

In this paper we examine the issue of the *inter-organisational* diffusion of human resource innovations by focussing on two particular questions that have been highlighted, among others, as being unsatisfactorily answered in the existing OD literature;¹¹ (i) how does change occur naturally? and (ii) what is the role of a third party in bringing about change? In looking at these questions, the particular innovation that we concentrate on is that of referral and treatment policies for problem drinkers in the workplace. Accordingly, in what follows, we indicate the potential importance of this particular workplace innovation, indicate the characteristics of natural adopters of the innovation, examine the record of one third party attempt to diffuse the innovation, and then conclude with some suggestions for future consideration and examination by both researchers and policy makers.

THE POTENTIAL IMPORTANCE OF ALCOHOL POLICIES

The value of looking at the particular workplace innovation of alcohol policies follows from their illustrative and substantive importance. If, as stated in the introduction, one of the basic objectives of organisation change is to bring about changes in the internal behavioural patterns of

8 Frank BLACKLER and Colin BROWN, «The Law and Job Design: Comments on Recent Norwegian Legislation», *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 13, 1982.

9 P.B. BEAUMONT and J.W. LEOPOLD, «A Failure of Voluntarism: The Case of Joint Health and Safety Committees in Britain», *New Zealand Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1982.

10 Edward E. LAWLER, «Should the Quality of Working Life be Legislated?», *Personnel Administrator*, January 1976.

11 Adrian MCLEAN, «Organization Development: A Case of the Emperor's New Clothes?», *Personnel Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1981, p. 3.

employees, then this is arguably most capable of being achieved if management adopts a 'shared power' approach¹². That is, where there is participation by group members in selecting from several alternative solutions specified in advance by senior management, or where there is problem identification and problem solving through group discussion. Much of the existing literature presenting arguments along these lines is concerned solely with sharing power *within the management hierarchy*. However, in unionised plants this sharing will also need to be done with the *unions* as they are likely to be particularly interested, not to say concerned, about any change initiative that focusses on personal employee problems. This is because the unions may well see initiatives in this regard as providing opportunities for management to harass and get rid of undesirable employees. And an excellent example of a change initiative concerned with personal problems is that of workplace alcohol policies, because they embody explicit sanctions, ranging from warnings, and ultimately dismissal, in order to motivate the employees concerned to accept treatment.

In addition to their illustrative value, in the above terms, workplace alcohol policies are an important area for study in their own right. This follows from the fact that a considerable proportion of the very substantial costs of alcoholism and alcohol abuse are likely to be borne in the workplace, given that the vast majority of problem drinkers are in employment. It is difficult to produce fully comprehensive figures on the costs of the alcohol problem, but a recent Government economic service working paper conservatively estimated that, under varying assumptions, the economic cost of alcohol misuse in 1977-78 could have been as high as £650 million in Britain¹³. Moreover, the costs of alcohol abuse in industry, which occur through impaired productivity, absenteeism, accidents, etc., will occur in a whole variety of work settings. That is, they are not confined to particular plants or industries; a typical estimate is that *any* company will have some 2-3% of its employees experiencing alcohol problems to a greater or lesser extent. The fact that the stimuli for change is *not situation specific*, as is so often the case with examples in the existing OD literature, further adds to the value of looking at this particular workplace innovation.

In principle, the workplace offers a setting in which the relatively *early* identification of the problem of alcoholism and alcohol abuse is made possible¹⁴. Moreover, the available evidence, albeit of a limited case study

¹² Larry E. GREINER, «Patterns of Organizational Change», in Dalton and Lawrence, eds, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-29.

¹³ Sally HOLTERMANN and Andrew BURCHELL, «The Costs of Alcohol Misuse», *Government Economic Service Working Paper*, No. 37, London, 1981.

¹⁴ Paul M. ROMAN and Harrison M. TRICE, «Alcohol Abuse and Work Organizations» in Benjamin Kissin and Henri Bergleiter, eds, *Social Aspects of Alcoholism*, Plenum Press, New York, 1976, p. 452.

variety, reveals that the success rates achieved by workplace based policies tend to exceed those of external (to the workplace) based policies; it is frequently claimed that workplace based policies have a successful treatment rate of 50-70 per cent compared to 30 per cent from hospital treatment populations¹⁵.

However, despite the apparent advantages of such workplace based policies, the typical approach to this problem in British industry was, and indeed remains, that of ignoring or tolerating the individuals concerned until the problem became so unacceptable from the company point of view that summary dismissal was considered the only possible solution. During the 1970s, however, a number of firms began to break away from this approach by introducing alcohol recovery policies for their employees. The initial lead in this regard came from the alcohol producing industries, although some more recent evidence indicates that such policies have now diffused to firms outside these particular industries¹⁶. This evidence, however, is extremely fragmentary in nature and for this reason it was decided to undertake a more systematic survey of this diffusion question. It is the results of this survey that are reported in the next two sections of the paper.

THE NATURAL ADOPTERS

The basic question posed here is: are the natural adopters of workplace alcohol policies a random sub-set of all organisations, or are they a rather special, distinctive group with certain identifiable characteristics in common? This seems to be the first question that a policy making authority interested in trying to encourage the reasonably widespread diffusion of any human resource innovation must seek to answer, as evidence of a non-randomly distributed natural diffusion process is likely to provide a powerful argument for some form of third party intervention to assist the process.

In seeking to answer the above question we were assisted by inspectors of the Health and Safety Executive in Scotland who provided relevant information on all establishments routinely inspected in the course of a 2 week period in September 1981, a 3 week period in March 1982 and a one week period in July 1982. The total number of establishments surveyed was 300. There was a considerable range of industries represented, but with the largest industry groups being food, drink and tobacco (20.3%), mechanical engineering (15.6%) and metal manufacture (9.7%). The mean establish-

¹⁵ P.B. BEAUMONT and S. ALLSOP, «An Industrial Alcohol Policy: The Characteristics of Worker Success», *British Journal of Addictions*, 1984 (forthcoming).

¹⁶ See *Industrial Relations Review and Report*, No. 153, March 1977.

ment size was 394 employees, although the median figure of 71 indicated that the majority of plants were relatively small in size, but with a number of large sized one being present. Some 41.8% were single, independent establishments, with the remainder being one part of a multi-establishment structure. The basic results were that 26.4% of the establishments (N = 79) had an explicit policy to deal with the problem of alcohol at the workplace. Moreover, 62 of the 79 plants that had such a policy stated that its details had been discussed and agreed with the recognised trade unions at the plant. In short, some 21% of our 300 establishments had an explicit policy to deal with alcohol abuse that was discussed and agreed with the unions.

Following Rogers and Shoemakers discussion of the nature of the innovation diffusion process (albeit discussion at the level of the individual rather than the organisation), we expect these firms with alcohol policies to be what they term *early adopters*:

the early adopter is considered by many as 'the man to check with' before using a new idea. This adopter category is generally sought by change agents to be a local missionary for speeding the diffusion process. Because early adopters are not too far ahead of the average individual in innovativeness, they serve as a role model for many other members of a social system¹⁷.

It was our task to try and identify just what were the relevant, distinctive characteristics in common (if any) of this group of early adopters. Accordingly, we tested a model consisting of four sub-sets of influences: the *a priori* hypotheses have been developed elsewhere¹⁸. These sub-vectors of influence were as follows:

- (i) *A work environment that is associated with alcohol abuse*. The individual variable under this sub-heading was an industry dummy, differentiating the two alcohol producing industry orders from the rest.
- (ii) *Innovation in the area of workplace health and safety*. The individual variables here were the presence (or not) of a specialist nurse at the plant, the presence (or not) of a doctor at the plant, and the existence (or not) of a joint health and safety committee established prior to the passage of the *Health and Safety at Work Act 1974*.
- (iii) *Innovation in the Personnel or Human Resource area in general*. The individual variables here were establishment size, and whether the plant was part of a multi-establishment structure.

¹⁷ Everett M. ROGERS and F. Floyd SHOEMAKER, *Communication of Innovations*, The Free Press, New York, Second Edition, 1971, p. 184.

¹⁸ P.B. BEAUMONT, «Trade Unions, Organisations and Alcohol Policies», *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Autumn 1983.

(iv) *Union Power*. The variables included here were the extent of collective bargaining coverage, strike frequency, and the nature of bargaining structure. (The variables under this particular sub-heading were all industry mean statistics, as opposed to establishment level observations.)

The correlation results obtained are listed in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Correlations Between Independent Variables and Alcohol Policy

| <i>Variables</i> | <i>Presence of Alcohol Policy</i> | <i>Presence of Jointly Discussed Alcohol Policy</i> |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| Alcohol producing industries | 0.203* | 0.190* |
| Nurse | 0.310* | 0.326* |
| Doctor | 0.285* | 0.321* |
| Voluntarily established joint health and safety committee | 0.400* | 0.448* |
| Plant size | 0.243* | 0.243* |
| Multi-plant | 0.267* | 0.289* |
| Collective bargaining coverage | -0.010 | 0.033 |
| Strike frequency | 0.100 | 0.114 |
| Single employer bargaining | 0.208* | 0.187* |

* Significant at the .05 level or better.

Although one must be cautious about generalising from the findings of an exploratory study, it was certainly encouraging to find so many of our independent variables entering with the expected sign, and attaining varying degrees of statistical significance. The results obtained suggest that the presence of a jointly discussed alcohol policy was positively and significantly associated with establishments in the alcohol producing industries, with relatively large sized establishments, establishments that were part of a multi-plant structure, which employed specialist medical personnel and had set up a joint health and safety committee on a voluntary basis, prior to the 1974 Act. These establishments also tended to be characterised by single employer bargaining arrangements. A series of stepwise regressions were then estimated, with some 25 per cent of the variance in our dependent

variable being accounted for; only three of the five variables that entered the best fit equation (defined as the step at which the R^2 , adjusted for degrees of freedom, was maximised) were statistically significant, although too much should not be made of this fact due to the presence of substantial multi-collinearity between most of our independent variables.

In summary, our results indicate that the *natural* diffusion process with regard to the introduction of such policies has been largely confined to a very distinctive sub-set of establishments. This finding raises the question of whether Government or third party initiatives can extend the diffusion process beyond the confines of the particular group of establishments characterised by the factors identified above. This question is examined in the next section.

A DIFFUSION ATTEMPT

In Britain considerable use has been made of *codes of practice* to try and stimulate the adoption of various workplace innovations. These codes of practice are typically based on the arrangements of best practice employers at the time and attempt to bring about a wider take up of the recommended arrangements by increasing knowledge of the benefits and details of the arrangements in industry at large. The implicit assumption here is that non-adoption is frequently, or even overwhelmingly, due to a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of an innovation. This is an extremely powerful assumption, and one that we return to in the concluding section of the paper.

Unfortunately, despite their frequent usage in Britain, there have been virtually no detailed empirical studies that have specifically looked at the influence of such codes of practice in bringing about the recommended organisation changes. There is clearly a need for such work, and in their study design the logical first question to focus on would be the number (and relevant characteristics) of firms in a given sample that have actually *obtained* a copy of the relevant code; this being the obvious pre-requisite for introducing the recommended change. The obvious importance of this question is suggested by Mace's general claim that:

... in large measure the resistance to change lies in the resistance to communication — the refusal, the disinclination, the incapacity or the simple failure to receive a message. Not all failures to receive a message arise from the resistance to change. *Failures are due to the simple failure of the message to arrive. We are perhaps too*

*ready to assume that all the trouble is located at the end of reception. Some of the sources of failure in communication are located in the transmitter and in the process of transmission*¹⁹.

It is the above perspective that we have the opportunity to examine here. This opportunity arises from the fact that the relevant Government departments issued a code of practice, *The Problem Drinker at Work*, in 1981 which recommended that management should, in consultation with any recognised trade unions, agree and implement an alcohol referral and treatment policy in their workplace. Specifically, we examine the question of whether the establishments that have obtained a copy of this code of practice are a *randomly* distributed sub-set of our sample, or whether the code was disproportionately obtained by a sub-set of organisations with certain relevant characteristics in common. Through this exercise, we should obtain some perspective on whether this code of practice has spread the natural diffusion process beyond the confines of the relatively small, rather special sub-group of establishments identified as already having introduced the recommended policy.

The code of practice, *The Problem Drinker at Work*, was only issued in late 1981 so that, in order to give it time to 'percolate' through the system, only the establishments surveyed in March and July 1982 were asked whether they had obtained a copy of it. This question was therefore put to only 190 establishments out of our total sample of 300. The results were that only some 14.7% of them ($N = 28$) stated that they had obtained a copy of the code of practice. The next step was to see whether (or not) this relatively small number of firms were randomly distributed across our sub-sample of establishments. Accordingly, we examined the relationship between the obtaining of this code of practice and the full set of independent variables that were tested with regard to whether the establishment already had a jointly discussed alcohol policy; whether the establishment already had such a policy in operation was included here as a variable. The correlation results obtained are set out in Table 2.

The number of statistically significant variables in Table 2 clearly indicates that the relatively small number of firms that had obtained a copy of the code of practice were not randomly distributed across our sub-sample. Moreover, the significant variables in Table 2 were very much those that were significantly associated with whether the establishment already had a jointly discussed alcohol policy (Table 1). Indeed, the existence of such a policy was one of the most powerful influences associated with the obtaining of this code of practice. This particular variable (along with four others)

¹⁹ C.A. MACE, «Resistance to Change», *Occupational Psychology*, Vol. 27, 1953, p. 27.

remained statistically significant in our best fit regression estimate which accounted for some 28 per cent of the variance in our dependent variable. The code of practice may have produced some *indirect* benefits, such as improved provisions in already existing policies, but from our results it is clear that it had little impact in *directly* diffusing knowledge of alcohol policies beyond the relatively homogeneous group of firms that have already introduced them.

TABLE 2
Correlations Between Independent Variables
and Obtaining a Copy of the Code of Practice

| | |
|---|--------|
| Alcohol producing industries | 0.249* |
| Nurse | 0.319* |
| Doctor | 0.219* |
| Voluntarily established joint health and safety committee | 0.406* |
| Plant size | 0.289* |
| Multi-plant | 0.114 |
| Collective bargaining coverage | 0.075 |
| Strike frequency | 0.154* |
| Single employer bargaining | 0.124 |
| Jointly discussed alcohol policy | 0.310* |

* Significant at the .05 level or better.

To summarise, our findings for alcohol policies are that a *natural* diffusion process was not randomly distributed among firms and that an *assisted* (in the sense of information provision from third parties) process was also not randomly distributed. Moreover, the two flows overlapped to a very considerable extent in being disproportionately concentrated among a relatively small sub-set of firms with certain identifiable characteristics in common. What are the implications of these findings? There are in fact two major implications, one for the human resource management researcher and the other for public authorities, which we discuss in our final section.

THE IMPLICATIONS

For the researcher, we have argued that there is a need for much more work to be done on the subject of diffusion both at the intra-organisation and inter-organisation levels of change. The example presented in this paper has been at the latter level so we will confine our comments to it. At this particular level of analysis researchers should, at least initially, centre any research on the subject of diffusion around the specific question of the nature of information flows that induce workplace level innovations. The fact of the matter is that, in terms of organisational changes designed to alter the internal behavioural patterns of employees, we know remarkably little about the particular information channels that will influence change, and why. Research in communications theory suggests that influential sources of information tend to embody two kinds of credibility:²⁰ (i) «safety» credibility (this person is my peer, is like me and has no axe to grind in giving me the information); and (ii) «professional» or «technical» credibility (this person knows what they are talking about). If these two types of credibility are what management look for in relation to personnel-human resource innovations then we need to identify the particular sources of information where they can expect, in their opinion, to obtain them. In this sense we need to follow the example of our marketing research colleagues²¹ and seriously examine the nature of information flows that stimulate innovation, change and diffusion.

Similarly for policy makers, interested in trying to encourage the diffusion of innovations in the personnel-human resource area, far more thought and attention must be given to the question of identifying and influencing the relevant information flows. With the aim of trying to influence information flows in relation to QWL innovations, Lawler has suggested the potential relevance of the model of the Department of Agriculture in the United States which, in trying to diffuse information about improved farming technologies, utilises both demonstration projects and local agents to aid farmers²². It is this sort of model which underlies the establishment of the small network of local QWL centres set up in at least three states (Massachusetts, Michigan and Ohio), and it will therefore clearly be worthwhile for researchers in the U.S. to examine the success of these centres in tapping into, broadening and influencing management information flows.

²⁰ David K. BERLO et al, «Dimensions for Evaluating the Acceptability of Message Sources», *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 33, 1970.

²¹ John A. MARTILLA, «Word-of-Mouth Communication in the Industrial Adoption Process», *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 8, 1971.

²² Edward E. LAWLER, «Strategies for Improving the Quality of Work Life», *American Psychologist*, Vol. 37, No. 5, May 1982, p. 489.

However, this recommendation of Lawler's should be seen in the light of the Norwegian experience with work redesign projects where a conscious attempt at diffusion, based on an agriculture-technology model, was judged to have been a failure²³.

In Britain the Department of Employment Work Research Unit has also been:

building up local self-help networks of companies applying or planning to apply QWL principles in their establishments. One network operates in the North East of England and is made up of a dozen companies either wholly based or with establishments in the area. Meetings held every few months are hosted by different companies in turn and provide other network members with the opportunity of seeing at first hand the organisational developments taking place on other sites and for the group to discuss problems of common interest. Another network is being started in the North West and other areas will be developed as companies prepared to act as hosts are identified²⁴.

This is obviously an early stage initiative, but one with considerable potential for trying to spread information about innovations among firms, which is something that clearly the code of practice examined above failed to do. Indeed if one subscribes to what is termed the 'two step flow of communications' hypothesis,²⁵ which contends that original sources of information will only be directly influential among early adopters and that these individuals, or in our case organisations, become, in turn, the immediate source of information for the remainder of the population, then this type of initiative should be watched with interest by all policy makers concerned with diffusing organisational change.

The above implications, however, have a specific premise, namely that the lack of a widespread diffusion of human resource-personnel innovations stems in large measure from an informational blockage, or lack of awareness on the part of many organisations. This premise which underlies the use of codes of practice in Britain and demonstration projects in the United States, must itself be subject to empirical examination. There may, for example, be numerous companies that are aware of innovations, such as alcohol policies, but have made a conscious decision not to adopt them. Certainly increasing company awareness of such innovations may achieve little in the way of change if many companies lack a powerful internal agent

²³ See Ph.G. HERBST, *Alternatives to Hierarchies*, Martinus Nijhoff, Leiden, 1976, pp. 41-56.

²⁴ D.E. Work Research Unit, *1982 Report of the Tripartite Steering Group on Job Satisfaction*, June 1983, p. 16.

²⁵ Elihu KATZ, «The Two Step Flow of Communication: An Up-to-date Report on an Hypothesis», *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 21, 1957.

of change to sponsor the innovation. This suggestion of other possible constraints on the diffusion process also has implications for policy makers. Perhaps Governments have been too quick to move from information provision to legislation without giving sufficient thought to certain *intermediate* activities, such as the development of rewards and incentives for adoption. The West German use of grants to support work restructuring projects is an interesting, if rather isolated, example of such an intermediate attempt²⁶. In short, awareness is likely to be a necessary, but not sufficient condition for an adequate diffusion process. This point makes it clear that there is much work for both researchers and policy makers to undertake on the subject of human resource management diffusion in the future.

La vulgarisation des innovations en matière de gestion des ressources humaines

Les chercheurs intéressés aux innovations en matière de gestion des ressources humaines dans les entreprises n'ont accordé que peu d'attention à la question de leur vulgarisation. Cette déficience dans la littérature devient d'un intérêt accru étant donné que les organismes gouvernementaux dans de nombreux pays ont, au cours des dernières années, cherché à encourager la diffusion de ces innovations dans un grand nombre d'usines et d'industries. À ce sujet, on peut citer la tentative norvégienne de favoriser des projets de remaniement des méthodes de travail, la tentative britannique d'établir des comités conjoints de santé et de sécurité et diverses initiatives américaines visant à encourager certaines mesures destinées à accroître la productivité et la qualité du travail.

Cet article se fonde sur un échantillon de quelque 300 établissements en Grande-Bretagne en vue d'examiner la portée et la nature de la vulgarisation d'innovations d'une organisation à l'autre. L'innovation considérée a trait à un programme conjoint syndicat-employeur de traitement de l'alcoolisme sur les lieux du travail. L'intérêt de considérer cette innovation en particulier repose sur les coûts considérables de l'abus des boissons alcooliques au travail, sur le fait que de tels coûts ne sont pas confinés à des établissements et à des industries spécifiques et sur le fait que la participation des syndicats est fort importante si l'on veut implanter et maintenir un tel programme.

Une constatation fondamentale a permis de se rendre compte qu'une entreprise sur cinq seulement avait appliqué une telle mesure. Dans cet article, on se demande si les entreprises qui ont instauré pareille mesure de leur propre initiative n'avaient agi que par coïncidence ou si elles présentaient certaines caractéristiques communes. Les

²⁶ LAWLER, *loc. cit.*

résultats de l'enquête ont démontré que celles-ci constituaient un groupe distinct relativement homogène. Ce qui les caractérisait, c'était qu'elles s'intéressaient jusqu'à un certain point à des innovations en matière de gestion des ressources humaines (il s'agissait d'entreprises assez considérables ou regroupant plusieurs établissements) et elles accordaient une grande priorité aux questions de santé et de sécurité au travail (c'est-à-dire qu'elles faisaient appel à un personnel médical spécialisé et qu'elles avaient établi volontairement un comité conjoint de santé et de sécurité).

Le deuxième objet de cet article était de vérifier si l'initiative d'une tierce partie avait réussi à propager la connaissance de semblables mesures au-delà des frontières du groupe d'entreprises qui les avaient appliquées sur une base volontaire. Cela consistait à analyser le nombre et la nature des firmes qui s'étaient procurées une copie du Code de pratique publié par le gouvernement recommandant la mise en vigueur de telles politiques. En fait, un petit nombre d'entreprises seulement avaient en main une copie de ce Code (environ quinze pour cent) et, de même, celles-ci ne se trouvaient pas au nombre de firmes distribuées comme au hasard. Leurs caractéristiques essentielles étaient fort semblables à celles qui avaient implanté volontairement une politique de lutte contre l'alcoolisme. En réalité, l'existence d'une telle politique était l'une des principales indications pour se rendre compte que l'entreprise s'était procurée une copie de ce Code de pratique. Ces résultats indiquaient clairement que l'initiative d'un tiers, présentée à titre informatif, avait peu d'influence quant à l'implantation et au fonctionnement de mesures relatives à la lutte contre l'alcoolisme.

Une des conséquences importantes de ces constatations, c'est que tant les chercheurs que les décideurs doivent en savoir davantage à propos des sources d'information qui exercent une influence sur les innovations en matière de gestion des ressources humaines. On a cité une ou deux initiatives à ce sujet, mais il faut souligner que la diffusion des informations peut être une condition nécessaire bien qu'insuffisante pour la vulgarisation des innovations en matière de gestion des ressources humaines.