

## WHEN FASHION IS FLEETING: TRANSITORY COLLECTIVE BELIEFS AND THE DYNAMICS OF TQM CONSULTING

ROBERT J. DAVID  
McGill University

DAVID STRANG  
Cornell University

**We analyze changes over time in the types of consulting firms offering total quality management services. When TQM was a booming management fashion, consultants tended to be generalists with weak links to the technical foundations of the practice; after the fashion went bust, TQM consulting was increasingly populated by specialists with quality control expertise. These results suggest that fashionable practices can return to their technical roots after the hype is over, reversing the usual institutional trajectory. They also help explain why fashion booms are so fragile and how management practices can be sustained once a boom is over.**

Management fashions are a striking feature of contemporary organizational life. Attention rapidly coalesces around a management practice as a powerful and robust means of achieving competitive success. But as Abrahamson (1996: 257) argued, the collective belief that a practice “leads rational management progress” is relatively transitory. Enthusiasm soon wanes, skepticism mounts, and yesterday’s panacea becomes today’s run-of-the-mill application. In the language we will use in this article, a “fashion boom” turns into a “fashion bust.”

These cycles in collective beliefs have important consequences. Fashionable practices consume scarce resources—not just time and money, but leadership opportunities and organizational commitment as well. And when the winds of fashion shift, managers and workers alike may be left jaded, if not embittered, by the experience. Given the significance of fashion swings, it is not surprising that scholarly attention has increasingly turned to investigate their sources and internal dynamics.

Two research strategies dominate empirical anal-

ysis of management fashions. The first focuses on discourse as a means of understanding fashion origins and trajectories. Barley and Kunda (1992) argued that management discourse oscillates between rational and normative logics. Abrahamson (1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999) elaborated a model of management fashion that comprises a supply side and a demand side and examined how “fashion setters” and external triggers interact to produce fashion cycles. Kieser (1997) identified the rhetorical characteristics of fashions that promote their diffusion (see also Jackson, 2001). Zbaracki (1998) analyzed how total quality management (TQM) rhetoric is both consumed and produced by managers. Carson, Lanier, Carson, and Guidry (2000) showed that cycles of media attention have increased in amplitude and frequency over the last half century.

A second body of research examines the causes and consequences of fashion adoption. For example, Osterman (1994) linked early adoption of TQM and related innovations to corporate strategy, CEO philosophy, and the pressure of international competition. Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell (1997) found evidence for network contagion among hospitals and demonstrated a shift from “customized” to “conforming” applications as TQM became increasingly popular. Staw and Epstein (2000) showed that “bandwagon” adoption of TQM was unrelated to the firm’s bottom line, but did bolster corporate reputation and CEO pay. Other studies have identified performance effects, but only where TQM was most deeply and systematically implemented (Easton & Jarrell, 1998; Hendricks & Singhal, 1999; Powell, 1995).

---

An earlier version of this paper received the 2004 Best Paper Award from the Organizational Theory Division of the Administrative Sciences Association of Canada. We thank Heather Haveman, Paul Ingram, Jan Jörgensen, Will Mitchell, Wesley Sine, Ithai Stern, Anand Swaminathan, Demetrios Vakratsas, and colloquium participants at the University of Chicago, the University of New South Wales, EGOS, and the Academy of Management for their helpful comments on this research. We are also grateful to three anonymous *AMJ* reviewers and Associate Editor C. Chet Miller for their insightful feedback and guidance.

Although this work has revealed important regularities in discourse and organizational adoption, much less is known about the supply side of the management fashion market. Management consultants—a key group of fashion suppliers—have been the subject of keen ethnographic accounts (e.g., Clark, 1995) but few large-scale empirical studies. This gap in research is unfortunate, because contemporary managerial innovation is not typically a “do-it-yourself” activity. Indeed, Wood (2002) found that 70 percent of firms used consultants when embarking on organizational change projects, and Buono noted that consultants have become “increasingly visible in most, if not all, organizational initiatives” (2001: vii). Thus, management fashions offer implicit theories of organizational performance, but how consultants implement these practices is likely to have a significant effect on organizational outcomes as well as on the credibility of the management techniques themselves.

This article studies the consulting firms that provided TQM services between 1992 and 2001, a period during which TQM went from the limelight to the background of the management stage. Simple supply and demand considerations suggest that the *size* of the TQM consulting market should vary with TQM’s fashion status; our focus is, however, on the *composition* of that market. We ask, What kinds of consulting firms provided TQM during its fashion boom? and What kinds of consulting firms provided TQM during its fashion bust?

The first goal of this article is to draw attention to management consultants as an important yet neglected organizational population and to discover regularities in the way they respond to fashion cycles. But we also think that these regularities can furnish theoretical insight into the underlying dynamics of management fashion and speak to broader issues of institutional change. To foreshadow our argument and results: we find that TQM’s fashion boom drew in large numbers of generalist consultants and firms with weak links to TQM’s technical roots, while in the fashion bust, TQM consulting swung back toward specialists and firms with expertise in quality control. These supply-side dynamics suggest that fashionable practices can return to their technical roots after the hype is over, reversing the usual institutional trajectory (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983; Westphal et al., 1997). They also help explain why fashion booms are so fragile, and how management practices can be sustained once a boom is over.

We begin by tracing the life cycle of total quality management and delineating its fashion boom and fashion bust. We then develop and test hypotheses about changes in the types of consulting firms that

provided TQM over time. We conclude by considering the implications of our results for theories of management fashion, as well as by discussing the generality of our analysis and possible avenues for future research.

### THE LIFE CYCLE OF TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT

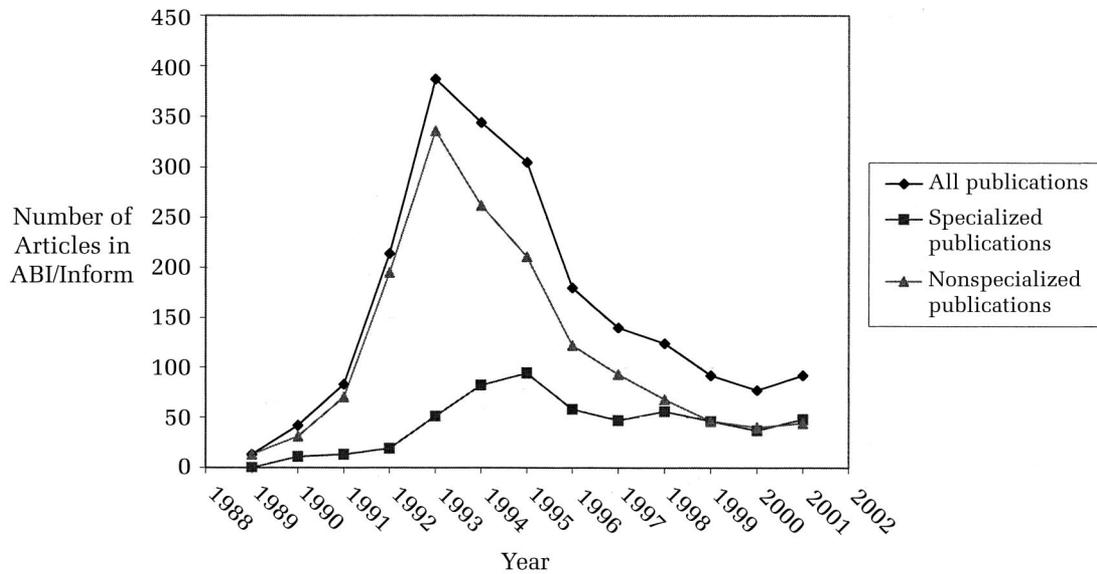
Total quality management refers broadly to the implementation of organization-wide quality improvement programs. Core principles include customer focus, reduction of variability, continuous improvement, and employee participation (Dean & Bowen, 1994; Hackman & Wageman, 1995). Operational elements generally include individual quality training, the formation of cross-functional process improvement teams, supplier partnerships, and quality councils. TQM thus combines a technical focus centered on statistical analysis of large-volume processes with a behavioral focus on teamwork, empowerment, and culture change.

In line with Abrahamson and Fairchild’s (1999) analysis, TQM’s fashion boom was triggered by performance gaps and the collapse of prior fashions. In the 1970s and 1980s, American companies lost considerable market share to Japanese firms in industries like steel, consumer electronics, and automobiles. This loss of market share led to much consternation surrounding American industrial productivity and an intense search for Japan’s “management secrets.” The result was a variety of fads linked to American perceptions of Japan. Initial forays into Japanese management methods were narrow in scope, and they generally failed to hold sway for long; bottom-up initiatives like quality circles wilted in the absence of a supportive infrastructure, while production techniques like just-in-time (JIT) lacked mobilizing potential (for a social movement perspective on organizational change programs, see Strang and Jung [2005]).

By the mid 1980s, a variety of leading companies were moving toward more integrated, corporation-wide approaches to quality improvement. Firms like Ford, Xerox, and Westinghouse built on both the successes and failures of their quality circle efforts. In developing more broadly based programs, they turned to “quality gurus” like Philip Crosby, W. Edwards Deming, and Joseph Juran. Also important were direct contacts with Japanese subsidiaries (Cole, 1999) and small quality-management consulting firms.

The combination of an economic downturn in the late 1980s, the demise of earlier responses to Japan, and success stories describing early corporation-wide programs helped launch TQM’s fash-

**FIGURE 1**  
**TQM Discourse**



ion boom. Core players began to require their suppliers to enter into quality partnerships, and TQM cascaded down the industrial food chain. For example, NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) wrote the rules for industry giants like Lockheed and Boeing, which in turn wrote the rules for their many suppliers. Ford required its suppliers to be part of its Q-1 Preferred Quality Supplier Program or lose the automaker's business. When firms discovered that TQM would help preserve their contracts, vast opportunities for program implementation appeared almost overnight.

Figure 1 shows trends in attention to TQM within the business community. We chart annual counts of articles indexed by ABI/Inform whose titles include the terms "total quality management" or "TQM" (shown by the "all publications" curve).<sup>1</sup> The first sustained discussion of the practice arose in 1989 in aeronautics and other Department of Defense-centered industries. Attention to TQM expanded rapidly from this base, reaching a peak in 1993. Discussions of TQM then declined through the latter part of the 1990s, with fewer than 100 articles per year appearing after 1999.

The wave of media attention shown in Figure 1 mirrors the pattern observed for other fashions (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Carson et al., 2000) and helps us chart TQM's fashion cycle. Although media attention and collective beliefs are not the

same, media discourse both reflects and is causally implicated in the production of collective beliefs (Kieser, 2002). Authors and media gatekeepers address the topics they sense will resonate with their audiences, while simultaneously amplifying their importance.

One reason that the volume of media discourse provides a robust guide to fashionability is that it is linked to systematic shifts in content: when the volume of discourse about a belief or practice is high, the content of the discourse tends to validate the belief or practice (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). TQM was not just widely discussed in the early 1990s; it was portrayed as *the* path to success and prosperity. Consider the following:

A quiet revolution called Total Quality Management (TQM) is underway in the world. It will change our lives as much as the advent of mass production early in this century. . . . It works for all types of management: industrial, service, education, and government. (Stuelpnagel, 1989: 4)

TQM is such a basic process that it can produce results when applied at any level . . . even with less than perfect use of the techniques it will still pay its way. (Stuelpnagel, 1989: 9)

Once in a generation, perhaps, something happens that profoundly changes the world and how we look at it. . . . In the summer of 1989, we became convinced that total quality was a profound and powerful idea that was changing the business world. . . . Companies are successful when they apply total quality to the processes that are key in their businesses, regardless of difficulty. (Gilks, 1990: 17–19)

<sup>1</sup> Normalizing these counts by the total number of articles searched in each year by ABI yields an almost identical result.

Quality is a system, and it is the one system that can solve America's economic problems. Quality can also improve education, streamline federal and state bureaucracies, help with growing social problems, and maybe even make airlines run on time. . . . Our grandchildren will not thank us for having made them citizens of what will seem like a Third World country, backward and non-industrial. That is not carved in stone, however. We believe that there is a way out, and that quality is the answer. (Dobyns & Crawford-Mason, 1991: 1–2)

These excerpts echo the textual analysis conducted by Giroux and colleagues, who found that by the late 1980s TQM carried a sense of “moral and patriotic obligation” (Giroux & Taylor, 2002: 509). These scholars describe the discursive creation of a “miracle cure” (Giroux & Landry, 1998: 200), noting that there was no longer a need to “prove the advantages of quality management or even to reiterate them” (Giroux & Taylor, 2002: 509). But rhetorical success came at a price. Abstract and incoherent definitions of TQM multiplied, with language emphasizing “total” (inclusion, completeness) dominating precise specification of either “quality” or “management” (Giroux & Landry, 1998; see also Zbaracki, 1998).

The “irrational exuberance” surrounding TQM proved unsustainable, however. Success stories were replaced by even more dramatic accounts of failure—such as Wallace Company's entry into Chapter 11 a year after receiving the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, and Florida Power and Light's decimation of its quality department after becoming the first American company to win Japan's Deming Award. Leaders within the quality movement harshly attacked the superficiality of the fashion boom; as Philip Crosby quipped, “I refer to this as Trivializing Quality Management” (1996: 4). Derisive comments appeared, such as, “What's as dead as a pet rock? Little surprise here: It's total quality management” (Byrne, 1997: 47), and consultants noted that TQM had become “a dirty word” in some organizations (Bohan, 1998: 13). Bain's Management Tools Survey, which is conducted annually by management consultants Bain & Company (see Rigby, 2001, 2003) found that between 1992 and 1996, TQM fell from 2nd to 13th place on a list of management tools ranked for reputation. The business community had thus learned, both individually and collectively, that TQM was not, in fact, a magic bullet, and the disappointment was palpable.

Some dismissed TQM, but others argued that it would work when done the right way (see Abrahamson and Fairchild [1999] on “sustaining discourse”). For example:

If there has been a failure [of TQM], it is not one of philosophy; it is one of implementation. . . . Many TQM efforts have not yielded the expected results; we do not dispute that. . . . The purpose of this book is to explain the common mistakes that organizations make and to provide guidance to avoid those mistakes. (Brown, Hitchcock, & Willard, 1994: v)

We offer no pat formulas. . . . We recognize that “one size does not fit all.” Thus, we propose different strategies for different kinds of firms. . . . We also provide a great many empirical observations about what works and what doesn't. (Cole, 1995: 3–5)

TQM's changing status is also indexed by the movement of discourse out of the major management publications and into less visible outlets. Figure 1 captures one aspect of this shift in the graphed line labeled “specialized publications,” which we defined as journals whose titles included the terms “quality control” or “quality management.” There were few of these pieces during the media upswing, when the great majority of communications were aimed at general managers. But after the 1993 peak, articles written for broad audiences declined in favor of articles written by practitioners for practitioners (and also, though they are not distinguished here, articles written by academics for academics).

Finally, what do we know about rates of TQM use?<sup>2</sup> Multipanel survey studies suggest that program implementation peaked in the early 1990s, around the same time as TQM discourse. For example, Lawler, Mohrman, and Benson's (2001: 59) triennial surveys of the *Fortune* 1000 showed higher use in 1993 than in any year before or after, with 75 percent of firms reporting TQM programs and a quarter indicating that all their employees were involved. Similarly, Bain's executive survey found that about 70 percent of firms were utilizing TQM in 1993.

Corporate use, however, declined gradually, rather than dropping dramatically like media discourse. For example, 66 percent of the *Fortune* 1000 reported TQM programs in 1996, and 55 percent did so in 1999 (Lawler et al., 2001). Bain's survey identified a similarly moderate decline, to

<sup>2</sup> Our summary of implementation is necessarily tentative, since surveys tracking management practices have poorly understood measurement properties. Most are one-shot affairs; definitions of TQM are not standardized; and conventional instruments appear to generate considerable reporting bias (Cole, 1999: 22; Strang & Macy, 2001: 150). Easton and Jarrell's (1998) strategy of generating an organizational narrative addresses many of these issues, but to our knowledge it has not been applied to TQM for the period under investigation.

40 percent in 1999 (Rigby, 2001). Although organizational surveys are not refined enough to show the precise relationship between TQM's implementation and its fashionability, they do show that TQM implementation continued at a substantial though diminished rate through the end of our study period.

### HYPOTHESES

We approach TQM consulting from an institutional perspective that hinges on the qualitative shifts in the market for consulting services that accompanied TQM's fashion cycle. Accordingly, we briefly summarize our conceptualization of TQM's fashion boom and fashion bust and then turn to specific hypotheses.

We view the period of the rapid upswing and peak in TQM articles (1989–93) as comprising the TQM fashion boom. Attention during this time was not only accelerating, but also celebratory. TQM was authoritatively portrayed as a powerful and robust solution to important problems facing the business community. Commentators spoke of “profound change” and warned managers of the existential crisis confronting them (“Our grandchildren will not thank us for having made them citizens of . . . a Third World country”). The practice was generally seen as a panacea, and few caveats were voiced (“TQM is such a basic process that it can produce results when applied at any level”). Success stories featuring prestigious firms provided “evidence” that the practice was both effective and legitimate (Kieser, 1997; Strang & Macy, 2001).

These kinds of signals set off a feeding frenzy among managers. If the claims are true, it is vital to act before rivals do. As Kieser (2002: 175) described, adopting fashionable practices allows managers to “nourish the hope” that they have established an advantage, but to do so they must move quickly. And even if the claims are false, ceremonial or “bandwagon” adoption may still be the best policy (Abrahamson, 1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Staw & Epstein, 2000). The demand-side combination of inexperience, urgency, and herd behavior is a powerful one, especially since all of these ingredients tend to reinforce each other in the short run.

The downswing in media attention (from 1994 onwards) marked the TQM fashion bust.<sup>3</sup> In this period, disillusionment and sober reanalysis re-

placed exuberance. Public evaluations were less positive, less emotional, and more carefully reasoned (see also Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Knowledge became more widespread, detailed prescriptions replaced simple ones, and contingencies multiplied. Authorities offered mixed messages: some distanced themselves (“I refer to this as Trivializing Quality Management”); others attacked the excesses of the fashion boom while defending the practice itself (“If there has been a failure, it is not one of philosophy; it is one of implementation”). Both messages reinforced managerial caution.

Within organizations, also, knowledge levels rose. Firms were in an increasingly strong position to draw on their own experience, which is always richer than media discussions. The now mixed character of public discourse reinforced skepticism and told managers that ceremonial adoption was unlikely to generate benefits. Firms thus became more discerning customers who were unwilling to take unsupported claims at face value and who wanted to make sure that if they did adopt the once-fashionable practice, it would fit their needs.

How did consulting firms respond to the different market environments of the fashion boom and the fashion bust? We consider two basic dimensions along which consulting firms vary: their connections to TQM's foundations, and the overall breadth of the services they offer.

### Related Expertise

We assume that all firms are not equally close to a given market opportunity; some possess key resources that others lack. Teece (1986) and Mitchell (1989) labeled such key resources “specialized assets,” and Lieberman and Montgomery (1988) referred to “proficiency.” Working in the context of a knowledge-based industry like consulting, we discuss the same broad idea under the heading of “related expertise,” defined as forms of human capital and organizational capabilities that are relevant to a market opportunity, and at the same time costly to obtain.

It seems clear that firms with greater related expertise will be more likely to participate in a market at any given time. Much research in strategic management documents the positive relationship between organizational resources and market participation (e.g., Chatterjee & Wernerfelt, 1991;

<sup>3</sup> Though we date the onset of the fashion bust from the start of the decline in media attention, we see it as a process that accelerates over time. A finer-grained con-

ceptualization might include a brief transition period between the fashion boom and fashion bust.

Schoenecker & Cooper, 1998; Thomas, 1996).<sup>4</sup> Financial and time costs are smaller when organizational building blocks are already available and can be shared with other activities (Mitchell, 1989). And the possession of related expertise leads firms to anticipate success in a new market (Haveman, 1992).

We argue, however, that the relationship between related expertise and market participation should grow over time, as a management fashion goes from boom to bust. During a fashion boom, client urgency and inexperience create a remarkable opportunity for all kinds of consulting firms. Managers racing against time view caution as a luxury they cannot afford, and firms that jump on the bandwagon because it is popular, or because it offers a legitimacy dividend, are unlikely to make discriminating judgments about suppliers. Consulting firms blessed with relevant forms of expertise are likely to see this market as highly attractive—but so do consultants who lack those blessings.<sup>5</sup>

The relevance of these considerations is well illustrated for the case of TQM by George Bohan (1998: 13), who provided an insider's view of client/consultant interactions during its fashion boom:

Those who wanted to improve didn't really have to articulate why or specifically where they wanted to see improvement. Those of us helping the organizations improve didn't have to articulate what we had in mind or how our models would work. A good number of consulting contracts probably were signed with no more conversation than the following:

Potential Client: "I would like to implement total quality management within my firm. Can you help me?"

<sup>4</sup> This research, however, mostly concerns generalized resources like access to financial capital and strength of brand name rather than expertise related to a specific market opportunity. Moreover, work in strategic management has focused on performance implications rather than on the changing composition of market segments over time.

<sup>5</sup> One might speculate that the novelty of a management fashion implies a scarcity of qualified consultants. In the case of TQM, however, many elements of the core skill set existed in the consulting industry prior to its fashion boom, and most consultants with related expertise (as measured here) never became TQM providers. This pattern of findings suggests that a pool of qualified potential entrants to the TQM consulting market exists in all periods.

Eager Consultant: "Why, total quality management is exactly what we do best. Of course we can help you."

As the wave of fashion ebbs, this sort of interaction becomes almost unthinkable. Client urgency fades as managers discover that the one-time panacea is not a sure thing. Motives for ceremonial adoption diminish when firms observe that others have learned the same lesson. A firm's ability to make discriminating choices grows as well, since many managers have gained personal experience with the once fashionable practice and more knowledge is now available in the public domain. In this environment, clients are likely to take a hard look at consultants before contracting for their services and to demand credible evidence of expertise. These shifts should lead consulting firms without related expertise to find their market opportunities far less attractive.

Together, these arguments suggest:

*Hypothesis 1. As a management practice moves from fashion boom to fashion bust, its consulting market becomes increasingly populated by firms with related expertise.*

### Specialists and Generalists

Consulting firms also differ in the breadth of services they offer. Specialists rely on a deep but narrow skill base and make a strong commitment to one or a small number of practice areas. Generalists, on the other hand, possess a wide range of capabilities and position themselves as "one-stop shops" ready to respond to all sorts of client problems.

We expect that the participation of generalists tends to decline, while that of specialists grows, as a fashion boom turns to fashion bust. Our core argument parallels the logic advanced above for related expertise. As Hannan and Freeman (1977) argued, generalists face a "jack of all trades, master of none" problem. They can respond to more client needs than specialists can, but they tend to be "outcompeted" by specialists within any given service area. Indeed, the consulting generalist's lack of deep knowledge is such that O'Shea and Madigan (1997) accused them of providing superficial, "one-size-fits-all" remedies.

These limitations of generalist consultants are relatively unproblematic during a fashion boom. Clients want a practice that "leads rational management progress," and they want it now. At the same time they are inexperienced and underestimate contingencies. Their concern for symbolic legitimacy also leads clients away from close attention to

implementation details. Generalists, by virtue of their broad scope, are well placed to implement programs quickly, and can often redefine other consulting services as fitting within the umbrella of a fashionable practice. Indeed, even if the services that generalists offer are false façades, they may render adoption of a fashionable practice more visible and thereby increase its legitimacy dividend.<sup>6</sup> For all these reasons, generalist consultants would seem well suited to a fashion boom.

In a fashion bust, by contrast, skeptical clients have less interest in the quick, but superficial, applications that generalists are likely to provide. As they come to realize the contingent nature of the practice and the importance of deep implementation (Powell, 1995), and as ceremonial benefits decline, clients are likely to turn instead to specialists that can focus programs on their particular needs and situations (Greiner & Metzger, 1983; Kubr, 2002: 43). Consulting firms with strong backgrounds and commitments in management development, corporate culture, work processes, customer relationships, and many other areas are well placed to tailor programs that can respond to specific types of organizational problems. In the case of TQM, for example, consider a consulting firm that specializes in corporate culture. Such a firm is well equipped to (1) entrench TQM into a client's culture and (2) tailor a TQM program to the culture of the client.<sup>7</sup>

The expanding base of client knowledge is also likely to raise the competitive position of specialists during a fashion bust. As they learn more about a practice, firms may call upon a consultant to repair or deepen a faltering aspect of an ongoing program. In others cases, consultants may be paired with in-house professionals to implement new programs. For both pragmatic and political reasons, specialist consultants are likely to appear to be ideal partners in these sorts of arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that generalists, by virtue of their broad scope of activities, would be more widely known to constituencies both inside and outside of client firms and as such would provide greater visibility to implementations.

<sup>7</sup> Some specialists may be better positioned to develop TQM programs than others, but TQM is connected to so many activities (indeed, it is organization-wide) that a wide variety of these consultants would be well placed to enter TQM consulting.

<sup>8</sup> The second author studied a quality initiative begun in 1997 that illustrates this situation. Although the firm had not previously implemented a corporation-wide effort, experience within one of its businesses as well as its professional investment in managing customer relation-

Two additional considerations suggest that generalist consultants should dominate fashion booms. First, generalists are likely to possess "entry routines" that predispose them to seek new markets (Levitt & March, 1988; Miller, 1990). As firms that operate in and have entered many markets in the past, they are experts at recognizing burgeoning opportunities and mobilizing organizational resources to meet them. The converse holds for specialists, which have typically entered few markets. When a fashion boom hits, this difference should lead generalists to be quicker than specialists to enter the market.

Finally, the identities of generalists and specialists reinforce the effects of structural and behavioral factors. As one-stop shops, generalists are hard pressed to ignore a popular management technique. In many ways, generalist consultants experience the same bandwagon pressures as their clients, and a full-spectrum service provider loses credibility if it appears unable to offer "hot" new practices. By contrast, specialists rely on claims of strong commitment in one or a few areas. They do not claim to respond to all client requests, and in fact risk accusations of opportunism if they move too quickly to embrace new trends. Holding other motivations constant, generalists should thus be quick to enter a fashionable market, while specialists not previously engaged in the market should approach the hype more cautiously.

Together, these arguments suggest:

*Hypothesis 2. As a management practice moves from fashion boom to fashion bust, its consulting market becomes increasingly populated by specialist firms.*

## METHODS

### Data and Variables

The leading source of data on management consulting is Kennedy Information, a specialized firm that produces directories, newsletters, and industry reports. Kennedy's *Directory of Management Consultants* is the oldest industry reference and the only one that is not limited to large firms. Editions have been published bi- or triennially since 1977. Kennedy's list of consulting services first included the category "TQM" in 1992, however, which means that the directory could shed light on con-

ships led it to contract externally in particular areas (especially individual quality training and team building) while organizing many elements of its TQM program in-house.

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Age	16.89	13.67												
2. 1–3 employees	0.41	0.49	-.23											
3. 4–10 employees	0.28	0.45	-.06	-.52										
4. 11–25 employees	0.14	0.34	.02	-.34	-.25									
5. 26–100 employees	0.10	0.30	.12	-.28	-.21	-.13								
6. Over 100 employees	0.07	0.26	.39	-.23	-.17	-.11	-.09							
7. Professional affiliations	1.74	1.90	.10	-.03	.01	.01	.02	.00						
8. Organizational development	0.07	0.25	-.02	-.01	.00	.03	.02	-.04	.12					
9. Quality control	0.05	0.22	-.04	.01	-.00	-.00	.03	-.04	.03	.08				
10. Manufacturing	0.30	0.46	.06	-.03	-.01	.02	.02	.02	.07	-.07	.22			
11. Total services	3.45	1.72	.05	-.11	.01	.06	.06	.02	.10	-.04	.06	.53		
12. Generalist	0.43	0.50	.04	-.08	.00	.05	.05	.02	.08	-.05	.06	.46	.82	
13. TQM	0.13	0.33	-.05	-.00	.00	-.01	.03	-.02	-.01	.08	.40	.19	.11	.11

<sup>a</sup> Correlations with an absolute value greater than .02 are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ ;  $n = 8,626$ .

sulting dynamics during and after the TQM fashion boom, but not on the field's dynamics before the boom started.<sup>9</sup> In all, the five Kennedy directories published between 1992 and 2001 supplied 8,626 records on 3,403 firms.<sup>10</sup>

Our dependent variable was a binary indicator that equaled 1 for firms that offered TQM as a consulting service and 0 otherwise. There were 178 consultants that did so in 1992. By 1995, the number of TQM providers had increased by more than a third, to 288. Numbers then declined and plateaued, with 214 TQM consultants in 1997 and 1999, and 190 in 2001.

We measured three kinds of related expertise. TQM is historically rooted in the analysis of large-scale manufacturing processes and integrates a technical emphasis on statistical quality control with a behavioral emphasis on team formation and employee development (e.g., Cole, 1999; Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Schroeder, 1994). Three binary indicators were taken from the Kennedy Directories: *manufacturing expertise* (equaling 1 if a firm provided manufacturing advisory services and 0 otherwise), *quality control expertise* (1 if affiliated with the American Society for Quality, 0 otherwise), and *organization development expertise* (1 if affiliated

with the American Society for Training and Development, 0 otherwise).<sup>11</sup>

We created two alternate measures to capture firm generalism versus specialism. The Kennedy directory groups services offered by consulting firms into ten high-level categories: general management, manufacturing, human resources, marketing, finance and accounting, materials management, research and development, office management, information technology, and other. Our first generalism/specialism measure was a count (ranging from 1 to 10) of the *total service categories* that firms reported being active in. We also created a binary indicator variable for *generalists* that took a value of 1 for consultants that offered more than three service categories and 0 otherwise.

The Kennedy directories provided basic demographic data on *organizational age* (years since firm founding) and *organizational size*. Since the directories gave the number of employees in ranges (1–3, 4–10, 11–25, 26–100, and over 100), we created binary indicators corresponding to each category. We included organization age and size as control variables because prior work has shown both to be related to structural inertia (see Baum [1996] for a summary of ecological work in this area). Finally, we also controlled for *professional affiliations* by including a count of the total number of industry and professional associations that firms were affiliated with (other than the ASQ and ASTD). A count of these affiliations provided a measure of consult-

<sup>9</sup> When the previous directory was published in 1989, TQM was just emerging as a named practice within the business community (see Figure 1).

<sup>10</sup> These do not include 497 records that contained missing data. Of these, 421 did not provide any information on services (including whether or not firms offered TQM), and the remaining 76 lacked data on one or more other covariates.

<sup>11</sup> The ASQ (formerly the American Society for Quality Control, or ASQC) and the ASTD are the leading professional societies in their respective fields.

ing firms' overall expertise not directly related to TQM as well as indexed the firms' "normative embeddedness" in professional domains, which may constrain organizational change. Taken together, these control variables allowed us to specify consulting dynamics more precisely.

Table 1 gives descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables.

## Models

To test our hypotheses, we examined change in the composition of the TQM consulting market from 1992 to 2001. Analyses were performed separately for each of the five time points provided by the Kennedy directories, a strategy that provided full information on temporal patterns.

Our review of TQM's life cycle suggested that the fashion boom ended in the early 1990s (with the volume of discourse peaking in 1993, which lay between our first and second data points), and that the fashion bust extended and intensified through the rest of the study period. Hypotheses 1 and 2 thus imply that coefficients associated with related expertise should increase from 1992 onwards, and those associated with generalism should decrease.<sup>12</sup>

We modeled participation in TQM consulting within a logistic framework. Logistic models take the form:

$$\log[p_{it}/(1 - p_{it})] = \alpha_t + \beta_t X_{it}$$

where  $p_{it}$  is the probability that firm  $i$  offers TQM consulting at time  $t$ ,  $X_{it}$  is a vector of covariates describing firm  $i$  at time  $t$ , and  $\beta_t$  is the corresponding parameter vector. Coefficients can be given a relative risk interpretation as multiplying the logarithmic odds (log odds) that a consulting firm will offer TQM services for a given shift in covariate values.

<sup>12</sup> We considered an alternative approach, wherein hypotheses would be tested by interacting consulting characteristics with a measure of TQM's fashion status. A well-defined way to accomplish this analysis is elusive, however, because both the amount and the rate of change of discourse are relevant. The natural candidate for the indicator of fashion status, a count of TQM articles, is unattractive because it fails to capture the difference between the upswing and the downswing. For example, the number of articles in 1992 is only marginally higher than the number in 1997, but 1992 is on the upswing while 1997 is on the downswing. Measures of fashionability that combine the level and direction of media activity, as well as elements of content such as enthusiasm and skepticism, would be of great interest.

## RESULTS

### Composition of TQM Consulting

Table 2 shows how the composition of the TQM consulting market changed over time, reporting the results of separate logistic regression analyses for each year. As we expected, all three types of related expertise increased the likelihood of a sample firm's offering TQM consulting; in a sense, this finding simply confirms that these forms of expertise are in fact related to TQM. But the three were not equally powerful. Quality control expertise had the strongest relationship to TQM provision, more than doubling the log odds of market participation in every year. Manufacturing and organizational development expertise had smaller, but statistically significant, effects.

Trends in the impact of quality control and manufacturing expertise follow the pattern suggested by Hypothesis 1, with increases in virtually every period. To see the overall shift, we compared the coefficients from 1992 (within the boom) to those from 2001 (deep in the bust). In 1992, firms affiliated with the ASQ were 9.39 (=  $\exp[2.24]$ ) times more likely to offer TQM than those not so affiliated. By 2001, however, the multiplier doubled, with ASQ affiliates 20 times more likely to offer TQM. The effect of manufacturing expertise also increased steadily after the boom, from 1.78 (=  $\exp[0.58]$ ) in 1992 to 3.7 times in 2001. These increases in coefficient size from 1992 to 2001 are statistically significant at the .05 level.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, firms with an ASTD affiliation had higher relative rates of market participation during the fashion boom than later on. This finding is contrary to our expectations, since an emphasis on teamwork and empowerment is arguably as central to TQM as is quality control. It may be that these components of total quality were deemphasized or moved in-house over time. Alternatively, consulting firms with strong organizational development expertise might have been particularly quick to move toward greener pastures as TQM's fashionability waned.

TQM consulting also shifted dramatically from being a sector in which generalists were overrepresented to one in which specialists predominated. In 1992, for example, TQM consultants were 1.61 (=  $\exp[.48]$ ) times more likely to be generalists than

<sup>13</sup> The statistical significance of the difference in the magnitude of the two effects can be determined by computing the  $t$ -statistic  $(\beta_2 - \beta_1)/\sqrt{\text{var}[\beta_2] + \text{var}[\beta_1] - 2\text{cov}[\beta_2, \beta_1]}$ . To do so, we pooled observations and modeled the joint data with a full set of time interactions.

**TABLE 2**  
**Results of Logistic Regression Analyses of the Probability a Consultant Offers TQM: Period Models<sup>a</sup>**

Variable	Model 1, 1992	Model 2, 1992	Model 3, 1995	Model 4, 1995
Intercept	-1.89*** (0.44)	-2.22*** (0.48)	-1.64*** (0.36)	-1.91*** (0.40)
Age	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)
1-3 employees	-0.64 (0.40)	-0.57 (0.41)	-0.99** (0.32)	-0.91** (0.33)
4-10 employees	-0.70 (0.41)	-0.62 (0.42)	-0.48 (0.33)	-0.40 (0.33)
11-25 employees	-0.56 (0.45)	-0.51 (0.45)	-0.65 (0.36)	-0.62 (0.36)
26-100 employees	-0.14 (0.43)	-0.12 (0.43)	-0.53 (0.35)	-0.47 (0.35)
Professional affiliations	-0.09 (0.05)	-0.09 (0.05)	0.00 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
Related expertise				
Organization development	1.55*** (0.28)	1.54*** (0.28)	0.93*** (0.28)	0.90*** (0.27)
Quality control	2.24*** (0.41)	2.27*** (0.41)	2.57*** (0.33)	2.60*** (0.33)
Manufacturing	0.58** (0.19)	0.52** (0.20)	0.41** (0.16)	0.39* (0.17)
Generalist	0.48* (0.19)		0.98*** (0.17)	
Total services		0.15** (0.06)		0.20*** (0.05)
<i>n</i>	1,453	1,453	1,596	1,596
Likelihood-ratio $\chi^2$	106**	107**	197***	183***

<sup>a</sup> Values in parentheses are standard errors.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

specialists. The multiplier peaked at 2.66 in 1995 and then declined between 1997 and 2001. In 1999 and 2001, not just the magnitude, but also the direction, of the effect was reversed: specialists were now significantly more likely to offer TQM services than generalists. Results with models containing a count of total services follow the same pattern, as shown.<sup>14</sup> The overall shift in coefficient values is statistically significant at the .01 level, providing strong support for Hypothesis 2.

It is instructive to examine the characteristics of TQM consultants directly, in addition to relating them to the "risk pool" formed by the full management consulting industry, as the above analyses do. Figure 2 plots the proportion of TQM firms that were generalists and had each type of related expertise.

In line with the regression analyses, the graph shows highly marked trends in generalism and quality control expertise. The proportion of generalists fell from almost 80 percent in 1995 to 35 percent in 2001. The percentage of consultants with affiliations to the ASQ jumped sharply, rising from 12 percent in 1992 to 43 percent in 2001. Firms with manufacturing expertise showed an increase from 45 percent in 1992 to about 60 percent in 2001, and the percentage of firms with organiza-

tion development expertise declined slightly. These results paint a clear picture: as TQM's fashion cycle moved from boom to bust, TQM consulting was increasingly populated by specialists and firms with roots in the more technical aspects of the practice.

We also conducted an additional series of analyses to investigate interrelationships between generalism and related expertise. Models including interaction effects suggested interdependencies between generalism and quality control expertise, but not between generalism and either manufacturing or organization development expertise (that is, the increment to model fit was small and not statistically significant in these latter cases). Table 3 reports coefficients for generalists and specialists with and without ASQ affiliations.

These models suggest two additional insights. First, the only types of consultants whose presence in TQM declined systematically over time were the generalists that lacked quality control expertise. Since this group formed the reference category, this decline is shown indirectly by increases in estimated coefficients for all other groups.<sup>15</sup> Although arguments about related expertise and generalism/specialism are posed separately above, the two sets of processes seemed to work in tandem.

<sup>14</sup> We also experimented with alternative cutoff values separating specialists and generalists, and with three-way as well as two-way partitions. All analyses produced the same temporal trajectory of increasing specialism.

<sup>15</sup> The temporal increases in coefficient magnitudes for specialists with and without quality control expertise are statistically significant at the .05 level, but the increase in magnitude for generalists with quality control is not.

**TABLE 2**  
Continued

Model 5, 1997	Model 6, 1997	Model 7, 1999	Model 8, 1999	Model 9, 2001	Model 10, 2001
-2.51*** (0.41)	-2.87*** (0.45)	-2.03*** (0.42)	-1.66*** (0.45)	-2.92*** (0.44)	-2.53*** (0.46)
-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
-0.04 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.38)	0.10 (0.40)	0.07 (0.40)	0.24 (0.41)	0.28 (0.41)
-0.07 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.38)	0.22 (0.40)	0.22 (0.40)	-0.04 (0.42)	0.03 (0.42)
0.09 (0.04)	0.07 (0.40)	-0.07 (0.44)	-0.07 (0.44)	-0.07 (0.45)	0.01 (0.45)
0.04 (0.42)	0.01 (0.43)	0.45 (0.44)	0.47 (0.44)	0.36 (0.46)	0.43 (0.46)
-0.11* (0.05)	-0.11* (0.05)	-0.23*** (0.06)	-0.22*** (0.06)	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.05)
0.59 (0.32)	0.60 (0.32)	0.79** (0.31)	0.79** (0.31)	0.67* (0.28)	0.69* (0.28)
2.98*** (0.25)	3.00*** (0.25)	3.10*** (0.24)	3.10*** (0.24)	3.00*** (0.23)	2.98*** (0.23)
0.75*** (0.19)	0.68*** (0.20)	1.04*** (0.20)	1.15*** (0.21)	1.31*** (0.22)	1.33*** (0.22)
0.58** (0.20)		-0.46* (0.20)		-0.82*** (0.22)	
	0.18** (0.06)		-0.18** (0.06)		-0.24*** (0.07)
1,630	1,630	1,805	1,805	2,142	2,142
278***	279***	324***	327***	314***	312***

Second, models with interaction effects suggested that specialists were more influenced by the possession of related expertise than generalists were. This can be seen by comparing the difference in coefficients for the two types of specialists with the coefficient for generalists with quality control expertise (since the effect for generalists without such expertise was set to zero). The difference for specialists is always larger, and this difference in relative magnitudes is statistically significant in all years except 1992. This makes good sense: the internal diversity of generalists provides some compensation for the absence of key forms of expertise, and few specialists can participate in markets where they lack connections to core technologies.

### Patterns of TQM Entry and Exit

Given these trends in TQM consulting, what demographic processes were most central? The composition of the TQM consulting community can be modified by four kinds of events: when new firms are founded to provide TQM services, when existing firms add TQM to their service portfolios, when firms drop TQM from their portfolios, and when TQM providers fail. What can our data tell us about the role of these alternative pathways in generating the results observed above? For example, did specialists become a larger presence over time because they entered TQM in greater numbers than generalists, or because they were less likely to exit, or both? Although the five snapshots provided by the observations based on the Kennedy directories mil-

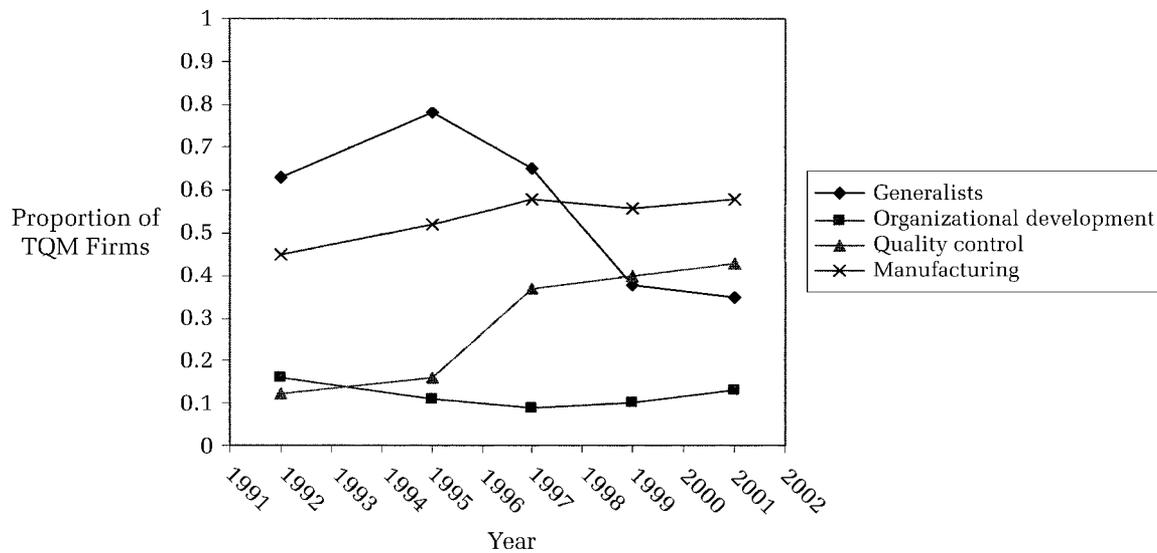
itated against fine-grained modeling efforts, they do speak to the relative importance of different demographic mechanisms.

An initial analysis indicated that most movement involved migration (addition of TQM services by existing firms and abandonment of TQM services by surviving firms), rather than founding or failure.<sup>16</sup> We thus focused on migration into and out of TQM and calculated relative entry and exit rates within each period. Relative rates give the probability of an event for a subgroup divided by the probability of the event for all others. (For example, if 10 percent of all generalists that are at risk enter the TQM market in 1995, but only 5 percent of all specialists at risk enter, generalists have a relative rate of entry that is twice as large.)

As Table 4 shows, the relative rate of generalist versus specialist entry shifted substantially over time. Generalists from the full consulting population were about three times more likely than specialists to enter at the height of the fashion boom (1992–95), and they remained more than twice as

<sup>16</sup> Eighty-eight percent of all firms new to the TQM niche were listed in prior directories as not offering TQM. In fact, 71 percent were founded before the emergence of TQM as a well-known business practice in 1989. And at least two-thirds of total exits from TQM appeared to involve migration rather than failure, since the firms were listed in the next directory as providing services other than TQM. Taking an ecological perspective, we can therefore describe the dominant mode of change as adaptation rather than selection.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Characteristics of TQM Firms**



likely to do so between 1995 and 1997. But this difference disappeared as the fashion bust deepened: in the periods 1997–99 and 1999–01, generalists and specialists entered at roughly equal rates.

Generalists were also generally quicker to leave TQM, though the gap here was smaller and did not change systematically over time. Over all periods, generalists exited at 142 percent of the rate of specialists, with a modestly larger difference during the bust. Overall, the increasing prevalence of specialists in TQM consulting was thus the result of a

declining propensity of generalists to enter coupled with a modest advantage in staying power for specialists once they were ensconced in the niche.

Consulting firms with related expertise, by contrast, were almost always quicker to enter *and* slower to exit than consultants lacking those forms of expertise. As we would expect from the logistic regression analysis, these differences were particularly large for firms with quality control expertise. Quality control experts entered at nine times the rate of firms without an ASQ affiliation and are

**TABLE 3**  
**Results of Logistic Regression Analyses of the Probability a Consultant Offers TQM: Interactions between Generalism and Quality Control Expertise<sup>a</sup>**

Variable	Model 1, 1992	Model 2, 1995	Model 3, 1997	Model 4, 1999	Model 5, 2001
Intercept	-1.41** (0.45)	-0.68 (0.36)	-1.87*** (0.41)	-2.42*** (0.45)	-3.63*** (0.48)
Age	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
1–3 employees	-0.64 (0.40)	-0.95** (0.33)	-0.04 (0.37)	0.13 (0.40)	0.29 (0.42)
4–10 employees	-0.65 (0.41)	-0.45 (0.33)	-0.05 (0.38)	0.24 (0.40)	0.02 (0.43)
11–25 employees	-0.56 (0.45)	-0.65 (0.36)	0.08 (0.40)	-0.06 (0.44)	-0.03 (0.45)
26–100 employees	-0.14 (0.43)	-0.53 (0.35)	0.04 (0.42)	0.47 (0.44)	0.38 (0.46)
Professional affiliations	-0.09 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.10* (0.05)	-0.22*** (0.06)	-0.06 (0.05)
Organization development expertise	1.55*** (0.28)	1.00*** (0.27)	0.55 (0.33)	0.77* (0.31)	0.66* (0.28)
Manufacturing expertise	0.58** (0.20)	0.42** (0.16)	0.72*** (0.19)	1.00*** (0.20)	1.27*** (0.22)
Generalist with quality control expertise	2.20*** (0.50)	2.05*** (0.36)	2.59*** (0.30)	2.64*** (0.33)	2.49*** (0.32)
Specialist with quality control expertise	1.80** (0.66)	3.03*** (0.78)	2.88*** (0.39)	3.89*** (0.38)	4.06*** (0.35)
Specialist without quality control expertise	-0.49* (0.20)	-1.08*** (0.18)	-0.75*** (0.21)	0.29 (0.22)	0.57* (0.24)
<i>n</i>	1,453	1,596	1,630	1,805	2,142
Likelihood-ratio $\chi^2$	106***	204***	282***	328***	319***

<sup>a</sup> Values in parentheses are standard errors.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

**TABLE 4**  
**Relative Rates of Adaptive Entry and Exit in TQM Consulting**

Period	Generalists	Quality Control Expertise	Organization Development Expertise	Manufacturing Expertise
Migrations into TQM by existing firms				
1992–95	2.98	5.26	1.69	2.08
1995–97	2.23	12.25	0.88	3.47
1997–99	1.05	10.02	1.10	2.86
1999–2001	1.02	16.46	1.45	2.79
All years	2.31	9.24	1.13	2.75
Migrations out of TQM by surviving firms				
1992–95	1.17	0.12	0.85	0.65
1995–97	0.92	0.41	0.79	0.81
1997–99	1.47	0.31	0.73	0.78
1999–2001	1.27	0.28	0.90	0.69
All years	1.42	0.28	0.82	0.74

seen to be about a quarter as likely to exit when all periods are taken together. Differences for organization development and manufacturing expertise are smaller but in the same direction.

Most of these differentials are rather stable, but one increases sharply over time: the relative rate of entry of consultants with quality control expertise. Between 1992 and 1995, this difference was already substantial; quality control experts entered about five times faster than did firms lacking ASQ affiliation. The gap then increased to a 10-fold advantage in the next two periods and to a 16-fold advantage in 1999–2001. Increasingly, the only consulting firms entering the TQM market were those with strong links to quality control.

The changing composition of TQM consulting is thus generally a product of a relatively stable factor (exit differences) and a more temporally variable one (entry differences). During the fashion boom, generalists and firms with little related expertise perceived TQM to be an area where they could do well, and they entered at relatively high rates. Over time, entry by these sorts of firms slowed dramatically, and new cohorts were increasingly made up of specialists and those with quality control expertise. Differences in exit rates reinforced this pattern, with specialists and firms with related expertise slower to exit TQM consulting in almost all periods.

## DISCUSSION

This study has presented and tested institutional arguments about change on the supply side of management fashions over the fashion cycle. We reasoned that a fashion boom provides a rich market opportunity for suppliers, as enthusiastic but inex-

perienced buyers clamber onto the bandwagon. In the case of TQM, at least, this opportunity attracted all sorts of consulting firms—those with related forms of expertise as well as those lacking discernable connections to the practice. Generalist consulting firms were also particularly likely to enter the TQM market during the fashion boom, impelled, we suspect, by a complex set of reasons linked to their structural characteristics, behavioral routines, and social identity. As the fashion boom turned to a fashion bust, however, firms with relevant technical expertise and more focused providers increasingly populated the TQM consulting market.

These results suggest that supply-side dynamics respond to more than the size of a market. A measure of demand as the number of buyers might help one understand fluctuations in the number of TQM consultants (though even this may be too strong a claim; a few TQM experts could potentially monopolize the whole field). But more is going on, at both the level of individual firms and the business community. The urgency and inexperience of buyers during the upswing and their skepticism and increased knowledge during the downswing present qualitatively different *sorts* of demand, not just quantitatively different *amounts* of demand, and these qualitative differences in demand characteristics result in identifiable organizational differences in suppliers. A simple count of firms demanding and supplying TQM services would miss this important heterogeneity.

## Alternative Mechanisms

Although we have focused theoretical attention on shifts in the fashionability of TQM over time,

alternative explanations can be formulated for the results reported here. Three lines of reasoning are of particular interest.<sup>17</sup> We discuss them briefly, primarily in connection to this paper's empirical findings but also with an eye to more general theoretical issues.

First, it can be argued that the complexity of the problems addressed by a management technique tends to increase over its life cycle. If so, the temporal shifts in TQM consulting that we uncovered may reflect the growing level of consultant sophistication needed to do the job. Consultants lacking a background in quality control may have been able to assist firms in solving the relatively simple or easy quality problems of the early 1990s, but only specialists with strong technical backgrounds could grapple with the thornier issues that remained once the "low hanging fruit" had been gathered.

This sensible logic is difficult to reconcile with the fact that the performance of TQM programs put in place during the fashion boom was generally disappointing. Much discussion among academics and practitioners has pointed to implementation problems as a primary cause of program failure (e.g., Brown, Hitchcock, & Willard, 1994; Choi & Behling, 1997; Ryan, 1995). Managerial enthusiasm declined, as did organizational use. All of this seems incompatible with the notion that strong consulting expertise was of limited importance early on.

A second alternative account posits differential learning rates as a key driver of change. It could be that all consulting firms were poorly equipped to implement TQM during the boom and that clients had no choice but to select from this pool. Over time, some consulting firms then mastered the technique faster than others and so gained an advantage. If firms making large relative investments (specialists and firms with related expertise) are typically fast learners, we would expect to see a reduction in generalists and firms without related expertise over time, regardless of external conditions.

This too is an attractive idea, and one that fits well with theories of learning as building on stocks of existing knowledge and expertise (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). But demographic mechanisms suggest that differences in learning rates play a limited role in shifts in TQM consulting. If specialists learned faster than generalists, we would expect a growing gap in relative rates of market exit.

As shown in Table 4, however, temporal shifts in consulting demographics largely concern rates of market *entry*. In addition, we looked for but found no systematic pattern of a widening gap in exit rates across cohorts. For example, the difference in 1999–2001 exit rates between specialists and generalists who first provided TQM services in 1992 was about the same as that between specialists and generalists who entered in later years.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, temporal variation in TQM consulting might be a by-product of larger movements in managerial ideology. In a seminal analysis, Barley and Kunda (1992) suggested that managerial discourse tends to oscillate between rational and normative formulations. They regarded the quality movement of the 1980s and early 1990s as an example of normative discourse focused on employee motivation and commitment. More recently, however, Kunda and Ailon-Souday (2005) argued that the pendulum has swung back toward the rational pole. If so, the decline in TQM consultants with expertise in organization development, and the increase in those with backgrounds in quality control and manufacturing, might be related to this broad shift.

There is little evidence of such a trend, however, at least in the demography of management consulting. In 1992, 5.5 percent of all consultants had affiliations with the ASTD, and 4.2 percent with the ASQC; in 2001, the figures were 8.5 and 6 percent, respectively. The percentage of consulting firms offering manufacturing services was stable at around 28 percent, while the percent offering human resources services rose from 47 to 51 percent over this same period. The shifts we see in TQM consulting thus do not seem to be part of a larger movement toward rational rhetorics of control, but rather appear to be a function of TQM's fashion cycle.

During the boom, TQM was seen as both scientific *and* participatory. In fact, we suspect that its "ideological" appeal stemmed from its plausible linkage to both rational and normative logics (see also Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999, 2001). We would further speculate that TQM's postboom movement toward its roots in quality control, rather than in behavioral techniques, may be part of an attempt to relegitimate TQM as a "hard" technique after the collapse of its fashion boom. Normative elements of once-fashionable practices may

<sup>17</sup> We thank the paper's reviewers for bringing these alternative lines of argument to our attention.

<sup>18</sup> We also note that the building blocks of TQM existed prior to its fashion boom, and, as we discuss further below, many preboom consultants were specialists with TQM-specific expertise.

be difficult to sustain in a context of disillusionment and skepticism.

Although we believe that the three processes outlined above have a limited role in generating compositional shifts in TQM consulting, from a broader perspective they suggest the value of approaching management consulting with multiple theoretical lenses. The notions that the challenges addressed by management techniques change over time, that consultants learn at different rates, and that particular fashion cycles are embedded in broader managerial discourses are all insightful, and all suggest the fruitfulness of expanded lines of inquiry.

We would thus enthusiastically call for research on management consulting that can study a broader range of organizational dynamics and more directly adjudicate between alternative causal mechanisms. This study has focused on broad trends, both because regularities in management consulting have not yet been established and because the data provided by industry directories do not lend themselves to a finer-grained analysis. Of particular value would be systematic studies of consulting engagements surrounding a management fashion over time—before and after a fashion boom—that could track both the evolution of client demands and the roles played by consultants and thereby arbitrate between or combine institutional and technical accounts.

### Coevolutionary Dynamics and Institutional Trajectories

The close connections between media-based TQM discourse, organizational adoption, and the characteristics of TQM consultants suggest the value of developing studies that consider all sides of this coevolving system. As Westphal and colleagues (1997: 390) argued, perspectives on fads and fashions that model not only adopters but also “opinion leaders and gatekeepers, such as the mass media, consulting firms, and business schools” can lead to a fuller understanding of diffusion processes. This view has important implications not only for theories of diffusion, but also for management practice; for example, firms will have difficulty innovating in technically appropriate ways if the consultants that surround them lack commitment and expertise.

In this concluding section, we thus move beyond our empirical analysis to consider a broader coevolutionary perspective. Although speculative at points, this exercise places the pieces of the TQM puzzle studied here in the context of prior work and helps assess the value of complementing studies of management discourse and organizational adoption with research on consulting firms.

Table 5 is a sketch of TQM's life cycle organized schematically into preboom, boom, and bust (or more neutrally, preboom, boom, and postboom) stages. To characterize the structure of discourse,

**TABLE 5**  
**Coevolution of TQM Discourse, Adopters, and Consulting Firms**

Period	Discourse	Organizational Adopters	Consulting Firms
Preboom, 1982–88	Little media attention Direct contacts within an incipient network of adopters and suppliers	Few adopters Prominent firms where technical fit is good Customized programs	Small consulting pool Quality specialists and gurus
Boom, 1989–93	High and rising volume of generalized discourse, aimed at general managers Loose usage with vague prescriptions Exaggerated claims and success stories	High levels of program adoption and usage Widely distributed across the business community Ceremonial and conforming programs	Large consulting pool Many generalists and firms lacking expertise
Bust, 1994–present	Low and falling volume of generalized discourse Continuing technical discussion within practitioner and academic community Attacks on excesses of the boom combined with focus on better implementation	Moderate levels of program adoption and usage Case study evidence of program maturation	Medium-sized consulting pool Specialists with quality expertise

organizational adopters, and the consulting community, we expand upon the description given in the above section on TQM's life cycle to incorporate this paper's findings. These characterizations should be read as aggregate tendencies that, we think, provide insight into broad trends in TQM's evolution.

During the preboom era (roughly 1982–88), TQM was an inchoate mix of corporation-wide quality programs, not a popular and widely accepted management system. Early adopters were largely major manufacturers whose analyzable production processes were well suited to TQM's problem-solving techniques. On the supply side, the period was dominated by "gurus" like Crosby, Deming, and Juran, as well as by small, specialized consultancies like Harrington, Hurd & Rieker (the first two principals were presidents of the American Society for Quality Control, the third a leading quality circle consultant).<sup>19</sup> This potent combination helped produce customized programs and substantial performance gains (Easton & Jarrell, 1998; Westphal et al., 1997), although the lack of media attention meant that TQM diffused slowly through social networks. In institutional terms, this era matches well with the period of rational adoption and structural contingency that Tolbert and Zucker (1983) found in their classic analysis of civil service reform.

The fashion boom (1989–1993, if we date its end by the discourse peak) is marked by an outpouring of media attention, widespread but superficial implementation, and market entry by large numbers of consulting firms unencumbered by expertise related to TQM. In this period, adopters tended to develop conforming applications that had little effect on the bottom line but did furnish a legitimacy dividend (Staw & Epstein, 2000; Westphal et al., 1997). This shift from the preboom period thus appears to follow the "rational-to-ceremonial" institutional trajectory described by Tolbert and Zucker (1983) and Westphal et al. (1997).

In the fashion bust (1994 onwards), the technical emphasis of the preboom period resurfaced. Exchanges of information and analysis between prac-

tioners and academics replaced celebratory success stories directed at general managers, firms seemed increasingly able to manage quality well (Cole, 1999), and specialists with quality control expertise came to dominate TQM consulting. The amount of TQM-based activity declined as the bust progressed (fewer articles, fewer programs, fewer consultants), but its quality appears to have risen.

TQM's fashion cycle can in fact be described as a "fashion circle," with developments in the mid and late 1990s reversing those of the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the peak of the fashion boom, TQM enjoyed tremendous legitimacy as *the* solution to management's problems. On both demand and supply sides, the business community was moving swiftly toward widespread but ceremonial enactment. One possible future could have been—as much institutional analysis suggests—increasing "ceremoniality." A few years later, however, TQM had lost much of its luster and had largely disappeared from nonspecialized discourse. Its incipient institutionalization halted, TQM began to swing back toward its technical foundations and to have increasing potential for customized applications.

TQM's larger institutional trajectory thus moved from rational to ceremonial to rational. Indeed, Westphal and coauthors (1997: 390) raised the possibility of "further stages of institutionalization" in which later adopters would customize their TQM programs. Although we do not have data on the adoption side of TQM, the dynamics of TQM consulting suggest a more complex institutional trajectory than the widely discussed two-stage, rational-to-ceremonial shift.

Two features of TQM's fashion circle are of particular theoretical and practical importance. First, why was the boom so fragile? During its day in the sun, TQM enjoyed material and symbolic support from powerful actors, a compelling cultural frame, rampant mimicry, and high levels of use. All of these are often seen as synonymous with or causally implicated in institutionalization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hannan & Freeman, 1987; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). But none seemed to preserve TQM's status.

A number of conditions—inefficacy, norms of progress, competition between fashion setters—have been adduced to explain the transience of management fashion;<sup>20</sup> we would argue that supply-side dynamics play an important role as well.

<sup>19</sup> Systematic data on TQM consultants is absent for the 1980s; we base our description on case study accounts like Cole (1999) and on a reading of the practitioner and popular management literature on TQM. These sources may tend to overstate the role of leaders of the quality movement; however, we anticipate that consultants not heavily involved in the quality movement would have neither the motive nor the opportunity to implement corporate quality programs before TQM became widely popular.

<sup>20</sup> See Abrahamson (1996) on norms of progress and the instability they provoke; Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) and Jackson (2001) on competition among fashion-setting elites; and Strang and Macy (2001) on the

The period when the business community's attention was focused on TQM was also the time when managers were the least likely to find capable, committed TQM providers. As noted above, O'Shea and Madigan (1997) accused consulting generalists of providing superficial, template applications. And the paucity of providers armed with technical expertise during the boom speaks for itself.

By decreasing the average effectiveness of TQM interventions, the influx of "fashion surfers" (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999) on the supply side can be seen as both a product of the fashion boom and a cause of its demise. Practices lose credibility when they attract (or fail to keep out) uncommitted and unprepared providers. A supply side inundated with firms lacking strong expertise and favoring one-size-fits-all applications is likely to result in many program failures and to thereby engender much disillusionment and skepticism within the business community. Indeed, this outcome may be worse than a supply-side shortage in which there are not enough consultants available to meet demand. Unfortunately, management consulting is a weakly professionalized field with no real credentials and few protections for best practice. Without gatekeepers or other forms of endogenous or exogenous monitoring, consulting dynamics appear structurally prone to amplify rather than dampen the faddishness of the business community.<sup>21</sup>

The second question posed by a fashion circle is, How does a managerial innovation survive the collapse of a boom? Fashion is by definition fleeting. We know that TQM discourse, like the discourse surrounding other popular management practices, is almost symmetrical around a sharp peak. Symmetry and transience are even more evident if one considers the consumption rather than the production of business discourse, since discussions within expert communities seldom reach the average manager. Indeed, if we take the social construction of managerial practice seriously, TQM should have disappeared from the management landscape altogether.

Instead, the practice seems to have considerable staying power (see Clark [2004] and Benders,

---

relationship between the intrinsic merit of an innovation and its popular staying power.

<sup>21</sup> Dramatic variance in the qualifications of consultants over time should also alert clients to the importance of choosing consultants carefully. And more systemically, efforts to develop and maintain professional controls and credentials may lead management consultants and their clients to enjoy some of the benefits resulting from similar professionalization projects in other fields, like engineering and medicine.

Heusinkveld, and Nijholt [2005], who cautioned that media discourse and organizational usage may diverge over time). Surveys show continued program implementation well past the fashion boom (Lawler et al., 2001; Osterman, 2000), with Bain & Company's executive survey even suggesting an uptick in usage after our study period (Rigby, 2003). And Gibson, Tesone, and Blackwell (2003) found that 96 percent of the managers they surveyed in 2000 reported familiarity with TQM, with 94 percent stating they felt it was "still applicable" to management.

We would argue that consulting dynamics, perhaps ironically, help explain TQM's robustness in the fashion bust. The emergence of a hard core of knowledgeable TQM providers is likely to improve average program success, refine industry best practice, and increase the legitimacy of a technique suffering from disillusionment and skepticism. Indeed, the appearance of committed providers on the supply side would seem to be a necessary condition for the continued viability of an innovation that has risen and then fallen in the eyes of the business community.

Does this robustness presage not just continuing program implementation, but also the possible restarting of the fashion cycle? In a memoryless world, the answer would be yes. But many managers have seen a once-hot fashion grow cold and will recall the unsustainable claims of fundamental organizational transformation. It seems likely that a previously fashionable management practice will continue to be implemented in a narrow, technically responsible way, until perhaps it can be relabeled or combined with other approaches to once again seize the managerial imagination.

## REFERENCES

- Abrahamson, E. 1996. Management fashion. *Academy of Management Review*, 21: 254–285.
- Abrahamson, E., & Fairchild, G. 1999. Management fashion: Lifecycles, triggers, and collective learning processes. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44: 708–740.
- Abrahamson, E., & Fairchild, G. 2001. Knowledge industries and idea entrepreneurs: New dimensions of innovative products, services, and organizations. In C. Schoonhoven & E. Romanelli (Eds.), *The entrepreneurship dynamic*: 147–177. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Barley, S. R., & Kunda, G. 1992. Design and devotion: Surges of rational and normative ideologies of control in managerial discourse. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 37: 363–399.
- Baum, J. A. C. 1996. Organizational ecology. In S. Clegg,

- C. Hardy, & W. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organization studies*: 77–114. London: Sage.
- Benders, J., Heusinkveld, S., & Nijholt, J. 2005. *Co-evolution in management fashion: One pro and many cons*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management, Honolulu.
- Bohan, G. 1998. Whatever happened to TQM? Or, how a good strategy got a bad name. *National Productivity Review*, 17(4): 13–16.
- Brown, M. G., Hitchcock, D. E., & Willard, M. L. 1994. *Why TQM fails and what to do about it*. Burr Ridge, IL: Irwin Professional Publishing.
- Buono, A. F. 2001. Introduction. In A. F. Buono (Ed.), *Current trends in management consulting*: vii–xiv. Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Byrne, J. A. 1997. Management theory—Or fad of the month? *BusinessWeek*, June 23: 47.
- Carson, P. P., Lanier, P. A., Carson, K. D., & Guidry, B. N. 2000. Clearing a path through the management fashion jungle: Some preliminary trailblazing. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43: 1143–1158.
- Chatterjee, S., & Wernerfelt, B. 1991. The link between resources and type of diversification: Theory and evidence. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12: 33–48.
- Choi, T. Y., & Behling, O. C. 1997. Top managers and TQM success: One more look after all these years. *Academy of Management Executive*, 11(1): 37–47.
- Clark, T. 1995. *Managing consultants: Consultancy as the management of impressions*. Buckingham, U.K.: Open University Press.
- Clark, T. 2004. The fashion of management fashion: A surge too far? *Organization*, 11: 297–306.
- Cohen, W. M., & Levinthal, D. A. 1990. Absorptive capacity: A new perspective on learning and innovation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35: 128–152.
- Cole, R. E. 1995. Introduction. In R. Cole (Ed.), *The death and life of the American quality movement*: 3–9. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cole, R. E. 1999. *Managing quality fads*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crosby, P. B. 1996. *Quality is still free: Making quality certain in uncertain times*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Dean, J. W., & Bowen, D. E. 1994. Management theory and total quality: Improving research and practice through theory development. *Academy of Management Review*, 19: 392–418.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. 1983. The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48: 147–160.
- Dobyns, L., & Crawford-Mason, C. 1991. *Quality or else: The revolution in world business*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Easton, G., & Jarrell, S. 1998. The effects of total quality management on corporate performance: An empirical investigation. *Journal of Business*, 71: 253–307.
- Gibson, J. W., Tesone, D. S., & Blackwell, C. W. 2003. Management fads: Here yesterday, gone today? *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 68(4): 12–17.
- Gilks, J. F. 1990. Total quality: Wave of the future. *Canadian Business Review*, 17(1): 17–20.
- Giroux, H., & Landry, S. 1998. Schools of thought in and against total quality. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 10: 183–203.
- Giroux, H., & Taylor, J. R. 2002. The justification of knowledge: Tracking the translations of quality. *Management Learning*, 33: 497–515.
- Greiner, L. E., & Metzger, R. O. 1983. *Consulting to management*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Hackman, J. R., & Wageman, R. 1995. Total quality management: Empirical, conceptual, and practical issues. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40: 309–342.
- Hannan, M. T., & Freeman, J. 1977. The population ecology of organizations. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82: 929–964.
- Hannan, M. T., & Freeman, J. 1987. The ecology of organizational founding: American labor unions, 1836–1985. *American Journal of Sociology*, 92: 910–943.
- Haveman, H. A. 1992. Between a rock and a hard place: Organizational change and performance under conditions of fundamental environmental transformation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 37: 48–75.
- Hendricks, K. B., & Singhal, V. R. 1999. Don't count TQM out: Evidence shows implementation pays off in a big way. *Quality Progress*, 32(4): 35–42.
- Jackson, B. 2001. *Management gurus and management fashions*. London: Routledge.
- Kieser, A. 1997. Myth and rhetoric in management fashion. *Organization*, 4(1): 49–74.
- Kieser, A. 2002. Managers as marionettes? Using fashion theories to explain the success of consultantcies. In M. Kipping & L. Engwall (Eds.), *Management consulting*: 167–183. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Kubr, M. 2002. *Management consulting: A guide to the profession* (4th ed.). Geneva: International Labour Office.
- Kunda, G., & Ailon-Souday, G. 2005. Managers, markets and ideologies: Design and devotion reconsidered. In S. Ackroyd, R. Batt, P. Thompson, & P. S. Tolbert (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of work and organization*: 200–219. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Lawler, E. E., Mohrman, S. A., & Benson, G. 2001. *Orga-*

- nizing for high performance.** New York: Jossey-Bass.
- Levitt, B., & March, J. G. 1988. Organizational learning. In W. R. Scott (Ed.), *Annual review of sociology*, vol. 14: 319–340. Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews.
- Lieberman, M. B., & Montgomery, D. B. 1988. 1st-mover advantages. *Strategic Management Journal*, 9 (summer special issue): 41–58.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. 1977. Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83: 340–363.
- Miller, D. 1990. *The Icarus paradox*. New York: Harper Business.
- Mitchell, W. 1989. Whether and when? Probability and timing of incumbents' entry into emerging industrial subfields. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 34: 208–230.
- O'Shea, J., & Madigan, C. 1997. *Dangerous company*. New York: Times Business.
- Osterman, P. 1994. How common is workplace transformation and who adopts it? *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*, 47: 173–88.
- Osterman, P. 2000. Work reorganization in an era of restructuring: Trends in diffusion and effects on employee welfare. *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*, 53: 179–97.
- Powell, T. C. 1995. Total quality management as competitive advantage: A review and empirical study. *Strategic Management Journal*, 16: 15–37.
- Rigby, D. 2001. Management tools and techniques: A survey. *California Management Review*, 43(2): 139–160.
- Rigby, D. 2003. Management tools survey 2003: Usage up as companies strive to make headway in tough times. *Strategy & Leadership*, 31(5): 4–11
- Ryan, J. T. 1995. Is total quality fading as a strategy? *HR Focus*, 72(10): 14–15.
- Schoenecker, T. S., & Cooper, A. C. 1998. The role of firm resources and organizational attributes in determining entry timing: A cross-industry study. *Strategic Management Journal*, 19: 1127–1143.
- Sitkin, S. B., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Schroeder, R. G. 1994. Distinguishing control from learning in total quality management: A contingency perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 19: 537–64.
- Staw, B. M., & Epstein, L. D. 2000. What bandwagons bring: Effects of popular management techniques on corporate performance, reputation, and CEO pay. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 45: 523–556.
- Strang, D., & Jung, D. 2005. Organizational change as an orchestrated social movement: Recruitment to a "quality initiative." In G. Davis, D. McAdam, W. Scott, & M. Zald (Eds.), *Social movements and organization theory*: 280–309. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Strang, D., & Macy, M. W. 2001. In search of excellence: Fads, success stories, and adaptive emulation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107: 147–182.
- Stuelpnagel, T. R. 1989. Total quality management in business—And academia. *Business Forum*, 14(1): 4–9.
- Teece, D. J. 1986. Profiting from technological innovation: implications for integration, collaboration, licensing and public policy. *Research Policy*, 15: 285–305.
- Thomas, L. 1996. Brand capital and entry order. *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy*, 5: 107–129.
- Tolbert, P. S., & Zucker, L. G. 1983. Institutional sources of change in the formal structure of organizations: The diffusion of civil service reform, 1880–1935. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28: 22–39.
- Westphal, J. D., Gulati, R., & Shortell, S. M. 1997. Customization and conformity: An institutional and network perspective on the content and consequences of TQM adoption. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 42: 366–394.
- Wood, P. 2002. The rise of consultancy and the prospect for regions. In T. Clark & R. Fincham (Eds.), *Critical consulting: New perspectives on the management advice industry*: 50–73. Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Business.
- Zbaracki, M. J. 1998. The rhetoric and reality of total quality management. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43: 602–636.



**Robert J. David** (*robert.david@mcgill.ca*) is an assistant professor of strategy and organization in the Faculty of Management at McGill University. He studies organizational change, competitive dynamics, and the evolution of industries and organizational forms from an institutional perspective. He earned a Ph.D. in organizational theory from Cornell University in 2001.

**David Strang** (*ds20@cornell.edu*) is professor of sociology at Cornell University. His research focuses on the diffusion of management practices within organizational communities. Current projects include the preparation of a monograph that examines a global bank's benchmarking program (provisionally titled *Searching for Excellence*), the development of models and methods for the study of diffusion dynamics on the Internet, and an analysis of theory-driven learning in public sector downsizing. He received a Ph.D. in sociology from Stanford University in 1988.

