“We Must be More Productive” :
Global discourse, local strategies

Professor Sally Davenport
Victoria Management School,
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
sally.davenport@vuw.ac.nz

Dr Michelle Renton
Victoria Management School
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
michelle.renton@vuw.ac.nz

Dr Jane Bryson
Victoria Management School
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
jane.bryson@vuw.ac.nz

Dr Urs Daellenbach
Victoria Management School
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
Urs.daellenbach@vuw.ac.nz

Professor Shirley Leitch
Deputy Vice Chancellor, Academic
Swinburne University, Melbourne, Australia
sleitch@groupwise.swin.edu.au

Professor Judy Motion
School of English, Media and Performing Arts
University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
j.motion@unsw.edu.au

Simon Scott
Victoria Management School
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
Simon.scott@vuw.ac.nz
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Abstract
By analysing a selection of productivity reports from four different countries (New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada) over a ten year period (2000-2009), we map the discursive representations of the concept “productivity” in order to gain insights into local strategies and global similarities in approaches to generating productive change. Using Leximancer we analysed five matched reports for each country, and argue that the reports contain a range of subtle and not-so-subtle nuances in the productivity discussions of each country. Despite this wide variation in local themes, we propose that the rhetorical strategies employed are evidence of significant mimetic isomorphism, driven by the uncertainty surrounding the notion of productivity.

Keywords:
globalisation, change, discourse, productivity, isomorphism, leximancer

The sad reality, however, is that Canada, even after all this effort, is slipping badly on the productivity front…. In 2003 and 2004 growth per output in the business sector in Canada was essentially zero. In the US the growth has been 3.5 per cent a year since 2000. We are 2.5 percentage points behind the U.S. and we are ranked 17th among the top 30 industrial nations. (Atkins, 2006: 1)

Productivity means many things to many people - and therein lies the challenge for useful exploration of the topic: is it one concept or several? Or is it one multi faceted concept? Or is the construction of the concept evolving? (Bryson et al., 2008: 1)

Nations all around the world are concerned with the levels of productivity in their economy and the challenge of poor productivity to their international status, despite the fact that serious issues relating to conceptualising, let alone measuring, productivity were identified decades ago (eg. Griliches and Mairesse, 1983; Berndt and Fuss, 1986 and references therein). In particular, there is apparent confusion over the levels of analysis and nomenclature (eg. Pritchard et al., 1988) with productivity units at: national; sector; enterprise; workgroup; or individual levels.

This paper will explore variations and distinctive features of the way in which productivity is discussed around the world, looking at measurement and unit of analysis uncertainties, as well as semantic instabilities in the productivity discourse. By analysing a selection of productivity reports from four different countries (New Zealand (NZ), Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and Canada)
over a ten year period (2000-2009), we map the discursive representations of the concept “productivity” in order to gain insights into local meanings and global discourses in approaches to generating productive change. The paper will explore the similarities which occur despite the different political and cultural contexts and the uncertainty surrounding the very notion of productivity, and posit some potential reasons for the isomorphism apparent in the reports.

LITERATURE

Isomorphism

As organizations struggle to attain legitimacy they tend act in ways that make them appear similar to other organizations that have already achieved legitimacy in their field. In a seminal work in neo-institutional theory, Di Maggio and Powell (1983) argue that organizations become increasingly similar over time as they respond to pressures from stakeholders in the organizational competition for political and institutional legitimacy.

Di Maggio and Powell (1983) described three isomorphic mechanisms: coercive, normative and mimetic. Coercive isomorphism “results from both “formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organizations function” (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983: 150). Normative isomorphism “stems primarily from professionalization”, by which Di Maggio and Powell mean “the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work… to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy” (1983: 152). Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations model themselves on other organizations because of uncertainty in the environment, as “uncertainty is a powerful force that encourages imitation” (Di Maggio and Powell, 2003: 151). Thus, “mimetic isomorphism provides legitimacy and happens when managers face ambiguous situations with unclear solutions” (Barreto and Baden-Fuller, 2006: 1561).

Davenport and Leitch (2009) argue that homogeneity in organizational discourses can be a consequence of isomorphic pressures. Creating legitimacy often involves the assertion of one
discourse over another (Sutherland, 2005) with the result that a new “common sense” emerges (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Mimetic discourse can thus enable the author to appear “more rational and prudent to the social system” (Deephouse and Carter, 2005). We propose that the subject of this paper, the (inter-) national discourses on productivity, are striving for a seemingly “common sense” status that provides inherent legitimacy to the concept and authors, yet this universalised discourse is by no means homogenous when it is analysed in detail.

Productivity and its Measurement

At the simplest level, productivity can be defined as the efficiency with which volumes of measured inputs are converted into volumes of measured outputs (Janssen and McLoughlin, 2008). Two measurements of productivity are commonly used, labour productivity and multi factor productivity. Labour productivity (LP) is a measure of outputs produced by a volume amount of labour input, while multi factor (MFP) or total factor (TFP) productivity measures output not attributable to physical capital, labour, materials or other inputs and may include growth in output derived from more efficient use of existing resources. MFP is measured as a residual, and as such, is prone to input evaluation errors.

Productivity can be assessed using economy wide measures, it can be measured at an industry, organisational or individual worker level, and as a result is both a complex and ambiguous concept. Productivity is however, the focus of governments, economists, business owners, managers and individual workers alike to connote the economic measurement of outputs. Productivity may, though, be more broadly conceptualised within different national discourses and it is this that we wish to explore.

Discourse Analysis

The study of discourse is here understood to mean the analysis of interrelated sets of texts that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972: 49). The concept of “intertextuality” (Bakhtin, 1986; Kristeva, 1986) refers to the relations that exist between texts.
Textual analysis involves an examination of related links in the intertextual chain in order to understand how a particular text reproduces and/or transforms meaning. Intertextual analysis can, therefore, contribute to our understanding of the processes by which change occurs. In this study we analyse the intertextual chain that links reports intended to drive significant productivity growth from four different countries, New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada, with the central focus being on the ways in which the word “productivity” and other words such as “growth” are used within a set of interrelated text. We examine the role that this word usage plays in facilitating a coherent presentation of a productivity message.

**Leximancer**

We used Leximancer to undertake a key word and thematic analysis of the productivity reports. Leximancer is a software tool which extracts, counts and relates common concepts from multiple texts (Cummings and Dallaenbach, 2009) identifying themes and thematically analysing the words used in the texts. The programme generates concept maps, graphical representations which may be compared to show how the discourse on productivity varies between different contexts (the four nations), giving an insight into the impacts of the local meanings of productivity and productive growth.

**RESEARCH APPROACH**

Based on our interest in differences and similarities in productivity discourse, our research centred on three questions: 1) What were the definitions of productivity and productivity growth used, and how did they differ between Australia, the UK Canada and NZ in the period 1998-2009? 2) What was the nature (as indicated by keywords) of the discourse surrounding productivity and what similarities and differences existed between the four countries? 3) What are the discursive strategies utilised in support of the productivity growth?

**Report selection**

An initial online search for reports resulted in a pool of over 220 reports from the four countries. From this pool, twenty matched reports with 5 from each country were selected along 5 dimensions: 1)
Early in the period (1998-2003); 2) Late in the period (2007-2009); 3) A representative report from a government department; 4) A representative report from a lobby or industry group; and 5) A report with a labour or wages focus. Table 1 gives the titles and dates of the twenty reports along with the labels used to attribute excerpts in this paper which accord with the 5 categories given above.

ANALYSIS

Local Strategies

Definitions
The definitions of productivity used in the reports vary greatly in terms of their specificity. At one extreme, productivity is defined using a mathematical formula, while at the other extreme several reports use vague conceptions of productivity. Most employ a non-technical description aligning productivity with production, living standards or efficiency and expressing it as an output/input ratio.

Of the twenty reports, fifteen defined labour productivity (LP) and eleven defined total- (TFP) or multi-factor productivity (MFP). Despite the fact that many of the reports identify MFP as a better measure of productivity, most focus on LP because it is easier to measure. Our analysis of the reports confirms that uncertainties in defining and measuring productivity persist, although this has not hampered the promotion of productivity as part of the economic discourse in many nations.

Productivity Concept Relevance
Using Leximancer, keywords, or “concepts”, were collated for each of the reports, according to frequency of use. The analysis showed that while “productivity” was a common concept in all four countries, and “growth” a concept closely related to productivity in each, the themes relating to productivity growth differed between each of the countries. Whilst concepts such as change, economy, industry, market and output appear at similar frequency levels across all of the four countries, there were significant variations for other themes such as labour, firm and policy. Figure 1, presents the frequency of concepts (relative to productivity which is 1.0) in such as way as to illustrate the key emphases for each country.
Growth is a strong concept for all of the countries but is particularly dominant in the Canadian reports, followed by Australia, NZ, and the UK. For Canada, productivity is strongly related to labour (as a grouping of employees) and also to wages (+salaries). The wages concept occurs at very low levels in the other 3 countries concept lists, despite being one of the criteria for selection. In contrast, the UK and NZ reports place an emphasis on skills upon which the Canadian reports are silent.

The next most obvious area of difference is around the place of firms (businesses, companies etc) in the documents. The firm grouping is a more prominent concept in the NZ reports relative to labour, and is also important for the UK, but is not so strongly evident in the Australian and Canadian reports. The role of capital appears to be of similar relevance for all countries. In contrast, the role of government policies in the NZ data is very low but given higher prominence in the UK, Canada and Australia. The innovation and performance concepts are emphasised in the NZ, UK and to a lesser extent Australian reports, but are absent from the Canadian data.

The concept frequency data highlight that differences exist, but they do little to shed light on why. This is where Leximancer’s concept mapping can add evidence for the nature of linkages between productivity concepts in each country.

Productivity Concept Maps

The Leximancer concept maps group related concepts into themes which are represented as circles. Size, centrality and colour in the maps indicate importance, and proximity of themes indicates how closely these keywords/themes are inter-connected. The country-specific differences noted above are still evident in the maps, but the relationships add a layer of complexity to our understanding of how each country approaches productivity discussions. Whilst many themes are the same across countries, there is greater variation between countries in the concepts/keywords that occur within themes, the relationships they have with other themes and in their centrality on the map. The discussion below will focus on the concepts of productivity, growth and government.
Starting with the productivity theme, it is very central in the Canada map (figure 5) suggesting it is closely linked to all the other themes, fairly central in the NZ map (figure 2) but more peripheral in the Australian (figure 3) and UK (figure 4) maps. The overlap between productivity and the central “capital” theme in the UK map suggests that the interest is in total- or multi-factor productivity. In the NZ map, productivity is populated by concepts of market and economy and is closely related to economic performance as well as growth.

Despite the fact that growth was such a frequently noted concept for most countries, the NZ map is the only one in which growth is raised to a theme. The NZ growth theme is built upon labour, capital and output concepts but is distant from the themes of business and firms, suggesting that the discussions of growth are not aimed at the business sector. However, given the absence of government related concepts in the NZ map, it is not clear what or who is responsible for the “growing.”

In the other maps, growth remains at a concept level usually as part of the productivity theme but, in each map, it is connected to quite different concepts. In the Australian map, growth is connected to rate and labour while in the UK it is connected to economy. In the Canadian map, growth is subsumed under the labour theme and connected to productivity concepts such as level and sector - it is however, more strongly connected with concepts such as goods and labour located (just) out of the productivity theme. When this is factored alongside the separate and central “wages” theme, the map reinforces the distinctive emphasis in Canada on labour and wages to productivity growth.

Another distinctive feature of the maps is the placement and relationships of “government”. In both the Canadian and UK maps, “government” is fairly central and is elevated to theme level, suggesting the importance of policies in driving firm competitiveness (Canada) and in shifting focus away from a centralised approach to productivity and towards regional initiatives (UK). In both the Australian and NZ maps, the government concept is positioned in the work theme suggesting in NZ that the government’s role has an employment orientation, while in the Australian case it appears that government’s role is to drive change, particularly within the workplace.
In summary then, the analysis of concepts in the twenty reports indicate that there are nuanced variations to the productivity discussions in each country, reflecting the differing political and cultural contexts within which the reports have been written. Having said that, there are several discourse strategies which are consistent across the countries, which we now discuss.

DISCUSSION

Global Discourse

The consistent elements across the four countries were centred on the discursive devices used to present the topics and data in the reports, and how they were harnessed for persuasive purposes. Four different rhetorical strategies surfaced which we call: aspirational; fear of failure; national threat; and exhortation to action. These are the global discourses as, despite the nuances that surfaced in the concept analysis, they are common across all of the reports. It appears the role of the productivity reports include using elements of shock and persuasion to invoke action on productivity related issues.

Aspirational

In the first discourse strategy, that of aspiration, almost all of the reports contain productivity-related goals to which the nation must aspire, be it in terms of OECD ranking or a raise in standard of living levels (not often given in explicit detail). Examples include:

*Productivity growth is important to Australia because, through income growth, it contributes to our community wellbeing.* (Aus3)

*The challenge for the future is to build on where our workplaces are performing well, while also achieving improvements that move New Zealand to a sustainable, high value, high skill and high wage economy. To achieve this will require engaging New Zealanders and lifting national awareness about what improved productivity can contribute to our lives.* (NZ5)

Of particular note in the aspirational rhetoric is the role of comparisons with other countries in emphasising the goals to be achieved. Productivity growth rates above that of the local economy are usually cited so that such comparisons are overwhelmingly negative, portraying the home nation as “behind” with the aspiration being to “narrow the gap”. We specifically looked for examples of inter-country comparisons in all of the reports and found nineteen examples over eleven of the twenty
reports (Table 2). Whilst the subject of the comparisons varied, comparisons were generally unfavourable to the host nation with only five painting the host country in a favourable light.

**Fear of Failure**

Coupled with these negative comparisons between productivity levels across different countries, a common rhetorical strategy used was to invoke fear around the consequences of a nation not achieving the productivity levels to which it aspired. The discourse tended to employ emotional terms such as “disappointing”, “poor”, “deteriorated”, “in danger of”, “decline” and even “dismal”

> From an international perspective, Canada's productivity growth performance in recent years has been disappointing. Over the 1989-96 period, output per person employed rose only 4.3 per cent, the smallest increase of the 13 industrial countries for which the US Bureau of Labor Statistics produces data. Canada's poor performance has meant that our relative productivity level has deteriorated, dropping from 82.2 per cent of output per person employed in the United States in 1989 to 80.5 per cent in 1996, although our level is still in the mid-range for industrial countries. OECD productivity statistics paint even a more dismal picture of Canada's business sector productivity performance over the 1979-96 period. Of 22 OECD countries, Canada was 19th in terms of labour productivity, and 21st in terms of capital and total factor productivity growth. (Can1, emphases added)

The negativity associated with the productivity reports is also evident in some of the report titles. “Challenge” is a key word used in association with productivity concerns and is coupled with the evocative word “fading” in “Fading Productivity: Making Sense of Canada’s Productivity Challenge” (Can4). Productivity is associated with challenges to be overcome.

**National Threat**

The fear invoked by a nation seemingly being “behind” others is sometimes manifested as direct threat, again to (ambiguous) concepts such as living standards and well-being.

> Canada’s weak productivity performance is especially troubling. If the country does not improve on its poor performance since 2000, Canadians are likely to see their economic well-being decline relative to other major industrial countries. (Can3).

Reflecting the conceptual themes from the earlier analysis, excerpts below illustrate a Canadian threat to real wages, while in the UK, the threat relates to the private sector’s ability to innovate and thereby increase productivity:
It is worrying, therefore, that real median earnings failed to increase from 1980 to 2005, while labour productivity grew 37.4 per cent. If most Canadians are not seeing the benefits of labour productivity growth in the form of higher real wages, why should they support policies favouring productivity growth? (Can5)

Innovation without entrepreneurial people to take ideas forward and to exploit their business potential will not contribute to productivity or output. Similarly, enterprises without innovation run the risk of performing more poorly than other businesses and ultimately failing. (UK5)

Exhortation to Action

The aspirational and threatening rhetorical strategies set the scene for calls to action. Who is being exhorted to act is sometimes very vague, at other times all encompassing. Often the expectations are that the action embodies new government policies while in other cases, it is the private sector that is deemed to be a priority for mobilisation. The calls are very normative in nature (actions “must” happen or are “essential” or “fundamental”) and evocative words such as “urgency”, “focused” and “critical” are used to highlight the importance of the “effort” needed.

There is no silver bullet. Building sustainable economic growth and lifting living standards demand a focused effort and strategic approaches across industry, firms and government.... Improving productivity is not primarily about working harder and harder but about working smarter. It sounds straightforward but there is no one answer to achieving it. (NZ5)

The productivity challenge does not fall solely to the Government. All participants in the economy – businesses, employees, investors and others – have an important role to play in raising aggregate economic growth. (UK1)

These calls for action carry with them very strong nationalistic elements, and effectively the economy becomes the metaphor for the nation, as a healthy productive national economy implies on-going well-being for its organizations and communities. It becomes “obvious”, or common sense, that the enemy of the nation is poor productivity. This approach to productivity is reminiscent of other “nation-building” discourses, organized around prioritizing the nation state (Sutherland, 2005).

Whilst it is not likely that the authors of the various reports purposefully evoked this metaphor, it is interesting that, despite the lack of a common approach to measuring productivity and also the distinctive local meanings as surfaced by the concept analysis, the four mantras were common to the
majority of the reports. This apparent isomorphism appears to be accepted and it is interesting to question the reasons behind the seeming uniformity in discourse strategies.

The similarities are unlikely to be a form of coercive isomorphism in that there are no apparent direct pressures from stakeholders to copy the rhetoric of other nations. It is possible that we may be observing some elements of normative isomorphism in that there may be tendencies for economists and policy makers worldwide to conform to “standard” ways of treating the subject of productivity as proscribed by organizations such as the OECD. Thus, economists in public and private sector organizations conform to the cognitive norms of their profession, resulting in the international diffusion of productivity rituals and rhetoric. By doing so, the authors of the reports may be attempting to establish or confirm their own legitimacy by imitating the major elements and themes of the globalised productivity discourse. We would suggest it is likely that most of the convergence is a form of mimetic isomorphism. This is particularly evident in the tendency in all of our countries, and many others as well to compare their productivity performance, usually negatively, to that of other economies to which they aspire. Mimetic isomorphism is probably more likely because of the uncertainty around what constitutes productivity and the varying definitions that abound, as well as contextual and cultural influences that are not well understood. Organizations (and we would suggest report authors) tend to model themselves after others “when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty” (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983: 51). Mimetic isomorphism is thus a logical strategy employed to reduce uncertainty (Villadsen et al., 2010) with the result that explicit acknowledgement of local contextual variables is suppressed even though these can be unique to the locale as suggested by our concept analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of the productivity literature (Bryson et al., 2008) and how it is defined in reports from four countries has shown that considerable semantic instability and ambiguity exists around the very meaning of productivity and how to measure it, despite the fact that it has become such a ubiquitous concept. It has become “common sense” discursively yet there is no common understanding.
Our thematic and keyword analysis of the reports has shown that local contextual factors have considerable influence on what is considered important in discussions of productivity. It is likely that such variation is wide-spread, not just in our four sample countries, which makes a mockery of “one-size-fits-all” best practice approaches to productivity solutions. It also should alert those interested in enhancing productivity to be cynical of inter-national comparisons as the aspirations are not likely to be realistic. A contingency approach to local productivity issues is probably more appropriate so that effort should be focused on tailoring measures to local conditions that may then be more sustainable in the long-term.

Despite the wide variation in local themes, significant mimetic isomorphism, is evident in the discourse strategies employed by the report authors. We propose that this tendency to imitate is probably driven by the uncertainty surrounding the productivity notion. In many of the reports the economy is effectively conflated with the country and the discourse strategies invoke strong nationalistic overtones. We have not specifically analysed the remedies employed in the nations to grow productivity to contrast this with those espoused in the documents, but it is likely that we would uncover a tension between the globalised prescriptions and the local contexts. While it has been interesting to identify the local meanings and global discourses in the productivity reports, there is certain irony and futility in the isomorphism generated which should make those interested in productivity wary. First, the results raise a question about whether any nation thinks they are addressing the supposed “productivity challenge” correctly. Second, given the merry-go-round of comparisons, if every country is trying to raise national productivity to levels higher than that observed in other countries, it becomes a never ending and potentially futile quest. If most countries are extolling working harder or working smarter as the path to improved productivity, but no nation is happy with their levels of productivity, it begs the question as to whether the issue is really one of productivity, however defined, or is more about acknowledging the diversity of potential approaches to building a sustainable economies and societies.
REFERENCES


Figure 1: Differing emphases in productivity reports; cross country analysis.
Figure 2: Leximancer Concept Map for New Zealand

Figure 3: Leximancer concept map for Australia
Figure 4: Leximancer concept map for the UK.

Figure 5: Leximancer concept map for Canada.
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*Table 2: Productivity Comparisons Between Countries.*