

Review:

Management of Knowledge-Intensive Companies

by *Mats Alvesson*, 1995 (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin)

DM 174, hardback, pp. x + 367.

Despite its title, the empirical basis of this book is a single company. Enator AB is a young, rapidly growing, Swedish computer consulting firm which the author argues, 'provides a basis for obtaining knowledge about an organisational form on which there has hitherto been relatively little systematic research' (p. 1). In short, Enator is a knowledge-intensive, service company that relies on the problem-solving ability of its professional employees. As such, it is a type of organisation that is becoming more important in advanced societies that are increasingly based on provision of highly customised business services.

Alvesson devotes a chapter each to a limited number of aspects of business organisation. These include strategy, structure, culture, leadership, marketing, some aspects of work organisation, the role of symbols in corporate life, and the extent to which contradictions limit the tendency towards social integration of employees. Aspects which are not covered in any depth include finance, budgetary and supervisory control, work content, gendered aspects of organisation and the nature of the wider Swedish culture. Alvesson argues that because normative control is more significant at Enator than in most other kinds of companies, and because of the author's theoretical interest in cultural aspects, the 'harder' elements of control are disregarded. No justification is given for ignoring the other aspects. Arguably, the nature of work is a major omission since the essence of supplying business services is the way they are organised as projects that meet clients' expectations.

A strong point of this book lies in the author's discussion of theoretical and methodological issues (chapters 3 & 4) as a prelude to the empirical analysis based on the above-mentioned themes. Thus, in chapter 3, a useful synthesis of anthropological and organisational perspectives on culture leads the author to conclude that the meanings which collectivities give to organisational symbols is a crucial area for research since meaning permeates all phenomena. But how does one know which symbols to study and how can symbols be studied? According to Alvesson, 'Indications of key symbols may be that people often talk about them, that they are strongly loaded, that they appear in various contexts and that they are regarded as sacred etc' (p. 40).

Cultural analysis requires a qualitative, ethnographic approach to research. Alvesson tells us that he interviewed approximately 35 individuals at different levels of the company with a bias towards 'managers and people with considerable experience in the company' (p. 57). In addition, the author had 'about 15 brief conversations, some three weeks of participant observation and some additional studies of corporate documents' (p. 58). Alvesson assessed his interviews according to several explicit criteria and weighted the evidence accordingly (p. 59).

Cultural analysis based on qualitative research faces an additional task of demonstrating the validity of such work. Alvesson's discussion in chapter 4 is exemplary. He distinguishes between *data collectors* who are particularly concerned with ensuring the validity of their data through empirical grounding and scientific methods, and *data interpreters* who argue that data cannot be regarded apart from the subjectivity of the researcher and hence cannot be subject

to scientific verification. Alvesson identifies with the latter group suggesting that creative research requires working with metaphors in various ways (as a point of view and by using concepts from other domains) and that dialogue is necessary to ensure that research meets acceptable standards. The following five criteria are advanced in order to facilitate this process: writing in a personal style that makes explicit the author's subjectivity; presentation of clear frames of reference and repeated examples of how these affect the research findings; openness to complexity, transience, and contradiction in studying organisations; avoiding reliance on a single perspective for comprehending reality; and explicitly stating the limitations of the study by referring to unanswered problems (pp. 52–53).

A second feature of this book is the way the author introduces empirical themes (mentioned above) through the lens of alternative theoretical perspectives followed by a cultural analysis of the same phenomenon. For example, chapter 6 focuses on organisational structure first by arguing that variable-correlating 'objectivist' accounts are characterised by 'an excessive interest in testing simple, limited relationships rather than searching for or constructing rich patterns based on deeper insights' (p. 84). Alvesson then takes issue with analysts who search for patterns but do not substantiate them empirically. Mintzberg's (1983) typology of organisational configurations is however taken up as a vehicle for comparing Enator's structure, the latter conceived of as the way the arrangement of roles and authority is interpreted by those who are involved in its continual re-constitution. The author suggests that in contrast to the expectation that Enator would approximate closely to an adhocracy (with a decentralised, organic structure), it comprises a hybrid of three of Mintzberg's configurations (the simple structure, the professional bureaucracy, the divisional structure), albeit with the dominant element being adhocracy. Alvesson emphasises that organisational structure 'shows different faces in different situations and to different groups' (p. 109).

In sum, although this reviewer believes that cultural and structural analysis should be integrated and that comparative case studies usually yield more interesting theoretical insights than single cases, Alvesson's work is an impressive illustration of cultural analysis. It also provides a useful basis for continuing research on what is likely to be a key form of organisation in the early 21st century, namely, the knowledge-intensive company.

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References

Mintzberg, H. 1983, *Structure in Fives: Designing Effective Organisation*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs.