The Occupational Mandate of an Innovation Intermediary: Influencing Innovation in the Digital Space

Name of authors/including affiliation: John Barker (Cardiff Metropolitan University)

Professor Nick Clifton, and Professor Gareth Loudon (Cardiff Metropolitan University)

John Barker – Email: jbarker@cardiffmet.ac.uk   Mob:07814942403

Context: Innovation intermediaries are gaining greater importance for productivity in Wales and across the United Kingdom as "innovation…accounts for 25-50% of labour productivity growth (Baughan, 2015). Especially as the Welsh economy has historically lower figures of productivity continue to leave the country lagging behind the UK productivity average.

Literature Review: In order to study the actions, behaviours, and values of an innovation intermediary this chapter seeks to construct what (Fayard, Stigliani and Bechky, 2017) calls an "occupational mandate". To construct this mandate requires individuals to internally develop shared understanding, behaviours, values, thinking and culture. Existing literature on innovation intermediary is extensively focused on services provided by the intermediary (Aquilani, Abbate and Dominici, 2016), benefits derived from the intermediaries services (Hossain and Islam, 2015), challenges of working with intermediaries (Kokshagina, Le Masson and Bories, 2017), and the perspectives of solvers (Hossain, 2018). The perspective of the intermediary and how they support the innovation process is not presently covered within the literature and requires investigation to build upon this knowledge. There is value in understanding how this occupational mandate influences the innovation process in the digital space as the chosen intermediary uses a digital platform to support innovation.

Literature Gap: This study builds on existing knowledge in the area (Aquilani, Abbate and Dominici, 2016; Kokshagina, Le Masson and Bories, 2017) by seeking to understand how the innovation broker, in this case an SME utilising a digital platform, engages and explores value creation for partners in this innovation environment. This shift in perspective, usually observed from either the instigator/recipient (Bervanakis & Dešić, 2013; Brunswicker & Chesbrough, 2018) or the conciliator/provider (Santoro, Ferraris, Giacosa, & Giovando, 2018) provides new knowledge.

Research Questions

RQ1: How and why does an innovation intermediary facilitate innovation in Wales?

RQ2: What are the factors influencing the take-up of open innovation through an innovation intermediary?

Methodology: In order to explore and deliver findings to the research questions, the study identified an auto-ethnographic perspective as potentially a novel method of collecting data in the context of the intermediary organisation (Hossain and Anees-ur-Rehman, 2016). This was supplemented with narrative data from the Slack instant messaging system, and qualitative semi-structured interviewing before using Giola and Corley's (2004) thematic analysis.

Method: Auto-ethnographic data capture consisted of 3 months of observation 20 recorded observation events, alongside 2680 analysed terms and a total of 24,680 words gathered over a 3-month observation period. This data was then coded in nVivo into 26 top-level concepts, or themes, 9 sub-groups, or concepts, and then finally 5 core areas of exploration.

Semi-structured interviewing was completed with all intermediary employees totalling 7 interviews to triangulate findings of the ethnography.

Results: The results of this study allow the construction of a professional mandate for the innovation intermediary and an improved understanding of how an intermediary facilitates innovation. The occupational mandate for this innovation intermediary is formed through the 3 key areas of culture, co-creation and relationships as suggested by Fayard, Stigliani and Bechky, (2017). A summary of findings for each element of the occupational mandate is included below:

Culture:

- Shared understanding: Leadership in innovation is people and technology-led

- Shared understanding: Practice and preparation when communicating internally and externally

- Behaviours: Professional Focus and Teamwork

- Action orientated and trusting

Co-creation:

- Shared understanding: Values of Business Support Organisations

- Values: Importance of digital product and people in delivering innovation

- Values: Intrinsic financial value should be present to enable collaboration

- Values: Strategic value to innovation is recognised

Relationships:

- Shared understanding: Sector based approach for customers with innovation mindset

- Shared understanding: Knowledge diversity is important within the innovation crowd

- Values: Trust and connection with customers

Generally, while the findings of this study are non-generalisable, as they are based on a singular case, they do raise interesting insights into the construction of innovation through an intermediary and the professional identity of intermediaries which can be explored in further ethnographic study.

Contribution to Scholarship: This study builds on the work of Aquilani, Abbate and Dominici (2016) by understanding that beyond the marketable services that intermediaries provides that innovation intermediaries provide valuable facilitation of the innovation process using a variety of human, technological, and communication features. Studying an intermediary using this type of embedded methodology, provides a new and different perspective from previous studies which look at the beneficiaries of the innovation intermediary and the individuals using this intermediary platforms using quantitative and case study methodologies rather than the ethnography employed here (Hossain and Islam, 2015; Kokshagina, Le Masson and Bories, 2017).

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