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Conn Steffen, Ritala Paavo

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THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH METHODS IN INNOVATION MANAGEMENT RESEARCH: A NOTE FROM THE 2018 ISPIM INNOVATION CONFERENCE

The 29th ISPIM Innovation Conference was held on 17-20 June 2018 and attracted 530 academics, innovation practitioners and policy makers to Stockholm, Sweden. Drawing on the strong support of local partners KTH and Innovationsledarna, participants gained awareness of the thriving and understated innovation ecosystem in Sweden as well as the latest insights on both classic and emerging innovation management themes in workshops, presentation sessions, PhD Lab, round table discussions, tours and panels. Kicking-off in the Nobel Prize Banquet Hall at the Stockholm Stathuset and closing with discussions and tours to seven innovation hubs and start-ups in the city, the conference spanned the entire Stockholm innovation scene.

Roberto Verganti, of Politecnico di Milano and Herman Kudlich of Lego, were the stand-out contributors to the opening session. Roberto asked us to consider innovation in a world of information and opportunity overload and suggested that radical innovation can be driven by the value or meaning inherent to an experience. He presented a practical process for the origin and refinement of such vision into meaningfulness for both the originator and the consumer. This approach moves the focus from the collection and assessment of many ideas (an approach common in industry today) to the support and development of an individual's rare and critically-challenged vision.

Building on the digital theme, Herman talked in depth about the transition of Lego from a traditional "plastic brick" company to one where customers also engage with Lego via a digital experience. Regularly ranked as one of the world's most innovative companies, the shift in mindset, structure and values required of the traditional, product-oriented, family-focussed organisation to achieve this is largely overlooked. Herman explained this transition and drew lessons for other organisation to follow. Both talks touched in very practical terms on the popular research themes of digital disruption, innovation culture, business models, open innovation and innovation ecosystems.

Prominent among the conference themes were the emerging global bodies of work on Innovation Standards, Terminology and Body of Knowledge. It was reported that the ISO standard for innovation will be published this Winter and that it is the result of collaboration between 50 countries and international organizations such as the OECD, WIPO, WTO, World Bank and ISPIM. These global, shared initiatives suggest that the field of Innovation Management is maturing, and that widely-shared standards, definitions and qualifications may be more commonplace soon amongst both the practitioner and academic communities.

In line with this maturing of the field, discussions over methodological rigor in innovation management research were notably more prominent than in previous years. As part of this progress, ISPIM has recently established the Innovation Research Skills Special Interest Group (SIG), which pursues to provide methodological and other research-related support for the ISPIM community. The SIG ran numerous activities in Stockholm including well-attended methods sessions on action research and social network analysis. In addition, there were sessions on publishing and research collaboration, including a journal editor panel, paper publishing skills workshop, and a co-author networking event.

Looking at the methods employed by researchers at ISPIM Stockholm provides a good overview of the flourishing methodological variety in innovation management research. To this end, we examined the methods employed in empirical papers submitted as “research results submission” (i.e. full papers that are well developed and close to journal submission status). Among this group of papers, there were 48% quantitative papers, 41% qualitative papers, and 11% mixed methods papers. This already shows that conference papers deviate methodologically more from those published in top-tier innovation journals (where quantitative methods tend to dominate). A closer look suggests an even more diverse picture. Of the quantitative papers, research methods included numerous instances of “big data” approaches, as well as simulation and experimental design. Among qualitative papers there were many case studies with interviews as one might expect, but there were also many instances of methods such as observation and ethnographic work.

This variety shows that innovation management research – as presented in ISPIM – is rather “innovative” and diverse in its approaches. The challenge for scholars is then to ensure rigor in research design and execution, as well as communication of the methodological choices, to make a substantial contribution to the field. ISPIM and the Innovation Research Skills SIG continues to help their members pursue such variety, and at the same time increasing rigor and subsequent impact, such as in the workshop addressing the SIG’s forthcoming Special Issue on Innovation Management Research Methods (in collaboration with R&D Management Journal (call open until 31st January 2019)). The workshop concluded that innovation management lacks disciplinary coherence regarding research methods, and that the community should reinforce its initial steps on the trajectory towards more rigorous and discipline-specific research designs, methods, and approaches. While innovation management borrows a lot of best practice from other disciplines, there are also discipline-specific features such as the ambiguity of conceptualization and analysis of key constructs such as innovation, novelty and creativity. This said, innovation management is likely to remain as cross-disciplinary field, given the broad-based relevance of innovation in the contemporary economy and societies. The workshop and upcoming special issue are part of the pursuit to engage in methodological discourse in this regard.

Close to 350 workshops and presentations and were made during the three days to the assembled 530 delegates, but two stood out. Namely *“Contributing to a sustainable city by organising as a meta-organisation”* by Jane Webb (Chalmers University of Technology Sweden) who received the *The Knut Holt Award for Best Paper* and *“What Employees Really Want: Demands for Individual Idea Development”* by Chris Gernreich (Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany) who received the *Alex Gofman Award for Best Student Paper*.

References