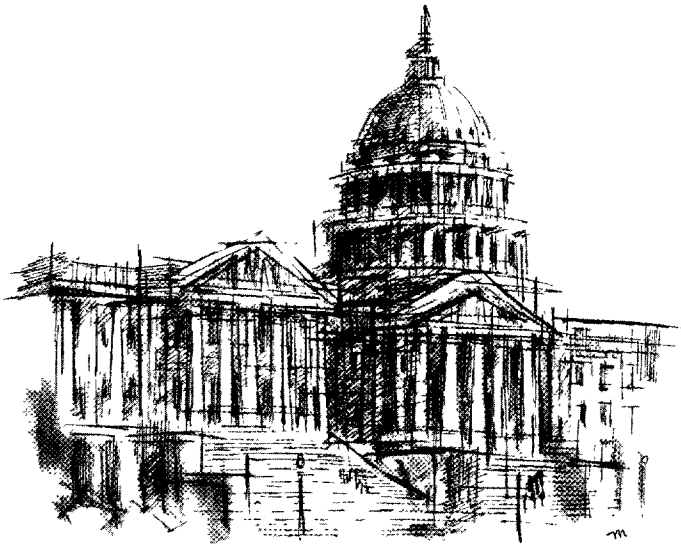


Graham T. T. Molitor

*Director of Government Relations
General Mills, Inc.*

how to anticipate public-policy changes

The best that any organization can expect to do in dealing with ever-increasing federal regulation and the fast-changing socio-political environment is muddle through, right? "Wrong!" says the author. Such an approach is too costly and too dangerous. Besides, he says, it is possible for a company, through an understanding of public-policy genesis and development, to anticipate what public-policy changes will occur and accommodate them with a minimum of stress and costs. Forecasting with a very high degree of accuracy specific public-policy developments covering ten years ahead is possible, in the author's opinion, simply because such developments don't come as a bolt out of the blue. Generally, a period of ten years elapses before substantial interest in an issue develops, prompting action to be taken. In his article, the author identifies some key factors for tracking and measuring the evolution of public-policy changes.



Today, important changes are taking place in what people and, more important, the government expect of business. Hindsight confessions from an organization about its failure to perceive the new requirements imposed on it are no excuse and will carry little weight. That's why the skill to anticipate and adapt to social and political change is becoming increasingly critical to businesses.

In a world of uncertainties, where change is the one thing we can count on, businesses need the ability to anticipate and adapt successfully to change in both matters of public policy and their own market pursuits. Through marketing and sales forecasts, organizations can obtain the information they need to understand trends and deal with the rapid and often illogical ups and downs of the marketplace. Through a better understanding of public-policy genesis and development, organizations should be able to foresee public-policy changes and be responsive to them. Such an approach enables change—that is the key concept, *change*—to be accommodated with minimal disruption.

Public-policy anticipation affords an organization the opportunity to minimize, if not avoid, the sometimes protracted and always costly defense of the indefensible. Merely muddling through—"benevolent neglect" as some have described it—is too erratic, too costly, and even too dangerous a course for dealing with "sudden" attitudinal changes on the part of government or "sudden" changes in the priorities of society at large.

Public-policy prediction model

After several years of experimenting with techniques for tracking and predicting probable implementation dates for public-policy issues, a number of approaches have been developed. So far, well over one hundred specific quantitative techniques have been identified and are being refined. An understanding of the basic concepts can lead to a better understanding of how change imposed by public policy can be anticipated.

The basic approach focuses worldwide, concentrating on the era of industrialization starting from the mid-1800s. Based on an examination of thousands of issues with wide currency during this period, it appears possible to predict the emergence and probable implementation date of most new public laws, for any country, at any point in history.

Anticipating specific public-policy developments looking ten years ahead is possible with a very high degree of accuracy. General predictions can be made as far as 60 or 70 years ahead; however, such long-range predictions are less accurate and mainly of academic interest.

Such predictions are possible simply because public-policy determinations don't come as a bolt out of the blue. New public policy isn't made overnight. New laws proceed through an evolutionary process. Their actual appearance is preceded by long shadows—long trains of activity. At bottom are certain structural forces that gain momentum over time and give rise to what I term “issue environments.” Some of these underlying forces may span as much as one hundred years or longer.

Combinations of these structural undercurrents come together as an issue progresses. This convergence of forces raises such “noise” or dissonance within the social system that demands for political response will soon follow.

There hasn't been a new federal law enacted in recent times that didn't require less than six to ten years to proceed from initial discussion to enactment. Generally, a period of some ten years elapses before sufficient interest and pressure develop behind an issue to force government to take action. To be sure, there are many false starts. But that ten-year period, during which the issue often undergoes a tortuous course of adversary confrontation, provides a substantial period of time for discussion and debate before the cry for a public-policy change is forged into new law or regulation.

The process of change

In the accompanying figures, key factors in tracking and measuring the evolution of public-policy changes are shown. They illustrate that the process of change invariably starts with aberrant and unique events that, when aggregated, reveal meaningful patterns. Authorities in the scientific, technical, and professional fields undertake to comment on and analyze such phenomena. Shortly thereafter, the observations of leading authorities are reduced to the written word and begin appearing in leading publications.

These writings lead to widespread dissemination of the ideas, increase interest in them, and give rise to various kinds of organizations that institutionalize the cause and provide a sustained base for advocating change. Politicians, who try to reflect the popular will, pick up on such trends. Finally, governmental bodies on national and international levels take action in response to the cry for legislation.

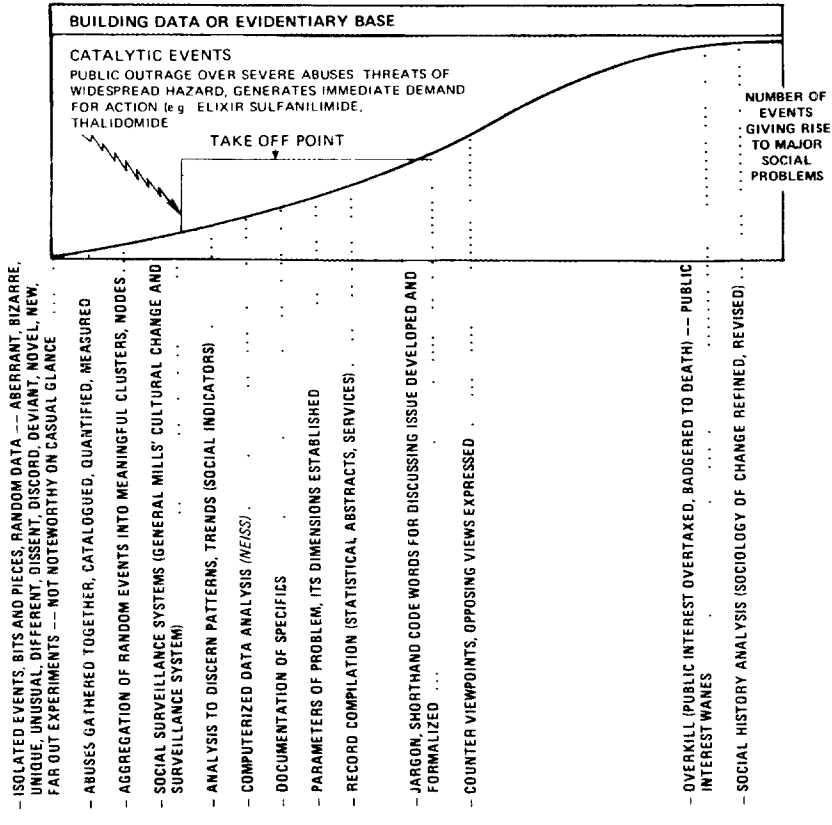
Each of the steps along the way, when structured in a time-series manner, tends to follow an “S-curve” pattern. As the accompanying figures show, at the outset, the slopes of these curves take off slowly, then rise steeply, and finally taper off. Each sequence of events plotted involves “leads and lags,” one to the other. By overlaying the time-series plotted for each of the five forces, it is possible to describe the point at which they converge. Convergence

Figure 1

Leading Events --

Deployed in a time-series, isolated events build up to a "data wall" describing an abuse or excess so unconscionable that remedial action is virtually assured.

Key Tracking Point: "Data walls" amass to "critical mass," "take off" points at which time (depending on "cost benefits") a virtually irreversible course for change is reached.



diagrams describe "points of critical mass"—that is, the take-off juncture for serious and intensive action on a public-policy issue. Let's look more closely at the process.

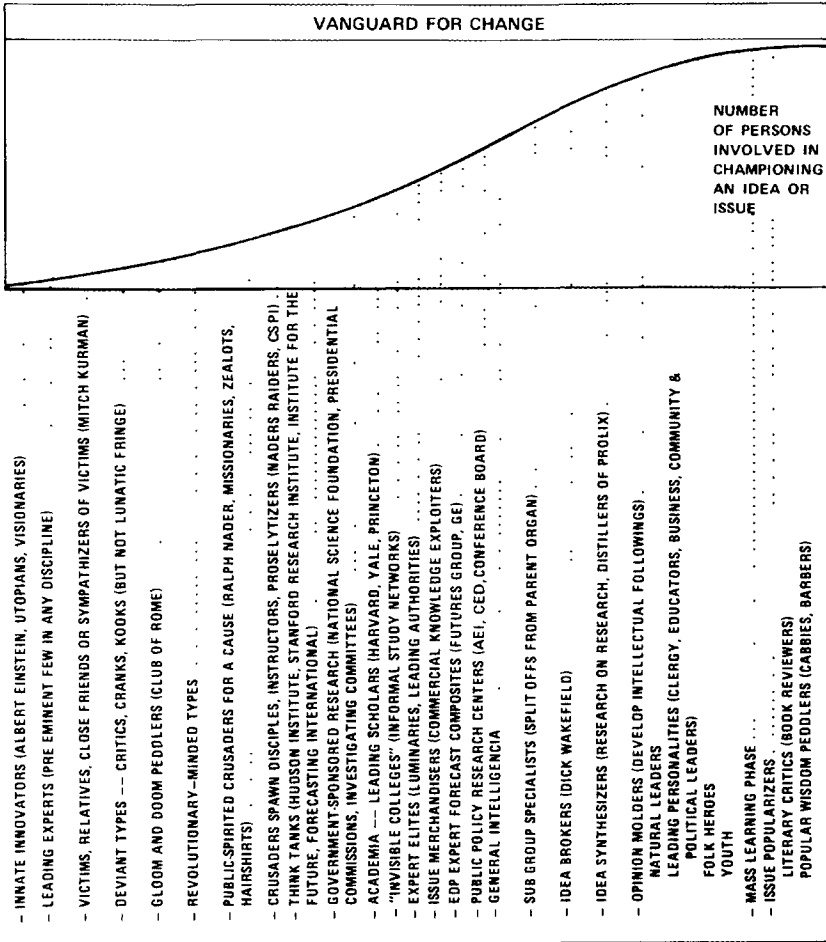
Leading events. Figure 1 depicts how isolated events, often viewed at first as bizarre or unique, eventually are pulled together, and also how aggregation of the events prompts analysis and the identification of patterns or trends. The first heralding of an idea may be an emotional response to limited, often faulty data and inadequate supportive reasoning. The penchant for over-reaction in democracies often blows issues out of proportion in early discussion. Only over time does a balanced understanding of the new phenomena develop.

Figure 2

Leading Authorities/Advocates — —

Intellectual elites who analyze and articulate social problems tend to emerge around an issue — — Likewise the victimized, even though less capable of articulating their plight, emote their feelings and often become powerful propaganda symbols for change.

Key Tracking Point: Usually less than 12 innate innovators can be pinpointed on any issue; by monitoring these early vanguards whose ideas ultimately are diffused widely, early indications of change can be forecasted.



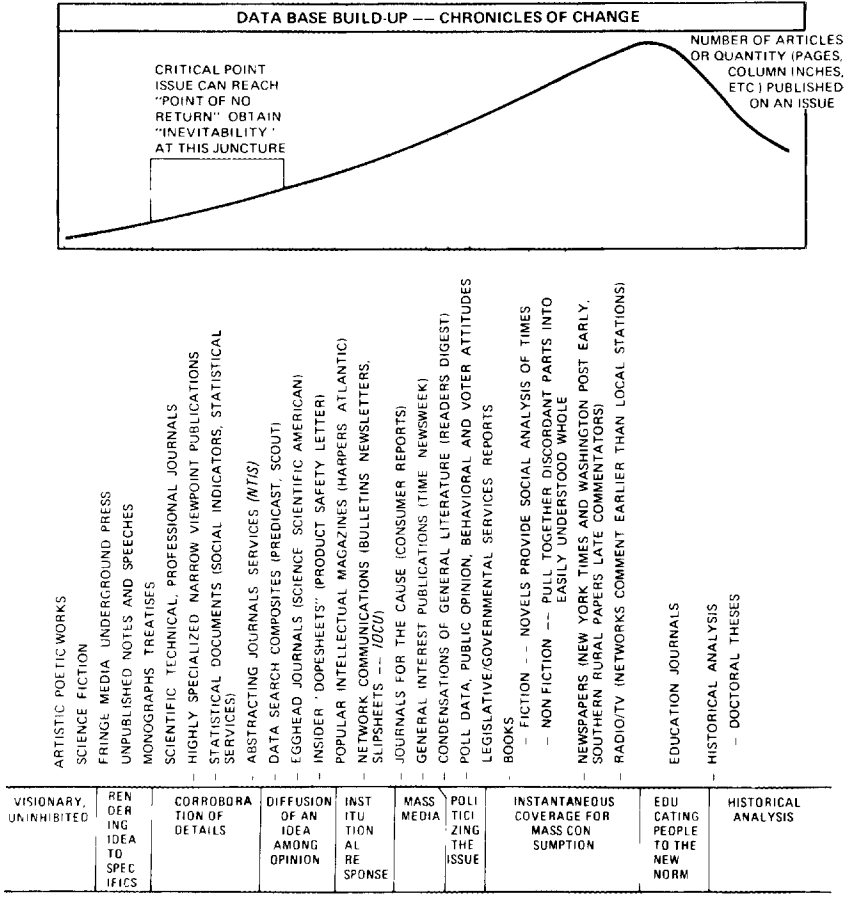
Leading authorities/advocates. Figure 2 depicts how random phenomena or isolated events are focused on by authorities and advocates who begin discussing and interpreting the issues involved. The schema patterns the various classes of authorities who engage the issues. In this figure, notice that most politicians tend to join the vanguard for change relatively late in the game.

Figure 3

Leading Literature —

Written records progress from modest beginnings to the more prolix which serve to explicate parameters and refine thinking, then to mass literature for public consumption.

Key Tracking Point: Various classes of literature emerge at different times — lead-lag times of up to 100 years can be involved — therefore, "early warnings" about emerging problems can be obtained from careful literature search.



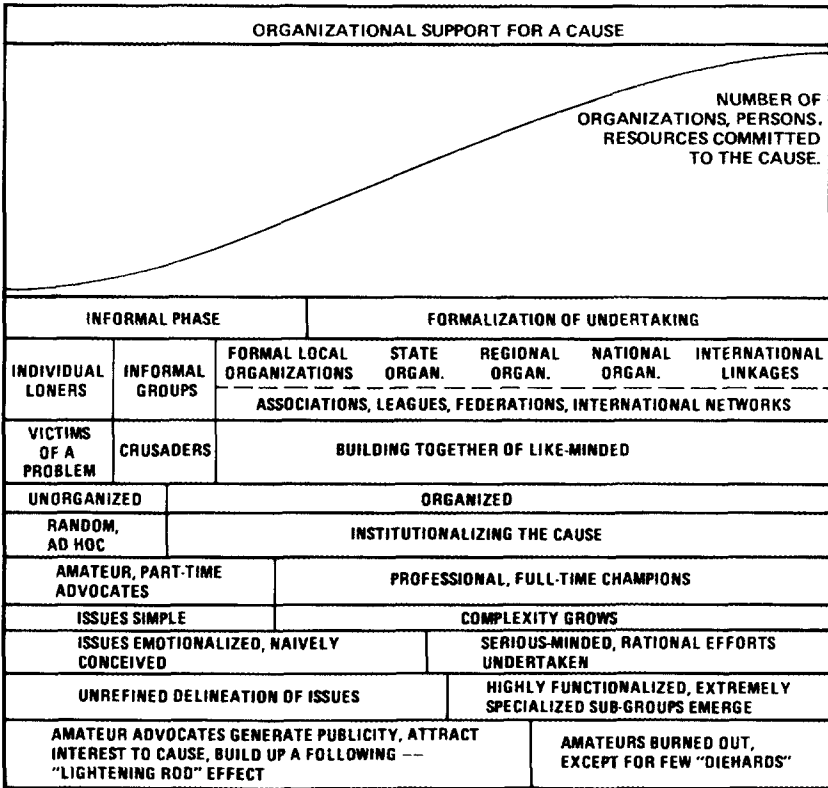
One commentator has suggested that politicians take up a cause after 20 to 40 percent of the people have begun to think that the issue involved is important. Since legislators usually reflect the views of their constituencies, this comment appears logical. Political statesmen and ideological leaders enter the process much earlier, often rallying favorable public opinion behind unpopular and even obscure matters.

Figure 4

Leading Organizations --

Innate innovators attract adherents which build up into formal followings and usually become institutionalized.

Key Tracking Point: Growth of institutional backing for a cause — whether measured by number of organizations, persons involved, or resources committed— follows exponential increases which tend to force serious consideration of the issue by public policy makers



Leading literature. The third figure shows the ways that experts begin to review and set down in permanent form their comments on the issues. After speaking out and commenting only informally, these authorities begin to write about their ideas. Eventually conjecture and hypothesis find their way into the permanent written record. Often there is as much as a one-to-six-year lag between the time when an expert first talks about an idea and the time when his views are finally published in a serious journal.

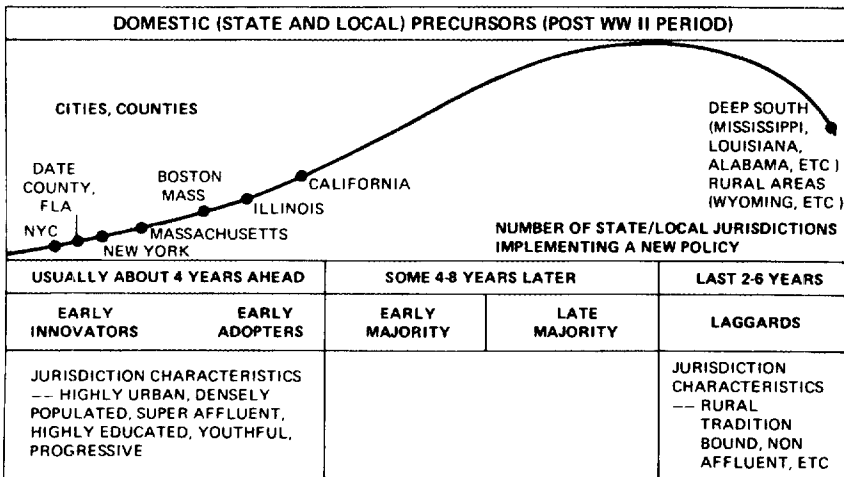
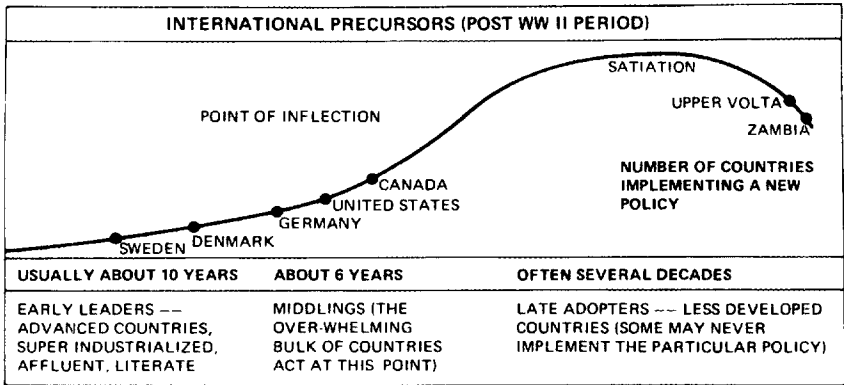
Shown in Figure 3 is a continuum of the various kinds of journals. This schema illustrates the approximate time lags between publication in various classes of literature. Scientific, technical, and professional literature constitute the

Figure 5

Leading Political Jurisdictions —

Early innovators and experimenters show the way to others — after idea is proven, other jurisdictions emulate, follow.

Key Tracking Point: Some 4-6 countries (and often simultaneously their internal local jurisdictions) invariably are the first to innovate by implementing new public policy ideas — these leading jurisdictions vary with different times in history and for different issues.



real core area. Once an idea has been widely written about and has become well established, a “point of no return” on the issue has been reached. Implementation is not far behind.

Leading organizations. As all of this is happening, various organizations of one sort or another begin—informally at first, then much more formally—to gather around the issue. A lightning-rod effect occurs, as shown in Figure

4. Interest among organizations usually develops first at a local level, then grows until, ultimately, it reaches the international level. The organizational base provides continuity and a cadre for pursuing the issue.

Leading political jurisdictions. During the course of this process, governments—which can be termed “precursor jurisdictions”—begin to take action to implement the idea. This stage is shown in Figure 5.

Once a new law is implemented by a number of jurisdictions, both internationally and domestically (at state and local levels), other jurisdictions tend to follow suit. That is, provided the new policy is proven to be effective. The process of other jurisdictions following the lead of early adopters can be termed “diffusion patterns.” For different periods of history, particular countries or groups of nations have been “early adopters.” Sweden in a variety of issue areas is now such a leader.

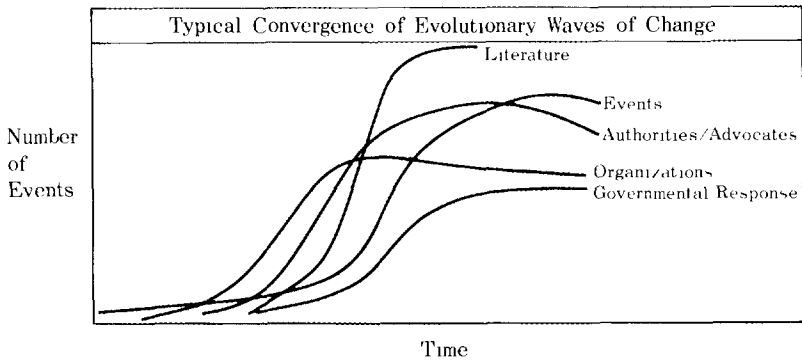
For several years, I have conducted extensive interviews in Scandinavia, primarily in Sweden. I have talked with several hundred private and public figures to develop an in-depth understanding of impending issues, particularly consumer-policy developments. Largely based on this work, it appears there are some two thousand consumer issues not implemented by the U.S. federal government. A substantial portion of these issues will most likely be implemented in the United States over the next 20 years or so. (Most major consumer issues over the last 30 to 40 years were implemented in Sweden as much as two to 20 years ahead of the United States.)

Conclusion

In summary, there are five basic forces that prompt public-policy changes. These forces follow sequential patterns, at some point swelling toward a convergence, thereby creating a dissonance within the society that demands laws to “correct” the problems. As events flow over time, authorities pick up on them. Next, the number of articles builds up, providing a permanent record on the issue and wider dissemination of the ideas. At about this stage, a number of organizations begin to converge around the issue, bringing the cycle to a close. Political jurisdictions finally are pressured to respond to demands for change.

None of the data plottings I suggest is subjective. All are based on hard numbers—quantitative data. The figures show that, as a trend moves along, the speed with which it moves increases at a very rapid or exponential rate. By overlaying the time-series plots, as shown in Figure 6, it is possible to determine the point where “data tracks” coalesce and form the point of critical mass, the take-off point. At the take-off point, the pace of change

Figure 6



itself creates pressures for action. The issue now has reached a level where it begins receiving intense and special attention. From this point onward, the forward momentum is so strong that the ability to alter the idea's course becomes most difficult.

The schematic overview provides a basis to begin making forecasts. Such predictions should enable management to address itself to public-policy changes in an anticipatory way. Such an approach would:

- Lessen or avoid the often costly impact of political or social determinations on a business.
- Enable a company to prepare or develop with ample lead time alternative products or procedures.
- Permit an organization to plan how to use its resources more astutely.
- Provide opportunities for exercising industry leadership and improving the business's image. □

Graham T. T. Molitor

is director of government relations for General Mills, Inc. in Washington, D.C. He completed political science undergraduate studies at the University of Washington and graduated from American University Law School. From 1969 until 1974, Mr. Molitor taught courses in government-business relations and corporate social responsibility at American University. From 1972-73, on leave of absence, he worked for the White House as director of research, White House Conference on the Industrial World Ahead. Presently he is a member of the White House Advisory Committee on Social Indicators and over 40 other committees, advisory boards, and organizations.

Copyright of *Advanced Management Journal* (03621863) is the property of Society for Advancement of Management and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.