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Frozen fish and mummies:
On the role of preserved objects in organizing

Andreas Diedrich & Fredrik Lavén



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Gothenburg Research Institute
Handelshögskolan vid Göteborgs universitet
Box 603
405 30 Göteborg
Tel: 031 - 786 54 13
Fax: 031 - 786 56 19
E-post: gri@gri.gu.se

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Abstract

This paper explores the efforts to construct a standard for competence development and management in Sweden. The apparently absurd idea – to standardize processes of competence development to gain a competitive advantage – manages to seduce many different people, groups and organizations over many years. We frame these developments and activities as the construction of an actor network, where attempts are made to translate the global idea of competence development into an object in order to be spread further and become a widely used management technology. When this translation fails new objects are constructed to aid in the translations. We argue that such an artefact-centred approach (Pentland & Feldman, 2008), while common in contemporary management does not translate well into intended actions. The framing of the paper reveals that the traditional account of “launch” and “implementation” is too simple to grasp all the complexity of introducing new technologies and practices.

Keywords: translation, actor-network theory, objects, practice, competence development, standardization

Introduction

'Nothing succeeds like failure.' [Bruno Latour, 2000]

Ideas in form of new technologies and practices circulate in time and space and arrive at organizations on a daily basis. The interest in improvement in organizations is exemplified by the way in which these new technologies or practices appear on stage as perfect models or 'best practice' for organizing the business activities (Abrahamson, 1996; Czarniawska, 2009). However, more often than not attempts to introduce new technologies in organizing fail when compared with the promises attached to the envisioned technology (see, for instance, Strannegård, 2003; Diedrich, 2004). One reason is, suggests Czarniawska (2005), that there are only very few goals to pursue with the introduction of new technology in organizations: you either wish to become more productive, more efficient or more democratic in one way or another. As a result, according to her, people are deceived time and time again by the shiny, new models and technologies.

Labelling organizing as success or failure has many dimensions that can only be addressed by considering the context within which the work is embedded and exploring the role of contingencies and constantly uncertain outcomes. One way to do so is to study *organizing* as the construction of actor networks (Law, 1992; Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005, Czarniawska, 2008). Actor network theory (ANT) (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1986; 1987) describes the strategies, actions, tricks, etc. with which persons or collective actors undertake translations in order to consolidate the network that supports them and make it as stable as possible.

While the ANT literature is full of heroic stories (apart from some well-known examples such as Latour's study of the Aramis project (1996)), we use an ecological approach (Clarke and Fujimura, 1992; Star, 1995; Suchman, 2000) from the STS field, to report the failed attempts at introducing a standard for strategic competence development and management, the *Management System for Competence Support (SS 62 40 70)*, in Sweden. Describing the process in terms of an 'ecology of action' (Star and Griesemer, 1989) we examine how an apparently absurd idea – to standardize processes of competence development to gain a competitive advantage [sic] – manages to seduce many different people, groups and organizations over many years without producing the results intended from the beginning, becoming, in the words of Bo Persson (1979), a 'surviving failure'. While ambitions were high at the 'launch' of the standard in 2002, nine years on interest in adopting and following it is almost non-existent (only two companies have been certified). Nevertheless, the standardizers continue their work. Translations continue, producing more and more intended and unintended consequences: new objects and practices.

In this paper we explore the role played by objects in the process. More specifically, following Czarniawska and Mouritsen (2009), we frame the attempts

of developing and spreading the SS 62 40 70 standard as efforts to produce a 'management technology', an object that mediates between a complex reality and management. When the object fails to become a management technology, new objects are constructed and are to be placed between the intended mediator (now the complex reality) and management. We argue that such an artefact-centred approach (Pentland and Feldman, 2008), while common in contemporary management, does not translate well into intended actions.

In the following we will firstly review the literature on management technologies and objects in organizations, after which we outline our research methods and fieldwork. We then present our findings, and conclude by discussing the role of what we refer to as preserved objects in organizing.

Management technologies, objects and failure in organizing

In management and organization studies (MOS) objects have gained currency through the introduction of science and technology studies (STS) (see for instance Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005). Especially Actor network theory (ANT) (Callon 1986; Latour 1986; 1987; Law and Hassard, 1999) has been widely used to study organizing in the context of among other accounting (Czarniawska and Mouritsen, 2009), the competitiveness of firms (Hansen and Mouritsen, 1999), management accounting (Pipan and Czarniawska, 2010), corporate social responsibility in downsizing (Bergström and Diedrich, 2011), the labour process (Nyberg, 2009), the 'green' discourse in organizations (Newton, 2002) and entrepreneurship (Czarniawska, 2009).

ANT traces the development of macro actors as a process of translation. In his seminal article on scallops, Michel Callon (1986) identifies four moments of translation – problematization, interessement, enrolment, and mobilization. Through problematization, the initiating actor defines the identities and interests of the other actors to become involved. Secondly, interessement entails attempts by an actor to convince the other actors that the interests it has defined for them are in line with their own interests. Third, through enrolment, the roles defined for actors are related to each other and actors are encouraged to adopt them. Finally, through mobilization, the initiating actor ensures that allied spokespersons act according to the agreement and refrain from betraying their interests. In this process, the actors' identities and interests are under constant negotiation and transformation (Callon and Law, 1982; Callon, 1986), yet these identities may become stabilized in relation to each other.

Similar to ANT, the semiotic-oriented concept of action nets (Czarniawska, 2004; Lindberg and Czarniawska, 2006), which originated in a combination of the sociology of translation (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1986) and new institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1987), suggests that social agency (both individual and collective) is constituted through assembling, aligning and stabilizing patterns of relationships so that any form of social order is in fact the outcome of observable

instances of ordering. In other words, actions tied together might produce actors, or networks or macro actors consisting of multiple networks, i.e. actor networks.

However, while ANT is constructed to focus on *how* the macro actors are put together, from an action net perspective the study begins earlier; before organizations, systems or processes are in place and have been backboxed (Latour, 1987). This allows the studying of critical instances of organizing that may otherwise be obscured when studying (blackboxed) organizations (Czarniawska, 1997, 2004, 2007, 2009). An action net approach not only problematizes the existence of given of actors (organizations, groups, individuals, agents), but also offers a vocabulary that permits *joint* conceptualization of the material and the symbolic aspects of organizing (Czarniawska, 2009). More specifically, materializations (an organization, a technology, a model, an object, etc.) are seen not only as representing, expressing, symbolizing or reflecting social relations, but also as *making* them (see e.g. Lindberg & Walter, 2013). They are 'enactments of strategies, and actively participate in the making and holding together social relations' (Pels et al., 2002).

STS has thoroughly addressed the question of *how* new objects are configured in and through such socio-material practice (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Latour, 1987). Technologies become visible in these examinations as socio-material pieces of equipment that align themselves into more or less durable forms (Latour, 1987). In this way, the study of the emergence of new technologies shifts from a focus on invention as a particular event to an interest in the continuous innovative work practices of assemblage, negotiation and performance. Instead of focusing on criteria pertaining to form and function, the focus lies with the way in which the innovation work is performed and performs. Latour (1987) suggested that innovative projects are always characterised in the beginning by technoscience; by such diverse elements as tools, plans, people, technologies, techniques, artefacts, texts, and methods interacting with one another; by the workplace; by innovators just trying to 'muddle through', to make do with whatever they can find, referred to as 'tinkering' by Knorr-Cetina (1981); and by unexpected contingencies arising on a continuous basis.

Based on STS, organization and management theorists have increasingly focused on the role of objects in organizing. Some, based on the work of Star and Griesemer (1989) have examined the role of 'boundary objects' (Carlile, 2002; Sapsed and Salter, 2004; Lindberg and Czarniawska, 2006; Trompette and Vinck, 2009), described as mediation mechanisms, instrumental in coordinating different communities of practice (Bechy, 2003). Others have studied the role of artefacts, such as written rules, forms, computers or factory buildings, in organizing (Pentland and Feldman, 2008).

Many of the discussions have focused on the stability, fluidity or tangibility of objects in organizing (see for instance D'Adderio, 2001). Indeed, an object may be more or less tangible or materially embedded. For example, a computer appears to have physical properties, but it can also be used for designing virtual

simulation models. On a similar note, D'Adderio (2008: 770) observes that routines, even though they may be embedded in material artefacts, are not merely 'undifferentiated monolithic objects'. Routines may of course become more stabilized and visible as they are materialized, as in standard operating procedures. However, as Feldman and Pentland (2003) conclude, as much as artefacts may display ostensive aspects of routines (or practices), they may also be performative in that they can generate changes in routines (or practices). This challenges the notion of objects as stable entities and places emphasis on degrees of materialization, and particularly on the role of artefacts, when it comes to stabilizing or changing routines (or practices). Moreover, even if an object appears stable in itself, it may also be translated into new objects - artefacts, practices, routines and so forth - as it travels in time and space (Latour, 1986, Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). Thus, rather than focusing on the stability of an object *per se*, we explore an object's role in stabilizing relationships and associations, with regards to linkages between actions and actors (both human and non-human).

In line with this reasoning, we are interested in exploring the role of objects in organizing, exploring both processes of stabilization and destabilization. Some have suggested that objects such as plans, policies and standards may act as ordering devices (see for instance Suchman, 2007). However, such devices do not necessarily translate into intended actions. As we will show, objects may also become preserved, that is kept and guarded for potential future use. This means that the object becomes an even weaker ordering device, albeit still influencing the enactment of practice.

Objects, mediators and management technologies

Bringing objects and things into the organization and management studies is a necessary development, as management cannot be accomplished without things (Czarniawska and Mouritsen, 2009). Discussing typical management artefacts – tables to sit around, telephones and Dictaphones – they stated:

Tables are silent artefacts: they rarely talk back, seldom break and are useful for delivering bottom-line reality arguments; they can be banged upon when an argument about the bottom line is involved (Edwards et al. 1995). Telephones and Dictaphones are more fragile, but not much. Telephones constitute staple technology nowadays, whereas Dictaphones are simple and cheap. If they break they can easily be replaced – everyone who uses them has at least two, and the secretary (the one womanning the computer) has another. (Czarniawska and Mouritsen, 2009: 160).

However, many objects of management are not that easily managed and the relationship between managers and such objects is often highly ambiguous. In fact, in the context of management, objects are downright scary. They might be large and complex machines in even larger and more complex production lines; they might be complex quality insurance processes requiring detailed knowledge

of the intricacies of the product, or they could be people in all their complexity, to name but a few.

When things to be managed are not objects or are highly complex objects, managers turn them into new (simple) types of objects to make them manageable. At all stages of that process, ‘management technologies’, such as human resource statistics or accounting calculations – are used as mediators between the complex reality and management (Hansen and Mouritsen, 1999; Kreiner and Mouritsen, 2003; Mouritsen and Larsen, 2005; Czarniawska and Mouritsen, 2009). Thus, instead of managing objects directly, managers manage them indirectly through mediators. These are often new objects that create new contexts for new actions. However, as Latour (1993: 81) pointed out, mediators are not only endowed with the capacity to translate what they transport, to redefine it and redeploy it, but also to betray it.

Jan Mouritsen and his colleagues (Mouritsen and Larsen, 2005; Mouritsen and Flagstad, 2005) studied one such betrayal, the (failed) attempts at introducing intellectual capital statements in firms in Denmark. The Intellectual Capital Project aimed at developing a procedure enabling firms to produce intellectual capital statements as part of their annual reporting. It ran from 1997 to 2002 but failed to produce the desired results in the form of intellectual capital statements that could function as a management technology ‘making the knowledge society manageable’ (Mouritsen and Flagstad, 2005: 210). Nevertheless, for many years the concept of intellectual capital fascinated many people, who spent vast resources in the form of personal energy, time and money on organizing activities around it. Mouritsen and Flagstad (*ibid.*) suggest that the dream was kept alive for more than two years because of the concept’s seductive powers, the promises attributed to the envisioned management technology.

For the purpose of this study it is important to highlight the fact that we see success and failure as labels (Strannegård, 2003) that are attached to actions and events in specific contexts – translated – created and maintained – in social interaction between people. Therefore, judging organizing as success or failure has many dimensions that can only be addressed by considering the context within which the work is embedded and exploring the role of contingencies and constantly uncertain outcomes. One way of doing so, following Weick (1979), Law (1994) and Czarniawska (2009), is to study *organizing* instead of organizations. The processes of organizing, if successful, produce, at certain points in time and in certain places, organizations. According to Czarniawska (2009) to study organizing means that one refrains from prematurely concluding that organizations have already been produced; to study organizations, on the other hand, means to be ignorant of the fact that they have not always existed like that. The difficulty of doing this in practice lies in the fact that, when studying organizing researchers examine processes that are already taken-for-granted, that have in some way succeeded and thereby have become reified into organizations (Czarniawska, 2004: 780). In the cases outlined by Czarniawska and Mouritsen

(2009) for example, the mediators *qua* management technologies – the human resource management techniques and accounting systems – are already in place and are widely used.

In this paper we describe the explicit attempts at constructing a managerial technology to act as a mediator between managers and complex processes of learning in organizations *before* it is in place and taken-for-granted. These attempts at constructing a standard for competence development and management may be labelled as a failure compared to the intentions voiced at the outset. In the paper we show how the intended mediator, instead of becoming stabilized as a managerial technology becomes a complex and insubordinate object in itself. Furthermore, as a consequence, attempts are then made to place another object as a mediator in-between managers and the insubordinate object.

In the following we present the fieldwork, i.e. the setting and methods of the study, as well as how we analysed the material, before presenting our findings.

The fieldwork

The setting

The activities surrounding the construction of the standard must be set against the background of the social and economical developments in Western Sweden from the 1970's onwards. Since the demise of the shipbuilding industry in the 1970s (see Jörnmark, 2005), political actors in the region re-directed their focus when it came to creating and maintaining growth, from the larger industrial employers (e.g. Volvo or SKF) to more 'knowledge-intensive' industries, such as software engineering and more recently biotechnology. To stimulate further growth, the city of Gothenburg created a municipal organization, Business Region Göteborg (BRG), which it fully owns. BRG has some 70 employees and its activities focus on attracting investment and establishing networks of small and medium sized companies in the region. There are several formal and more informal networks, incubators, innovation clusters, start-ups and science parks in the region. Each network focuses on a particular area, for example IT-development, biotechnology, finance or competence development and its members meet more or less regularly every few months. The networks aim to facilitate what is commonly referred to as 'triple helix', the co-operation between industry, the public sector and the universities.

One of these networks focused on the development of a standard for competence development, which eventually became known as the *Management System for Competence Support (SS 62 40 70)*. It is the efforts of constructing this standard that we will focus in this paper.

Method

The study (2005-2008) included 25 open-ended interviews, document analysis and observations of meetings, training programs and seminars. We retraced pre-2005 events retrospectively to be able to map developments longitudinally. We also observed meetings and workshops and followed two three-day training programs aimed at promoting the standard, taking careful field notes in the process. The workshops took place at BRG's offices in downtown Gothenburg. Between 8 and 15 persons attended them: consultants, HR managers from both public and private organizations and educational experts. The workshops were run as part of the ambitions to construct a network of enthusiasts – laymen and specialists – working with 'strategic competence development and management', or indicating an interest to do so in the future.

Finally, we studied thoroughly documents such as the standard requirements documents and manuals, brochures and other information material, e-mails, power point presentations produced by the standardizers as part of the work with introducing the standard.

Analysis of the material

The analysis consisted of two stages. The first stage involved transcription of interviews, coding and close reading of the material. First, we studied the interviews conducted with proponents of the standard, aiming to identify the activities involved in the production of the technologies and the actors involved in each activity. Keeping in mind that we did not follow the process from the beginning (as this is in any case impossible) and that the respondents talked about their experiences and activities in retrospect, we recorded the content of each activity, the time at which it occurred and the actors involved, creating a preliminary timetable of the process. The respondents' descriptions were triangulated (Silverman, 1993) by cross-checking with dated archival sources, such as protocols from meetings, e-mails, memos and newspaper articles, and by conducting additional interviews with respondents who could provide additional information about aspects not covered by previous interviews.

Secondly, we engaged in what Langley (1999) referred to as a 'temporal bracketing strategy' for process theorizing. The data was decomposed into successive, adjacent periods enabling the examination of how actions of one period led to changes in the context that affected actions in subsequent periods. We then examined the actions and objects connected to the work with producing the technologies and organized them in terms of how they could be seen as contributing to the translation of the idea of competence development and management.

Standardizing competence development

Connecting competence development and standardization

In the 1990's major industrial companies in Western Sweden, such as AB Volvo, restructured their organizations, laying off large numbers of employees. In the wake of these developments senior managers from these companies met with senior public officials to discuss future challenges and ways of strengthening the region's international competitiveness. Access to skilled labour was identified as pivotal for the companies' survival.

At subsequent workshops attended by representatives from nine industrial companies and public organizations, focus was placed on how to develop and manage competence in the future. At one of these workshops the idea was voiced to look closer at the competence requirements of the ISO 9001 quality management standard as a solution. A senior BRG representative, who had attended the meeting recounted:

[We were asking ourselves], what about our business plans and operations plans? How much do they actually take competence, the competence resources available, the mass and the supply, into account in large organizations? They don't! And this is what we felt had to be addressed. And then we started talking about ISO, which is a tool for management. And then the whole discussion turned somewhat. We said, we've discussed education, competence development and so on, now it's time to look at how we should manage this? (Senior representative BRG, 4 December 2008)

The competence requirements of the ISO 9001 quality standard were seen as a promising tool for making the elusive, complex processes of learning manageable. The requirements did not go far enough though. According to the BRG manager, the group was in agreement that to really 'elevate' competence development onto a strategic level, a separate standard for competence development should be developed:

What should we do with the other questions that concern strategy apart from the ones covered by the ISO 9000 standard? And these include questions of competence...and thus it became strategic competence development and management. This wasn't there from the beginning, to change the behaviour of management... When one does a business plan, one has to look at the competence resources in the company, as well as compare this with the business plans 5-7 years ahead. And one has to ask: does it match up? That's how the standard is designed. (Senior representative BRG, 4 December 2008)

The group approached the Swedish Standards Institute (SIS) with their ideas. SIS had in the past developed their own standards, but had more recently participated

above all as one of many partners in the development of ISO standards. The promise of once again developing a Swedish standard meant that they quickly became interested in the idea of a separate standard for strategic competence development and management. Subsequently, work with developing a national standard was initiated under the auspices of SIS. Around 30 members of SIS, companies and public organizations, were involved from the outset. The group included HR managers, quality management experts, consultants and academics.

The representatives met every six weeks to discuss and prepare a draft version of the standard's requirements, modelled on the ISO quality management logic. The draft document was constantly revised and redrafted, a process characterized by continuous negotiations, mediations and compromises. Finally, the standard (SS 62 40 70) was completed in 2002 after about a year of intensive work.

And there it was...the standard was developed in record time. The full musical score (*partitur*) for the orchestra was in place... (Senior representative BRG, 4 December 2008)

Companies and public organizations fulfilling the requirements could now be certified through national and international certification organizations such as Bureau Veritas and Den Norske Veritas (DNV).

An object appears

The standard materialized in form of a document outlining the requirements for certification and a manual for how to work with the standard. I was described as a 'process model' for defining and managing all aspects related to competence in an organization (see Fig. 1), providing the: 'preconditions so that the right decisions can be made in the whole organization and the decision's consequences are followed up' (SS 62 40 70, 2002: 2).

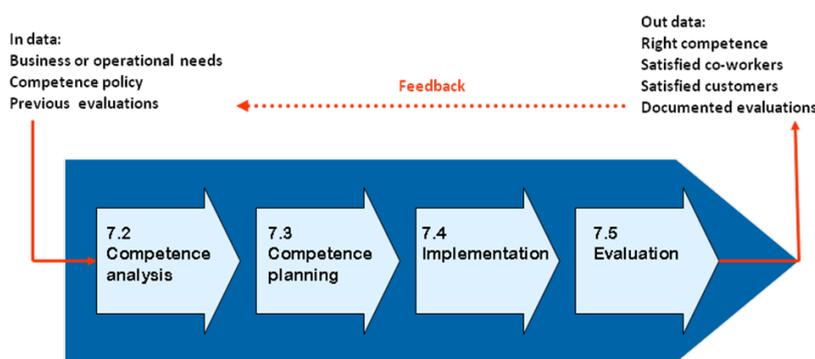


Fig 1. The Competence development and management process (Source: BRG presentation material, 2007).

The competence development and management process is described in the standard criteria document in the following way:

The competence development and management process aims at, based on formulated goals, leading, developing and maintaining the organization's collected competence so that the operation's needs are fulfilled in the short and long run (SS 62 40 70, 2002:8)

As part of the first step, competence analysis, the organization is required to identify its short and long-term competence needs according to a standardized method. Secondly, the 'existing' competence of the organization and of each of its members should be mapped. Thirdly, the differences between the existing and required competence should be identified and analysed in order to establish the 'competence gap'. It is this gap that the organization should attempt to close through short and longer-term strategic competence development. Step 7.2 in that way resembles the knowledge gap analyses that many companies work with to link the competence of the individual employee with the company's competence requirements.

As part of Step 7.3, competence planning, the short and long term goals with regards to competence should be identified in line with the company's competence policy, and plans for competence supply and development are drawn up to meet the goals. The plans should include types of activities, e.g. future training programs, the persons responsible for the activities and the time frame for implementation, the third step in the model. Finally, the fourth step concerns the evaluation of the efforts, the communication of the results and the initiation of 'corrective action and improvements'.

The model follows a traditional linear planning logic – plans are seen as a basis for purposive action (see Suchman, 1987). It defines competence, the input in the process, as the 'ability and will to engage in a task by applying knowledge and skills'; A broad and vague definition (and each component – 'ability', 'will', 'knowledge' and 'skills' – is further defined). However, it focuses on managing the results from learning taking place in the organization *correctly* by means of documentation and formal structures, rather than on how such learning should be facilitated. It is, what Brunsson and Jacobsson (1998) referred to as an administrative or organizational standard. As such, the SS 62 40 70 is closely related to the more famous quality standard series ISO 9001 and ISO 14000. This is something that is readily acknowledged in the SS 62 40 70 documents, where the complementarities of the standards are accentuated. Apart from the already mentioned fact that many ISO 9001 experts participated in the work with developing the standard, another reason for the similarities is that the connection to the more known ISO 9001 standard was understood as bringing legitimacy to the standard for competence support. The SS 62 40 70 criterion document also mentions that the standard is built up similarly to ISO 9001, making it easier to employ. More importantly, however, the documents state that the SS 62 40 70 goes further than the ISO 9001 standard when it comes to enhancing competence development in particular:

SS 62 40 70 denotes demands on the competence support process, which go even further longer than the requirements of the SS-EN ISO 9001 point 6.2 'Personnel resources' and can therefore contribute to explain how these requirements can be fulfilled (SS 62 49 70, 2002: 3).

The idea of a standard for competence development and management had not only become acknowledged, but had also been turned into an object: a booklet outlining the standard requirements and an accompanying manual intended as instructions for how to 'implement' the standard in an organization.

Objectified, but fragile

An object had been produced, but it was fragile. In order to become a management technology, actors needed to be enrolled (cf. Callon, 1986). This constituted a pivotal challenge in the work. The decision of introducing the standard in an organization had to be taken by senior management. In order to be enrolled, however, managers first needed to find out about the existence of the standard, which was dependent on the marketing done by BRG. Secondly, even if they knew about the standard, managers are not necessarily interested in having their work of *managing* standardized. Third, if they decided their company should work based on the requirements of the standard, the company had to be certified by one of the certification bureaus. And forth, if they were certified, the organization's stakeholders (customers, employees, etc.) would need to understand the certification of the organization as a valuable asset. Thus, enrolling managers in the work entailed a chain of enrolments in which the enrolment of one actor was dependent on the enrolment of others.

The standard was 'launched' in 2005 BRG during a regional conference where high-ranking local politicians and managers from two certified companies spoke in the name of the standard, serving as role models and successful examples of using the standard.

Betrayal and re-problematization

However, companies and other organizations did not decide to become certified after the official 'launch'. For the BRG representatives, it was as if they had been 'betrayed', in Callon's (1986) sense of the word. Since its introduction, only two companies present at the conference had been accredited – a medium sized process engineering company and a small logistics supplier. Furthermore, none of them expressed interest in renewing their certification (valid for four years).

Representatives from the various organizations gave a number of reasons for this lack of interest: Firstly, the larger organizations, such as Volvo and the Swedish Post, initially involved in the project, developed their own internal competence development system. According to a personnel director at the Swedish Post:

The Swedish Post has enough work to do with ISO... and the management team is going back and forth with regards to how much they want to work in this way, with processes, and certifications. And, I don't think this is the first priority...to work with processes and standards. Today, things move so fast, and one has no time to work with these things. It demands perseverance, working with quality issues over time. Now they're more interested in key performance indicators. (Regional personnel director, 17 November 2008).

Secondly, the marketing of the standard was described as inadequate as common knowledge about its existence was low. Furthermore, the representative of one accredited company stated that there was little value-added in showing their customers that their work with managing their internal competence development is certified as they are above all interested in ISO quality and environmental certifications:

I don't think that the marketing has been...has been sufficient. And I also believe that those who are interested that already have a management system think that these [the competence support] parts already exist in ISO 9000. /.../ What is interesting in the customer setting is really the certificates that have 'ISO' in front of them. (HR expert, 12 May 2009).

Finally, the two accreditation-organizations, Den Norske Veritas (DNV) and Bureau Veritas stopped certification services with regards to the SS 62 40 70. A quality manager at DNV explained in an Email:

We had a customer who wanted certification according to SS624070 early in the 2000s. This certificate was withdrawn in 2008; I have not done any research into why.

I do not know of any other certifications according to the standard, have asked at our production department as well.

Nevertheless, we certify employment companies according to ISO 9001. And that is a similar evaluation. (Quality manager IT company, 13 January 2011).

And when asked why they had removed the standard from their portfolio, the answer was straight and simple: 'because we had only one customer and they did not wish to continue with the certification' (ibid.). Taking all this into account, it is safe to say that interest in the standard was scant: it was an object that almost nobody loved (cf. Latour's Aramis study, 1996).

Subsequently, the BRG representatives reworked their definition of the problem: they stated that the standard's predicament was above all due to the fact that while there existed an interest in competence development and management, managers and other actors who were to work with it did not really understand the standard and its workings, as it was, in the words of one BRG representative, 'too rigid'.

A new object appears

In order not to jeopardize the whole project, the BRG representatives developed and introduced a new activity: 'the competence diploma process'. Companies that wished to work with strategic competence development and management, but did not want to go through the process of certification could go through a 'light version' of the standard. A senior BRG representative explained:

The diploma was developed, because many companies said: we're not interested in certification. /.../ There are several reasons for this. One is that they had been in contact with environmental and quality certifications and said: no, this is not beneficial for our company; it's way too much work. We take care of this in other ways, with other management tools and processes. And we don't want to spend all that time with documentation and all that this entails. However, they still said that they were very interested in managing that process [competence support] in their organizations. And we didn't want to let them go. So then we said: let's give diplomas to those organizations and companies that don't want to become certified. (Senior representative BRG, 4 December 2008).

According to our interlocutor, the diploma was based on a checklist that included some 75% of the original requirements found in the SS 62 40 70 standard:

75% is enough for awarding them the diploma. And the purpose with that is of course that they would be interested in coming back to get the remaining 25%. (Senior representative BRG, 4 December 2008).

Not only were there less requirements for attaining the competence diploma, but the remaining requirements had also been shortened extensively: while the standard had 17 pages outlining the necessary requirements, the diploma consisted of a three-page checklist only. And, in contrast to the standard, the diploma was described as flexible:

...there are things that suggest that 75% is enough, it can be the documentation requirements and certain areas [that can be omitted]... Because the companies all look very different ... we can't make it too square. (Senior representative BRG, 4 December 2008).

Thus, the diploma was introduced as a new and more accessible object, acting as a linkage between the original, undesired and, according to our interlocutors, rigid standard. The idea was that once the organizations have undergone the stepping stone diploma process, their interest in the standard might be rekindled and they might eventually go through the certification process. Indeed, BRG representatives described the competence diploma as a 'warm up' for future certification according to the standard. In one of their brochures it said:

The competence diploma shows that the organization is using the right competence, in the right place and at the right time and constitutes visible

evidence for both clients, employees and other stakeholders. The diploma can be a goal in itself, but it is also a good starting point for a certification (BRG Information Brochure, 2008).

The new process brought with it new roles and objects: In order to be issued a 'competence diploma' by BRG a company had to go through a shorter review process, carried out not by the certification bureaus, but by BRG employees.

To enrol people and organizations in the diploma process BRG organized a series of workshops under the broad theme of 'competence development'. They presented the workshops as an opportunity of building a 'network' of professionals interested in this wider topic and saw these meetings as a means of supporting organizations in the region in their work with competence development. Nevertheless, the standard was still featured in this workshop-setting. At the inaugural workshop with eight participants present the following dialogue took place:

Participant A:	What kind of things do you do here to support competence development?
BRG rep	What do you mean?
Participant A:	I mean, what is it that you do? Through what do you support competence development?
BRG rep:	Ah, through these meetings, for example... we stimulate competence development through these workshops. [...]. And the standard is of course the backbone of this work, but then it's important what [kind of content] you fill the standard with. [...]. And it's quite a long process...1-2 years before an organization is eligible for their competence diploma.

This shows that while the workshops were intended to bring together people interested in competence development in general, BRG expected the organizations present at the workshops to eventually subscribe to their definition of competence development – the competence diploma process – and enter the process to receive their competence diploma. And as we know, they were also hoping that the organizations later would become certified according to the standard.

To do so, the BRG representatives informed the network about a training program they organized intended to instruct those members of the network and possibly others, on how to 'implement' the competence development process based on the competence diploma in their own organizations, and on how to evaluate (review) its results. The training programs included four separate but interrelated workshops: 'Strategic competence development – implementing methods and tools in the process'; 'Leading projects and change'; 'Auditing the management system for competence development'; and, finally an 'Examination'.

The training sessions had the ambition of paving the way for organizations to receive their competence diploma by training employees in the diploma process. As part of this work the SS 62 70 40 standard was described as the ‘backbone’ in this process. After completing the training program, participants were certified as ‘competence strategists’ equipped with the necessary tools for organizing strategic competence development and management. It is interesting to note that while these training sessions had the aim of spreading knowledge about the competence diploma, participants learned about the standard, its main concepts, its definitions of competence, skills and knowledge and its requirements for documentation, using its definitions and diagrams.

Despite the new objects and practices, only three organizations chose to go through the diploma process. At that point we left the field. It seemed that the standard for competence development and management was not going to become an actor network, or was it? The study shows that the standard became an object, a book, a manual and a process – a materialization of the idea how competence development should proceed. But, the idea also produced offspring as it was translated into another object, the competence diploma – a ‘light-version of the standard’ with a reduced battery of formal requirements.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper set out to explore the work with organizing a management technology, a standard for competence development and management, as a chain of translations aimed at producing objects of things that are not objects initially.

The standard, which had failed to function as an interestment device for enrolling the required actors (Callon, 1986), was translated into another object: the competence diploma. The diploma was introduced as a new object for maintaining a relationship between the organizations that had come to reject the standard. In this work of organizing the relationship between the standard’s proponents and the dissidents, in Callon’s (1986) sense of the term, the standard did not disappear. As part of its translation into new objects and practices, it was still carried around (sometimes literally), referred to as *something* that has had an important history and/or *something* that will be used in the future. It can be said to have been preserved, to be brought forward by various actors for ceremonial purposes on homepages and at seminars and meetings. Arguably, this preservation practice facilitated the standard’s survival – but as an object, not a management technology. Thus it was allowed to exist and contribute to the enactment of practice despite the fact that nobody wished to subscribe to its requirements.

The paper contributes to previous research in a number of ways. First it contributes to the literature on objects in organizing by highlighting the role played by objects that fail to become management technologies in the chain of translations. As Czarniawska and Mouritsen (2009: 161) argued, when things to be managed are not objects or are complex objects, managers turn them into new types of objects to make them manageable. In this case the standard

itself – although developed to be a mediator – was translated into a complex object (not a technology). Managers (and, paradoxically, even its proponents) became increasingly wary of this object keeping their distance from it, but not completely discarding it. When things did not work out as intended, the object was left unchanged – it became a dead object, preserved for future organizing in the form of a book, manual and inscriptions in presentations, in much the same way as fish are frozen for future consumption or as Egyptian pharaohs were embalmed for the afterlife. Nevertheless the translations produced a new object to act as a mediator – the certification diploma process. This brought with it new practices, artefacts and roles (training seminars, workshops, diploma issuing, process descriptions). However, once again, this object was not translated into a management technology.

Secondly, it contributes to the literature on change in organizing. In line with previous studies (e.g. Latour, 1987; 1996; Pipan and Czarniawska, 2010) the paper suggests that the traditional accounts of ‘launch’ and ‘implementation’ are too simple to understand the complexities of developing and maintaining new technologies and practices in organizations. Here the translation model permits a close analysis of apparently disparate events, showing that actors who take upon themselves the task of translating will inevitably try to materialize the idea by converting it into objects – artefacts and practices. Indeed, this work was an attempt at building a new management technology for turning complex things such as knowledge or learning into separate objects that therefore become manageable. But, there was no actual, local practice to be translated into a separate object to begin with. Instead, while fighting against the insubordination of knowledge, learning and competence, the objects constructed were based on abstract, rational and simplified notions of processes of documentation and analysis of knowledge. These rational myths (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) were incorporated to increase legitimacy and external support for their competence development work, something which may provide a seductive power (see also Mouritsen and Flagstad, 2005), but in practice they had little relevance.

Thirdly, there are practical implications for management. The idea of organizations standardizing their strategic basis for competition may be seen as rather absurd in itself, but the point here is something else: *why* do managers seek simplistic technologies and practices for managing the ephemeral and complex? According to Suchman (1987; 2007) there is an overrated (western) belief in the linear relationship between plans (or other ordering devices such as technologies), ‘implementation’ and results. Goody (1986) called this a ‘logic of writing’, which prioritizes the making of lists, tables and recipes. Plans and structures are seen as necessary to be devised first and then put into practice, often in a step-by-step fashion. However, as this case has shown, this management practice is highly problematic as it can lead to what Pentland and Feldman (2008) termed an artefact-centred approach that does not translate well into intended actions. One of the reasons for this is that it focuses ostensive (abstract) aspects

of standard operating procedures or routines (Pentland and Feldman, 2008), as is the case with the standard for competence development. When these ideas were translated into a standard document and manual, they became both more visible and stable. However, this materialization failed to stabilize a wider network around standardizing the strategic management of competence development; on the contrary, the ostensive and rational ideas surrounding competence contributed to destabilizing the network. While the strong focus on documents as objectifications can be understood as a way of seeking to stabilize the translation (Pipan and Czarniawska, 2010), in this case, it misses its target.

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