

The role of storytelling in the innovation process

In this article we explore a key challenge in the innovation process around how an innovation might be articulated and communicated in organisations. Articulating innovative ideas, refining them, drawing others into the vision and gaining their support is a key part of this process. It is essentially a process of “storytelling” – constructing and sharing stories that reflect on personal experiences and involvement in the innovation process. This paper is based on managers’ own perceptions about storytelling throughout the innovation process. Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with innovation managers and other senior managers from UK construction/infrastructure project-based firms. The findings demonstrate that storytelling is essential for presenting innovative ideas and getting interest and support from others. It also plays a key role in motivating organisational members to innovate, and in promoting innovation success stories more widely. It is through storytelling that the image of firms as being and becoming “innovative” is constructed.

Keywords: experiences, identities, images, innovation process, stories, storytelling

1 Introduction

It is commonly understood that innovation process involves the coordinated efforts of many organisational members to develop, implement and promote innovative ideas to improve work practices (Bessant & Tidd, 2015; Van de Ven, Polley, Garud, & Venkataraman 2008). Articulating innovative ideas, sharing them and persuading others to adapt and implement them is essentially a process of storytelling. In this paper we define storytelling as a form of communication associated with sharing experiences and expected entertainment. Stories play important roles in the context of organisational life (Boje, 1991, 2001, 2008; Gabriel, 1995, 2000, 2004). They clarify our understanding how innovation works in practice from the perspectives of those involved in the innovation process (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Garud, 2013).

It is commonly argued that innovation is ambiguous and highly contested construct (Garud, Tuertscher, & Van de Ven, 2013). Storytelling can generate common understanding of innovation and future vision among organisational members (Denning, 2008; Perkins, Lean, & Newbery, 2017; Sarpong & Maclean, 2012). Innovation is often promoted in organisations by telling stories about past, present and future innovations, e.g. a new or improved product, a process, a service, work practice. Innovation managers are responsible for promoting innovation through different channels, ensuring that organisations have the capabilities to develop innovation strategies and to create and maintain the culture of innovation. Stories about innovation can be repeated in organisations. Retelling stories of innovation is a way of reinforcing the cultural norms and values around innovation (Garud & Turunen, 2018). To date, there is still a scarce understanding about the role of storytelling in the innovation process, and more specifically: 1) the role of storytelling at the earlier stages of the innovation process: developing innovative ideas, getting approval from senior management team, refining ideas further; and 2) the role of storytelling at the later stages of the innovation process: stories about happened innovations, past successes and failures, and how they get shared and promoted in organisations; the implications for future motivation to innovate. This paper aims at contributing to the innovation studies by providing insights into the role of storytelling in the innovation process.

This paper is arranged into five key sections. The next section outlines the promising role of storytelling as a theoretical framework for understanding its role in the innovation process. This is followed by the review of the innovation studies that apply a storytelling perspective to explore different aspects of innovation. Following an outline of the methods of data collection and analysis, the findings section provides empirical evidence discussed in relation to the reviewed literature. The conclusion summarises the key findings, outlines theoretical and practical contributions of the research, and further research directions.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 The role of storytelling and stories in organisations

Storytelling has a long history within the study of organisations, and continues to attract an interest amongst academics and practitioners (Boje, 1991, 2001; Gabriel, 1995, 2000, 2004). The contribution of “storytelling organization” (Boje, 2008) is in the understanding of sense-making that takes place in pragmatic ways between storytellers and their audiences. In this paper we define storytelling as an activity of telling and sharing stories about personal experiences, life events and situations. We distinguish between storytelling/stories and narration/narratives, arguing that the first is more personalised, entertaining, and emotional in nature, whereas the latter is more towards coherence, performative intent and repetition (Dailey & Browning, 2014; Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016). Both storytelling and narration are important parts of organisational life. Stories are informed by personal experiences providing the listener with the opportunity to understand the life world of the storyteller. Storytelling can be seen to provide a means of making sense of shared experiences, and sharing stories is an essential part of organisations (Gabriel, 1995, 2000, 2004). Storytelling encompasses the social and cultural activity of sharing stories.

Gilliam and Flaherty (2015) explore the role that storytelling plays in the exchange between salesperson and buyer. They found that stories are informative and interactive, providing a useful tool for information exchange. Stories can also be persuasive, as salesperson seeks to convince buyers. Lacoste and La Rocca (2015) comment on the paper by Gilliam and Flaherty (2015), arguing that buyers actively participate in the storytelling process by initiating, interrupting and complimenting stories. Storytelling may help the buyer to pursue its role of adding value to the marketing of its organisation. Storytelling is hence understood as a dynamic process that is continuously (re)created through the elaboration, contestation and exchange of stories. Some stories are concerned specific events or people, while others take a

form of biographies. Stories are told from the point of view of the storyteller or another individual or group. They are frequently considered as being an integral part of organising (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfield, 2005; Garud, Dunbar, & Bartel, 2011), and the means of connecting past experiences, present and future aspirations. Such work suggests that stories imply an ability to make sense of past memories, respond to new experiences in the present time and to use what has been learned in ongoing processes that shape future aspirations. Storytelling is further seen to play an essential role in the social construction of self-identities and informal roles for themselves and in the eyes of others, as well as organisational images in projecting identities to others (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). We build upon the work of Dvora (1996) to distinguish between an identity that is conveyed to internal agency personnel, to guide them in their tasks and an image that is projected to external stakeholders (clients, personnel, sponsors, policymakers).

2.2 The role of storytelling in innovation process

There is undoubtedly increasing interest amongst scholars of innovation in the importance of storytelling, although there remains little consistency in terms of theoretical approach and scarce empirical investigation (Beckman & Barry, 2009; Snyder, Hedlund, Ingelsson, & Bäckström, 2017). To date, little is known about the role of storytelling in the innovation process. Bartel and Garud (2009) suggest that stories about innovation comprise events and contextual descriptions surrounding their occurrence. Their paper is conceptual in nature that uses stories/storytelling and narratives/narration interchangeably. Garud et al. (2011: 588) further conceptualise that stories of “unusual experiences” (situations that bear little or no resemblance to the types of experiences that have occurred in the past) are the means of connecting past memories, responding to new experiences in the present time and using what has been learned in ongoing processes that shape future aspirations. The argument is that by constructing stories, organisational members create understandings about innovation, negotiate

consensus, and engage in coordinated actions. Through storytelling, memories of prior innovative experiences are evoked leading to the emergence of new experiences. From this perspective, storytelling enables organisational learning.

Garud et al. (2013) further argue that stories of innovation can serve as a “boundary object”, facilitating coordination of multiple social group’s activities. Telling others about innovation may enable shared understanding of innovation and coordinated actions. Sarpong and Maclean (2012) reinforce that stories of innovation can generate common understanding and shared vision. Storytelling is hence seen most effective when tellers and listeners interact and share experiences. Maclean, Harvey and Gordon (2012) further highlight the role of success stories of individual entrepreneurs who are presented as being central to innovative processes. Personal and collective stories may serve as social purpose of encouraging other innovators who hear their stories to identify and emulate them. Their study is based on life-history interviews, drawing attention to the self-conscious use of storytelling which serves as a powerful tool for recruiting new people in an organisation that leads to a higher degree of employee engagement. Sergeeva (2016) explores the ways senior managers in project-based firms socially construct their identities as champions of innovation through stories. She emphasises that storytelling is an important process in constructing self-identities, but there remains to explore other roles it plays. By clarifying the role of storytelling at earlier and later staged of the innovation process, this paper extends the extant innovation studies.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

In consistence with previous interpretive studies on storytelling (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008; Kembaren, Simatupang, & Wiyancoko, 2014), the semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to explore managers’ perspectives on the role of storytelling

in the innovation process. The rationale for the interview method is that it enables interviewees to reflect on their personal and working experiences, life events and share their stories with the interviewer (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 2001). By using semi-structured interviews, the researcher can reach areas of socially constructed reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible, utilising other methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Silverman, 2011). Interviews have been used to understand the ways managers make sense of the role of storytelling at earlier and later stages of the innovation process, and to elicit stories about their experiences in leading and promoting innovation.

Twenty-nine interviews have been conducted with innovation champions from large UK infrastructure, engineering and construction firms. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their self-identity of innovation champions. Eight interviewees were chief executives who are responsible for driving organisational changes and innovations; nine participants held the formal role of “innovation” in the job title (innovation knowledge manager, business improvement manager, R&D manager, innovation manager, head of innovation); twelve participants held other senior functional positions in firms who saw themselves as innovation champions. The interviewees all had in excess of ten years’ professional experience.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The research questions were crafted for semi-structured interviews to understand how managers make sense of the role of storytelling in relation to innovation. Examples of interview questions were formulated as: “To what extent storytelling is important in your role [as an innovation manager]?”, “What is the role of storytelling in relation to innovation?”, “What is the relationship between innovation and storytelling?”, and “How innovation is promoted in organisations?”. These questions intended to encourage the interviewees to talk about the nature and the role of storytelling in relation to innovation with the reference to their roles, activities and social contexts within which they operate. The questions also inspire them to

share stories about their personal experiences of leading and promoting innovation. In case when interviewees reflected on the role of storytelling in relation to the earlier stages of the innovation process (e.g. how to get investments for the proposed innovative ideas), the researcher would also ask about the role of storytelling at the later stages of the innovation process (past innovations, promotion of innovation), and vice versa. This enabled to explore the role of storytelling throughout the innovation process. Interviews lasted around 45-90 minutes with an average interview lasting an hour.

The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed by the first author. The analysis commenced with a detailed reading of the transcripts several times over with a focus on the nature and the role of storytelling in the innovation process. The researcher started with noticing and looking for patterns of meaning and potential interests in the data. The analysis of the interview transcripts involved coding the textual material, identifying one or more passages of text that, in some sense, exemplify the same theoretical idea. The codes cut across interviews and thus represent recurring themes. The identified themes were cross-referenced across the interviews. The analysis involved a continuous moving back and forward between the entire dataset (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The following section presents the interpretation of the interview data.

4 Findings

4.1 Understanding what “storytelling” means in general and in relation to innovation

Many interviewees were seeking to define what “storytelling” means for them in general, before providing their views on the role of storytelling in relation to innovation. This is especially the case for those who do not have innovation in their job titles and hence direct responsibility for leading and promoting innovation. For some interviewees storytelling was seen as a relatively new concept:

“I only came across the concept of storytelling recently. You have to make it relevant. That would probably fit with storytelling example. It is explaining what matters and why what I want to achieve. I worked very heavily explaining why I want something. I will build a logic for a course of action.” (CEO, Road infrastructure client firm)

The senior managers interviewed often defined what “storytelling” means by giving specific examples from their work experiences. Storytelling is here understood as a form of communication - a process of explaining what senior managers want to achieve and why to other organisational members; as a process of sharing experiences through stories. Storytelling can be seen as essentially personalised and contextual in nature:

“Part of my monthly diaries is to go and visit people, visit sites. One had to be able to tell stories. Sometimes, there are stories that lead to success, demonstrable recognition. Sometimes, there are stories that do not go so well. I think it is important to balance the stories because that really makes you a person, a personality. The stories are not always about work. But they provide a context. I think if you can bring the vision and mission to life with context that is important.” (CEO, Temporary transport client firm)

The interviewee was perceived by other managers interviewed as a “good storyteller” and “innovation leader”.

In relation to innovation, storytelling was commonly defined as telling and sharing stories with others about innovative ideas and past successful and unsuccessful innovations. For example, the Head of Innovation from infrastructure client firm defined storytelling as a way of talking about innovative approaches that provides new opportunities in the organisational journey:

“Storytelling can be a powerful tool for people to come up on the journey with a different way of working. Being able to talk about how a different approach enables a different outcome that was more beneficial or unlocks new opportunities to help people on a different journey. But I

also think it helps as a visualisation tool to talk about a challenge and potential solution around that challenge”

Of particular note is that storytelling was seen as a powerful visualisation tool to talk about challenges and potential solutions to these challenges.

All interviewees recognised its importance of storytelling in relation to the innovation process. Many interviewees reflected back on the origins of introducing the word innovation into the vocabulary of their firms. It is evident that CEOs play an important role in creating innovation mind-set within a firm:

“I think innovation was not the word which was in a vocabulary of the organisation. So, it was not something that was used in that quite explicit sense. I think we would retrospectively look at the origins of that that it was seen as quite innovative and an opportunity to do something quite clever. But it is a Chief Executive who arrived with a very sort of innovation-oriented mind-set. We have introduced the word “innovation” into the vocabulary of the organisation.”

(Strategic Projects Director, Temporary transport client firm)

A vocabulary and language are seen important means for constructing the shared understanding of innovation within a firm. Innovation managers interviewed were seeking consistency in understanding innovation by all organisational members. They are responsible for developing innovation strategies in their firms. Many interviewees emphasised the importance of innovation as being embedded in the business strategy and one of the key organisational values:

“We have a strategy of a business which embeds innovation. Our strategy has got a headline that we want to be an engineering enterprise by human capital. People in engineering is what we think makes us different. We have digital engineering (Building Information Modelling). Innovation is in each part of our business strategy” (CEO, Public transport client firm)

Innovation was commonly positioned as one of the core values and part of a business strategy.

Table 1 summarises the themes, description, codes and illustrative quotations for understanding storytelling by the interviewees.

Table 1 Themes, description, codes and illustrative quotations for understanding storytelling

Themes	Description	Codes	Examples of quotations
Understanding storytelling	This theme is about the ways interviewees make sense of storytelling in general	A process, relevance, explaining, meaning, facilitate innovation, success, failure, recognition, interesting, engaging, exciting	<p>“Storytelling plays a huge part in changing people’s behaviours. And we are using different storytelling mechanisms to do it. We have marketing campaigns to change behaviours. We also do quite a lot internally for people to tell stories about their experiences and activities. The other aspect of it is a story about a [name of firm itself.” (CEO, Infrastructure client firm)</p> <p>“Storytelling should be interesting to make people to remember. If it is really interesting and dramatic people will remember. If not, they will remember because they heard it 10 times. So, something that is quite mundane you have got to repeat. But something that is exciting you know people will remember because it was interesting story to listen to” (CEO, International construction engineering firm)</p>
Understanding audiences	This theme is about the ways interviewees pointed towards the importance of audience for storytelling	To whom the story is told, audiences, good storytellers, not good at telling stories, passing experiences, connect with people, interactions, dialogue	<p>“It is all about storytelling, Stories have to be crafted to be able to understand the people. It is about audience and tailoring stories to have the same meaning on innovation” (Strategic Business Manager, Construction contracting firm)</p>
Defining what storytelling means in relation to innovation	This theme is about the interviewees’ views on the role of storytelling in relation to innovation	What innovation means, introducing innovation, language that is aligned, past, present and future, stories about innovation, innovation stories, storytelling in the innovation process, stories of innovation success, visualisation tool, persuading people	<p>“Innovation is hugely over-used and misunderstood term. We started our dialogue by why this is important. It is really taking people on a journey, in a language that is aligned with everyone.” (Head of Innovation, Temporary transport client firm)</p> <p>“In xxx project we really were conditioning people what innovation means. You get data from the past. But the future is how do I think the future should look like.” (Innovation Knowledge Manager, construction engineering contracting firm)</p> <p>“It is lovely to hear some of the stories about innovation. I use story in telling about some of the innovation projects. That happened because I used to meet Andy on the train every Monday morning</p>

			<p>for years I talked to him about the project we have done in Germany with the tunnel. He said you need to come and see me. It is a story that I love telling because it is how I get involved in a process. This is how I get involved in infrastructure industry innovation platform. A lovely story that I was involved in creating Innovate18. I did not know it because the failure of the project with the tunnel led ultimately to the creation of Innovate 18. I did not know before a conversation with Andrew. I love telling those stories.” (Knowledge Transfer Manager, Network firm)</p>
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4.2 The role of storytelling at earlier stages of the innovation process

The managers interviewed further highlighted the role of storytelling in the process of getting approvals from the senior management teams when organisational members seek to obtain funding for development and implementation of their innovative ideas:

“Storytelling is very important and having done this for a couple of years now I have seen probably ten Innovation Forums. I can see that in the end what gets you the funding is storytelling. How you articulate yourself, what the motivations are, the challenges and the benefits. I have seen ideas go to Innovation Forum and people present them in such a way as personal stories - these are the ideas that successfully get funding. In all honesty, sometimes we get ideas which should be really good and should be like an easy win, easy tick, they find it harder because the people presenting it are less skilled in storytelling element. It is not a fair thing but realistic thing. Actually in business a lot of it comes done to people and how you present yourself.” (Alliance Innovation Manager, Temporary water client firm)

The interviewee highlighted the ways organisational members self-present themselves and their innovative ideas when presenting it to the senior management teams, demonstrating their motivations and enthusiasm. She further reinforced that they promote innovation by running communication campaigns, through innovation platforms, forums and company website:

“Last year we run two campaigns around, the first was Dragon Den’s event, we had 4 Dragons. It is the appeal for presenting your idea to CEO, that promotes it in itself. You talk about senior level support. You have got an opportunity to present to CEO your idea of innovation. That means something. We had a lot of ideas in a month after this event. We went to the actual studio of Dragon Den used to be filmed. There is a whole theatrical aspect around it as well which people tend to like. A second campaign we run was called ‘mission possible’. That was all about carbon reduction and sustainability and environmental value. It is a fun. We had again another 30-50 ideas come through just from that campaign supported by the champions.”

The role of storytelling at the earlier stages of the innovation process was also seen critical for those working in contracting firms when tendering for projects funded by client firms. Of particular note is the way a contracting firm articulates the innovative ideas through real examples to win future projects during tendering processes:

“What I would like to do is to engage the client with what is the problem they have got. Let’s tell that client a few stories about some things we have done that are similar to his situation in a quite creative, innovative way. I encourage people to listen what the client is telling in terms of the problem and then try and tell some stories. They facilitate innovation. Storytelling is really important for us. It is also really important around the culture of a company.”

(Managing director, Global engineering firm)

Storytelling was recognised as important process contributing to creating an innovation culture in firms. Table 2 presents the themes, description, codes and illustrative quotations for the role of storytelling at earlier stages of the innovation process.

Table 2 Themes, description, codes and illustrative quotations for the role of storytelling at earlier stages of the innovation process

Themes	Description	Codes	Examples of quotations
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Articulating and presenting innovative ideas	This theme is about the ways organisational members present their ideas for getting approvals, and tell stories about their experiences in leading innovation	Presenting, telling, motivations, challenges, personal stories, skills, convincing, persuading people, getting approval for innovation ideas, innovation proposals	<p>“If I were to go and present a keynote about innovation I would present a journey based on stories. Because what you cannot do is create a route that others can repeat.” (Director of Asset Management, Private client water infrastructure firm)</p> <p>“Part of what I am doing is telling a story about a current and potential future state” (R&D Manager, Construction and maintenance contracting firm)</p>
Motivating people to innovate	This theme is about the ways storytelling is used by the interviewees to motivate organisational members to innovate	Speaking to people, motivating, talking about innovation	<p>“I travel a lot, I go to visit many of our projects, to be honest when I go and speak to people, one of my big mission is to motivate people. Maybe it is not only about talking about innovation, it could be talking about anything, maybe something about personal life, it is giving people a chance to speak about something different to the daily jobs. People in projects work very hard, many hours, they focus on daily tasks, if somebody comes from outside, from central office, most of the time it is about work. It is about going there and motivate people to do a great job.” (Head of Innovation, Digital Engineering and construction client firm)</p>

4.3 The role of storytelling at later stages of the innovation process

Storytelling was further recognised as an essential part at the later stages of the innovation process when promoting happened innovations in organisations. Storytelling was seen as an important means of sharing learning across individuals, projects and organisations; and motivating people to innovate more in the future:

“For us storytelling about what we invested in and what the benefits we have had encourages other people to come forward with their ideas. There is a reward and recognition which may even be a mention, a week blog, or your picture in the staff newspaper because you did an innovation. Those stories get people want to go: How do I get that? For a lot of people this is the case. For some people it is a worst nightmare having your picture on the Newspaper. Generally, for people it is a motivation. And then for wider, stakeholders and public, London

itself, selling them a story that we innovate and improve, not just Tideway but for London, that is a good story as well.” (Alliance Innovation Manager, Temporary water client firm)

The non-monetary rewards and recognitions are seen as the means through which innovation is motivated in the firm. Stories about successful innovations were further perceived as important means for constructing the organisational image. This is clearly demonstrated in the above quotation in the ways a story is promoted in constructing the image of project and city as being innovative. Another example was shared by the innovation manager from the client firm. The firm has been going through the organisational change with a new name, new CEO:

“What we are now doing we are close to launching our innovation Portal that allows to very openly share in key areas. The areas I talked about 2050 vision. It will be using communications, a video story of innovators who work with us. I think that is the mechanism to get a message across. It is so powerful. It is not something we did years ago. Our intention is to go digital with our whole innovation piece. Connect with academics, wider sectors globally.” (Director of Innovation and Continuous Improvement, Private client road firm)

It is evident that storytelling was recognised through launching the innovation portal. The organisational journey shows the ways innovation is intended to be promoted further to different audiences. Table 3 presents the themes, description, codes and illustrative quotations for the role of storytelling at later stages of the innovation process.

Table 3 Themes, description, codes and illustrative quotations for the role of storytelling at later stages of the innovation process

Themes	Description	Codes	Examples of quotations
Promoting innovation	This theme is about the ways innovation become promoted through storytelling	Realising, promoting, Stories to tell, channels, forums, portals, web intranet, value, culture, innovation mind-set, strategy,	“Once we realise that we have a good story to tell we just needed a method of telling a story. That was when we badged innovation on project. We decided with a little bit of investment we could create a web page for innovation that would allow us to share all our learning.” (Asset Manager, Public client rail firm)

		image of organisation	<p>“The public is expected to hear story about innovation, to offer opportunities for people to be involved in that.” (Alliance Innovation Manager, Temporary water client firm)</p> <p>“You need to use all the channels to promote you could think of. I spend or I give a lot of my time, it could be internal talks, it could be external talks as well. Then we have all the intranet. For example, we have online channel about innovation; we have innovation platform. We have campaigns, videos. Every time we try to think of something.” (Head of Innovation, Digital Engineering and construction client firm)</p>
Stories about innovation success and failure	This theme is about the interviewees’ perspectives on innovation successes and failures	Innovation process in projects, success and failure, learning, lessons learned, a journey based on stories	<p>“We want to capture failures as well as successful projects. We have some good stories where people, for example, a couple of guys invested a system to do different things, we kept them through the journey. It has been tested in major projects. It is good to learn from them.” (Director of Innovation and Continuous Improvement, Private client road owner and operator)</p> <p>“Success stories is something I was eluding before around if we can talk about where we have been really successful. That helps people to see that we have been innovative and it worked. I think stories of failure are equally important because you can say look: Look, we thought that was the right approach. We followed a process, but we were not sure and we decided to take a chance on it.” (Head of Innovation, infrastructure client firm)</p>
Constructing image of an organisation	This theme is about the role of storytelling in constructing an image of an organisation as being or becoming innovative	Managing innovation, strategy, commitment, innovation process, organisational journey, story about a firm itself	<p><i>“I think the way we are managing an innovation and strategy and the approach is very different than other projects done in this industry. We are in the process, and the supply chain coming on board, so there is a time required for them to absorb all this information and start to feel that this is part of their day job. When we reinforced why this is really important, they started to give us some ideas but maybe not particular great quality. Now we are seeing improvement in quantity and quality and start to get that sort of engagement. For where we are in the life cycle of a programme I am reasonably confident, there is always more work to do, and I never be satisfied that we have the culture and the environment right because you never will.”</i> (Head of Innovation, Temporary transport client firm)</p>

5 Discussion

The empirical findings demonstrate that all interviewees agreed about the importance of storytelling in their work experiences. Whilst for some interviewees storytelling is a relatively new concept, for the majority it is a communicative activity of talking and sharing experiences

that they use in their day-to-day work. Storytelling is seen as engaging, personalised and contextual in nature. We build upon the organisation studies on the role of storytelling in organisational life (Boje, 1991, 2001; Gabriel, 1995, 2000, 2004). We found that storytelling plays a crucial role in the innovation process as agreed by all the interviewees. For example, storytelling was seen as a powerful visualisation tool to talk about challenges and potential innovative solutions to the challenges. Storytelling was also seen to play a vital role in the innovation process as a valuable enabler for introducing change. From the empirical investigation, we conclude that storytelling can act as:

- A communicative exercise of articulating and presenting innovative ideas;
- A way of telling and sharing experiences;
- A way of achieving shared understanding of innovation;
- A motivation for organisational members to innovate;
- A persuasion for getting approval for innovative ideas;
- A promotion of innovation to different audiences;
- A way of constructing image and identity at different levels;
- A learning mechanism for organisational and individual memory;
- An emotional “charge” to help energise discussions;
- A way of exploring future vision and strategy.

Whilst there is an increasing interest among academics in the role of storytelling in the innovation process (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Beckman & Barry, 2009; Garud & Turunen, 2018; Snyder et al., 2017), there is little consistency in terms of theoretical position. The extant innovation studies are largely silent about the role of storytelling at different stages of the innovation process. We found that the role of storytelling differs throughout the innovation process. In particular, we demonstrated that at the earlier stages of the innovation process, the role of storytelling lies in articulating and presenting innovative ideas, and motivating people

to innovate. Storytelling plays an important role for organisational members who articulate innovative ideas and for those responsible for leading and promoting innovation, e.g. innovation managers and others in senior positions. For innovators, the role of storytelling is critical in self-presenting themselves and their innovative ideas in order to get approval from senior management team and/or receive funding from investors. The interviewees emphasised that those who are good at storytelling, by presenting their ideas as a stories of personal experiences and life situations, are more likely to get interest and support from others. This is consistent with the innovation studies by Denning (2008) and Sarpong and Maclean (2012). For those who are leading and promoting innovation, e.g. innovation managers and champions, the role of storytelling is important in achieving shared understanding among organisational members, motivating others to innovate and sharing experiences with others. This contributes to the emergent innovation studies on the ways innovation champions use storytelling in their work practices (Sergeeva, 2016). At later stages of the innovation process, the role of storytelling lies in promoting innovation through different communication channels by innovation managers and champions, learning from and sharing success stories, and also learning from stories of innovation failures. The empirical evidence showed that temporary organisations (megaprojects) are proactive in arranging innovation forums, portals and communication campaigns where everyone has an opportunity to present innovative ideas and get support from others.

According to the managers interviewed, the label “innovation” was commonly introduced into a vocabulary of firms with the arrival of new CEOs (they tend to frequently change in temporary project organisations and permanent project-oriented firms). The role of innovation managers is to reinforce and often repeat the message about the need for innovation and continuous improvement, both internally within their firms and externally with the suppliers and other external stakeholders. According to managers interviewed, by retelling

stories and reinforcing the message about innovation, organisational members better understand an innovation and engage in the process. This is consistent with the recent work by Dailey and Browning (2014) and Vaara et al. (2016) who emphasise the process of retelling stories in organisational change. Yet, the innovation studies are largely silent about the repetition and retelling stories and narratives of innovation in organisations.

We found that stories enable knowledge and learning transformation from the past experiences to inform current and future innovation practices. This confirms the extant studies into innovation and knowledge management by Easterby-Smith, Crossan, and Nicolini (2000), Garud (2013) and Strambach and Klement (2012). Stories about past successful and unsuccessful innovations facilitate a learning process between organisations, projects and social networks. The particular contribution of this paper lies in recognition that storytelling plays an important role in constructing identities and images of organisations, projects and individuals (Alvesson et al., 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). We found that it is through personal stories that organisational members self-present themselves and/or are recognised by others as innovation champions and leaders. It is through storytelling that organisations construct their internal identities and external images as “innovative”. The innovation studies are largely silent about the important implications of storytelling in constructing identities and images (Sergeeva, 2016). By discussing the ways identities and images are constructed through stories of innovation, the paper moves the innovation scholarship work further. Figure 1 presents an empirically derived model of the role of storytelling in innovation process.

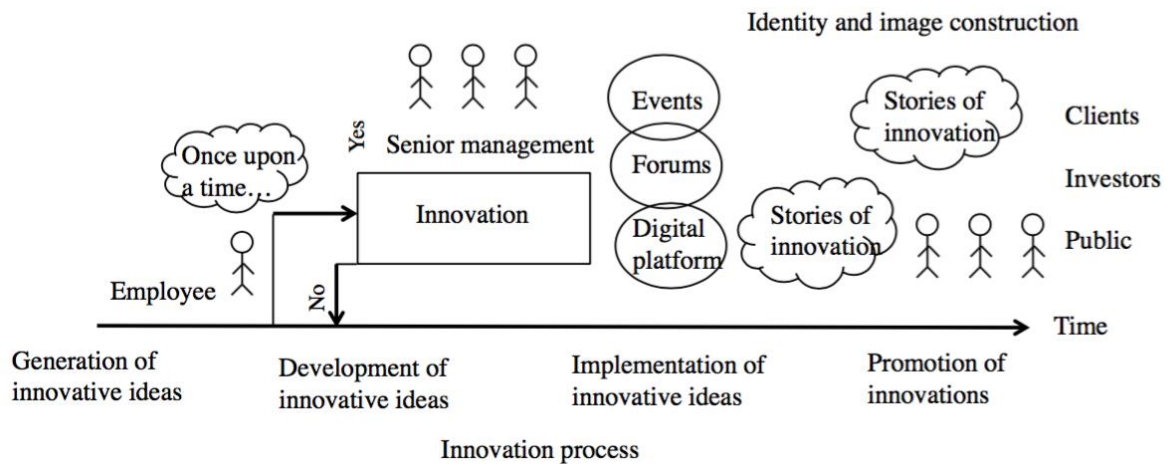


Figure 1 The role of storytelling in innovation process.

The conceptual model demonstrates the ways organisational members who come up with new ideas and present them to senior management team during innovation events, forums and/or other digital platforms. Storytelling that reflects personal experiences and justifies the value of innovative ideas is essential at the earlier and later stages of the innovation process.

Innovation managers and champions facilitate innovative ideas, motivate organisational members and promote most valuable innovations to wider audiences. The process reflects the identity and image construction of organisations in their journey of becoming “innovative”.

6 Conclusions

Storytelling plays a crucial role in the innovation process, from the initiation of innovative ideas through to their implementation and promotion of past and present innovations widely. At earlier stages of the innovation process, storytelling is key for getting approvals for innovative ideas, capturing attention and interest from others and future refining and developing them. At later stages of the process, storytelling is a way of promoting innovation to wider audiences through different mechanisms, and stimulating future innovations. How well the story is told, the content of the story itself, shaping and promoting it to resonate with the target audience are all central to the process of building momentum. Storytelling has

important implications for collaboration between people and organisations, sharing experiences, and learning processes. It also has important implications for constructing organisation, project and individual identities and images.

This research offers some future research directions. Further research may involve other methodological approaches such as studying innovation events in greater details, e.g. innovation campaigns, Dragon's Den, innovation forums. This will enable to better understand the role of storytelling based on the innovation events organised by firms. Further research is needed to explore different storytelling mechanisms and supporting frameworks, including innovation portals and platforms. Another research direction is to explore the relationship between storytelling and individual and organisational commitment in the innovation process. The interplay between storytelling and narration in the innovation process also merit further attention.

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