

Abstract for the Workshop “Expectation-building and innovation processes”,
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Expectation in innovation – Interdependencies, synergies and contradictions in technical innovation processes.

Based on new unpublished results of our current project “Smart Innovation (SIIn)” we present the role of expectations in innovation processes and the mechanisms of their emergence. Our empirical research includes sixty qualitative interviews in five market-leading machinery manufacturers. Taking a retrospective point of view we reconstruct the entire Product-Life-Cycle following product innovation step by step, starting with the R&D department, up to production, service and including customers. Our study focuses the concrete level of every day work and in particular actors involved in innovation processes. Participants in the observed innovation processes rarely address the subject “expectation”. One reason is that so-called end-consumers and therefore global or societal expectations are usually limited to an under part in high-tech, business-to-business fields, such as the machinery manufacturing branch. However, we will illustrate that expectations do play an important role for technical innovations as pointed out here.

Product innovation takes place in complex collaboration networks and is infused with life and ideas by diverse actors. Therefore innovation in companies is not directed by a collective or precedent expectation shared by all involved parties. Depending on the phase and position in the Product-Life-Cycle (PLC) the setting for expectation building differs considerably: apart from different stages of technical development, players and corresponding collaborators vary as much as the ongoing story accompanying the progressing innovation. All these gradual and sometimes abrupt modifications form conditions for expectation building processes.

Expectations in turn are also effective as precondition for technical innovations. The work of design engineers for instance is broadly considered market oriented or more precisely: driven to fulfil customer expectations. Yet, this is a lopsided and restrictive standpoint, since the integration of market expectations in innovation processes again requires an amplified perspective. The same, “single” customer includes a multitude of and often conflicting expectations that have to be sensed and simultaneously embedded into the innovation work. To explicit customer expectations mechanisms such as specifications are applied in order to create transparency. Further approaches to formalize and standardize expectations such as innovation management tools support actors in the innovation process by allocating responsibilities and making apparent who is when taking care of what. To be effective these strategies of standardization need to be open for implicit expectations that are unlikely to be formalized, but often guide innovations actors in their every day work.

Finally the generation of expectations is, from an industrial sociological point of view, generally linked to interests that are connected to the actor's position and role within market and innovation structures. On every work station actors pursue interests originating from their own perspective, not necessarily regarding expectations from other sides of the innovation network. We will further examine in our article how it is actually crucial in certain innovation phases, not to meet others' expectations to guarantee an overall innovation success. In other words: the ability of innovation workers to block external expectations and to concentrate on their specific interests and work, in fact leads to a successful implementation of innovation.

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