

# The productive role of innovation in a large tourism organisation (TUI)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper studies the productive role of innovation in organisations. Using the post-structuralist insight that innovation is an open concept that can become performative, we shift the emphasis from analysing innovations themselves to analysing how the concept of innovation affects the organisational practices through which it acquires meaning. Deploying this framework, we studied the development of an innovation unit within TUI, a corporate tour operator. We found that actors interpreted innovation in different ways and that initially the innovation unit was considered a failure. The subsequent dramatisation of this failure resulted in a new version of this innovation unit that strengthened established actors and institutions within the organisation. Our study shows how the use of the concept of innovation in an organisation can both stimulate and hamper its innovativeness. Addressing this paradox requires sensitivity to the concept's productive role and evaluations of innovation that look beyond accomplished results.

## 1. Introduction

“Actively shaping change and successfully tackling external factors and market challenges are two of TUI's strengths. We delivered double-digit growth for four consecutive years.”

(TUI Group, 2019, p. 6)

In their 2019 annual report TUI addressed their shareholders with confidence. A few months later, facing a global pandemic and related market challenges, German government-provided financial stabilisation packages worth €2.0bn are keeping the “the world's leading integrated tourism group” afloat (TUI Group, 2020). One year earlier, TUI's long-term rival Thomas Cook failed to obtain a similar bailout after a planned restructuring was stopped at the last minute, and collapsed (Collinson, 2019).

Shock events like these tend to expose the weaknesses of established organisations (Klein, 2007). Many different explanations for these weaknesses have been offered. Some reiterate the known business flaws of package holiday conglomerates (see e.g. Collinson, 2019). Others critique the volume growth model for tourism and its negative impacts on public health and climate change (see e.g. Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020). This retrospective finger-pointing can be very relevant, but it shrouds the complexities inherent to innovation from within (Akrich, Callon, & Latour, 2002a).

Even when they want to, established organisations like Thomas Cook and TUI cannot easily change directions. Various dependencies, such as past accomplishments, current routines, and future commitments, shape their path (see Van Assche, Beunen, & Duineveld, 2014). They face, in other words, what management literature describes as the rigidity of their own business model (see Doz & Kosonen, 2010). To deliver on growth promises in saturated markets of their own making, tasks are often standardised, and an operation-focused, efficiency-driven culture is manifested. Those conditioned in such environments are usually well aware that long-term success necessitates the exploration of new avenues (see Gonthier & Chirita, 2019): they simply succumb to the inherent political pressures that come with talk of innovation (see e.g. Smith, Ree, & Murray, 2016). Innovation can introduce risks that compromises efficiency and is therefore often ruled out (Christensen & Raynor, 2003). This raises questions about innovativeness (Tajeddini, 2010), the creation and adoption of novelty from within.

Innovation is a vague but fashionable concept. It has many meanings and, regardless of their content, it mainly evokes positive connotations (Bontems, 2014). Within tourism innovation research (see Pikkemaat, Peters, & Bichler, 2019 for the latest review), a sizeable body of literature addresses the innovativeness of tourism organisations (see e.g. Fraj, Matute, & Melero, 2015; Kallmuenzer & Peters, 2018; Martínez-Román, Tamayo, Gamero, & Romero, 2015; Tajeddini, 2010). In this literature, organisations are unquestioningly understood as ‘firms’, distinct

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constructs separable from their performance (Guérard, Langley, & Seidl, 2013), and innovation is seen as a management tool. It is reduced to proxy variables that stand in hierarchical, causal, or inclusive relations with each other (cf. Kooij, Van Assche, & Lagendijk, 2012; Law & Urry, 2005). As a result the focus is on measuring its assumed steering power to explain or direct organisational performance.

In contrast to these instrumentalist approaches, interpretivist approaches consider innovation a dynamic process in different organisational settings (see e.g. Lowe, Williams, & Shaw et al., 2012; Nordin & Hjalager, 2017; Rodriguez-Sanchez, Williams, & Brotons, 2019; Smith, Rees, & Murray, 2016; Zhang, Kimbu, & Lin et al., 2020). Innovation is seen as the progressive entrepreneurial or intrapreneurial achievement of creative and knowledgeable persons collaborating in teams, self-organising networks, or coalitions. The focus is on the perspective of these individuals to identify or understand different antecedents that can explain their actions and the resulting innovations.

Each approach has its own merits. Instrumentalist approaches advance innovation measurement, deemed important for comparison and benchmarking (Montesor, 2018; Camisón & Monfort-Mir, 2012). Interpretivist approaches uncover different forms of freedom, i.e. to set goals, to fail, and to build coalitions of likeminded souls, as important sources of innovation. Yet, central to both is an actor-focused interpretation of agency: innovation usually emanates from specific organisational attributes or from the (combined) character traits and cognition, i.e. the acquired knowledge and skills of specific (collaborating) entrepreneurial or intrapreneurial people (see Garud, Gehman, & Giuliani, 2014). The possibility that the idea or concept of innovation itself also accumulates an agency of some kind remains unaddressed in these two bodies of literature. Through its presence and use in organisations, ‘innovation’ as a concept and idea – aided by its inherent vagueness – can evoke multiple meanings and serve different purposes (Kooij et al., 2012).

By means of a case study, this paper therefore investigates the use and effects of innovation as a concept in a specific tourism organisation, namely TUI Benelux. Apart from a study on Thomas Cook by Smith et al. (2016), there is little research examining ‘innovation’ in corporate tour operators, despite their substantial role in shaping the international tourism industry. As part of the TUI Group, TUI Benelux is a cluster organisation of TUI Netherlands and TUI Belgium, which each serve their respective source markets, but operate under a shared management board for reasons of efficiency as part of TUI’s corporate strategy (TUI Group, 2018). Over a period of 18 months, we traced the development of an innovation unit in this organisation.

For our analysis, we turned to an alternative approach to instrumentalist and interpretivist studies of innovation, sensitive to the more political uses of the concept of innovation in organisations (Kooij et al., 2012): post-structuralist organisation and governance theory (Van Assche, Beunen, Duineveld, & Gruzbacher, 2020; Van Assche et al., 2014; Czarniawska, 1998, 2004, 2009; Kooij et al., 2012). Two inter-related ideas shape the theoretical framework of this study: open concepts and performativity. Open concepts are seemingly vague concepts that lack inherent substance, i.e. specific technical or ideological definition, and can therefore create meaning or give direction without disclosing much detail (Kooij et al., 2012). Performativity is the self-fulfilling effect of written and spoken communication (Mackenzie, Muniesa, & Siu, 2007), and invites us to probe the functions of concepts in language (Czarniawska, 2009). Combined, these ideas can help us shift focus from the alleged substance of the concept of innovation to its productive functions in an organisation and trace how it sorts different reality effects. By reality effects we mean: changes in shared understandings of an organisation’s past, present, and future that can be observed in organisational practices and that inform coordinated action (Van Assche et al., 2020).

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section presents our theoretical framework in further detail. Section 3 explains our methods. Section 4 presents the evolution of an innovation unit in TUI Benelux,

and section 5 analyses the reality effects we observed in this process. Based on the results, we propose a new, more reflexive approach to understanding and implementing innovation in organisations in section 6.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In post-structuralist organisation and governance theory, organisations are not seen as fixed and clearly delineated entities, but as emergent and evolving effect of organisational practices (Czarniawska, 2004). In this view, an organisation is not a pre-given entity or ‘fact’ but the result of numerous communications that collectively produce multiple, overlapping representations of a single organisation (Czarniawska, 2009). This conceptualisation of organisations has major consequences for the analysis and understanding of innovation in organisations. Conceiving organisations such as ‘firms’ and ‘start-ups’ as dynamic and complex processes instead of fixed actors, fully able to steer and control their development (Kooij et al., 2012; Law, 2001), opens the door to probe the political, arbitrary, and contingent dimensions of innovation in organisational practices.

### 2.1. Innovation as open concept

To deepen our understanding of the role of the concept of innovation in organisational practices, we add the notion of open concepts to our framework. According to Kooij et al. (2012), the seeming vagueness of open concepts creates space for multiple interpretations of an organisation and its practices to co-exist. This multiplicity accommodates the construction of temporal certainties – evident for instance in vision and strategy documents – that veil the general impossibility of knowing or fully steering the future. Innovation is an open concept because of its inherent lack of substance (Bontems, 2014). It can mean and imply many things for different people and in different contexts. Thus, conceptualising innovation as an open concept enables us to trace how it evokes different meanings as organisations and the related actors mould it into various shapes in their efforts to mobilise support for their ‘innovative’ ideas, and implement change in organisations (Akrich, Callon, & Latour, 2002b). To analyse the reality effects emerging from this process, we now turn to performativity.

### 2.2. Performativity: the reality effects of innovation

Performativity highlights that the discursive use of the concept of innovation in organisational practices can be productive in itself, regardless of the value attached to the outcomes. The ‘innovative’ ideas produced within an organisation can result in the emergence of new actors and institutions, resistance, and altered patterns of inclusion and exclusion of knowledge and ways of thinking (Van Assche et al., 2014). These reality effects cannot be assumed beforehand but have to be observed in actual practices (Kooij et al., 2012). Thus, simply by being discursively present, the concept of innovation can become productive and induce change in anticipated and unanticipated ways.

To identify how innovation became productive in TUI Benelux, we distinguish between the generative and the transformative function of innovation as an open concept. The generative function entails the capacity of open concepts to simultaneously generate different representations of the organisation. As innovation can assume various shapes, the concept evokes different understandings of an organisation’s past, present, and future, and corresponding tensions and conflicts (Van Assche et al., 2020). Innovation can confront actors with their own conflicting loyalties, i.e. to direct colleagues, the organisation, clients, and their personal networks, even within a single project or practice (Grabher, 2004). This multiplicity highlights that innovation can simulate divergences in organisational practices. Rather than producing instant shifts in perspectives, the concept serves multiple representations of the organisation at once. Its conceptual vagueness

accommodates flexible interpretation, which enables actors to reflect and look ahead (Van Assche et al., 2020).

The transformative function concerns the capacity of open concepts to facilitate change in organisational routines, for instance through gradual institutionalisation of new ideas (Van Assche et al., 2014). Flexible interpretation accommodates the co-existence of different meanings and interpretations of innovation and its organisation (Kooij et al., 2012). This can enable actors to buy more time, mask their intentions, and/or avoid conflict in the process of mobilising support for their ideas (Van Assche et al., 2014). Such competitions for influence can create convergences in organisational practices. Actors are necessarily required to find broader strategic acceptance of their positions. Mobilising support through coalition building is considered an important stage of the innovation process (see e.g. Nordin & Hjalager, 2017; Rodriguez-Sanchez et al., 2019), but it also narrows one's options over time. Coalitions can bring focus to discussions that first moved in many different directions. Coalitions can produce rules and norms that structure interactions and that make distinct organisational representations more stable and lasting (Van Assche et al., 2020).

### 3. Methods

After a series of meetings with TUI managers in the Netherlands in 2016 and early 2017, we were invited to study the development of an innovation unit in TUI Benelux up close, for a prolonged period of time, and with access to key informants (TUI staff directly involved, senior management, and external advisors). A case-study approach was subsequently adopted. The case-study method is deemed suitable for exploring less accessible, unique organisational practices (see Tasci, Wei, & Mildman, 2020).

Our case – the development of an innovation unit in TUI Benelux – consisted of a collection of innovation unit meetings and workshops at various (external) locations, (management) meetings about the innovation unit, and related communications (email exchanges, informal conversations) that followed each other in rapid succession, happened at several places at once, but within a specific organisational context. We therefore opted for an iterative case-study design common in research premised on post-structuralist thought (see Beard, Scarles, & Tribe, 2016). Its integrated process of data generation and analysis granted us the required mobility and flexibility in the field (see Czarniawska, 2004): the possibility to change directions and include new events or informants during the inquiry as we learned more about innovation in TUI Benelux.

We entered the field in August 2017, when the development of the innovation unit began. We left in April 2018, after the process had (temporarily) stalled, but returned in June 2019 for a reflection (and learned about the unit's re-emergence). We generated data through direct observation and interviews. We observed different innovation unit events as they unfolded (see Table 1). We used these events to present ourselves, our research, and to relate to and understand the TUI staff equipped with the task of shaping and operating the unit ('the innovation team'). We made *descriptive observations* (for instance of people, locations, presentations, and discussions) and *interpretative observations* (for instance our perceptions of the atmosphere, the interactions between people). We recorded these observations in field notes and a research diary.

Alongside, we interviewed members of the organisation directly and indirectly involved in the development of the innovation unit (see Table 2). We used these interviews to trace interpretations of this process as informants reflected on – and made sense of – what had happened (see Czarniawska, 2004). In 2017, using a pre-tested topic list, we conducted 9 *semi-structured interviews* with innovation team members. In addition, we facilitated a *focus group discussion* (FGD) during the second innovation team event, in which innovation team members collectively identified, visualised, and clustered items enabling or hampering innovation in TUI. In 2018 and 2019, 4 *unstructured interviews* with TUI

**Table 1**  
Observed innovation unit events.

Event	Participants	Duration	Date
Kick-off innovation team	Innovation team, external advisors, board member	6 h	31-08-2017
Reflection kick-off innovation team	Coordinator	1 h	04-09-2017
Reflection kick-off innovation team	Coordinator, senior manager	1 h	04-09-2017
Preparation next innovation team meeting	Coordinator	1 h	13-09-2017
Preparation innovation engine	Coordinator, some innovation team members, external advisor	2 h	18-09-2017
2nd Innovation team event (introduction innovation engine) & FGD	Innovation team, external advisor, board member	6 h	28-09-2017
3rd innovation team event (visioning)	Innovation team	2 days	29-11-2017 & 30-11-2017
4th innovation team event (operationalisation)	Innovation team	3 h	22-12-2017
Design sprint innovation team	Innovation team	3 days	06-02-2018 to 08-02-2018
Reflection innovation team	Coordinator	2 h	03-04-2018

**Table 2**  
Interviews and respondents.

Respondent	Expertise as stated in job title	Date
<i>Semi-structured interviews</i>		
R1	Corporate policy	21-11-2017
R2	Sales	13-09-2017
R3	Digital innovation	23-11-2017
R4	Innovation	27-10-2017
R5	Product management	17-10-2017
R6	Human resources	28-11-2017
R7	Retail	19-10-2017
R8	Human resources	14-11-2017
R9	ICT	26-10-2017
<i>Unstructured interviews</i>		
R10	Executive	19-01-2018
R11	Executive	19-01-2018
R12	Executive	19-01-2018
R13	Executive	06-06-2019

Benelux executive board members – senior managers commissioning and supporting the innovation unit undertaking – served to facilitate retrospective reflections on the innovation unit process and the lessons learned, and complemented data generation. Inherent to our iterative approach, respondents were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (see Beard et al., 2016). The last unstructured interview (with R13) turned out to be of profound importance for our study as this respondent played a pivotal role in our case. Interviews lasted between 35 and 104 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed at verbatim (in Dutch).

In this study we had very useful access to key informants. The participating TUI staff have been helpful, welcoming, and open to discuss issues during interviews and innovation unit events. Overall, the applied techniques enabled us to identify and follow the evolution of the innovation unit. Yet, regardless of the duration of fieldwork and the techniques deployed, access is always precarious and partial (Czarniawska, 1998). In the field, we positioned ourselves as researchers. Despite being overt about our role, we sporadically got the impression that some informants viewed us as innovation experts rather than

researchers and welcomed our inputs. To maintain optimal access in these cases, we sometimes had to shift our role from observer to participant-observer. This may have influenced the practices we subsequently observed: our presence and contributions may have helped others in creating arguments that further legitimised – or delegitimised – aspired courses of action (see Czarniawska, 2001). Related, organisational hierarchies and pecking orders arguably confined group discussions during the observed events. Specific participant observation techniques, such as shadowing and observant participation (see Czarniawska, 2004), could have provided further insights into these institutionalised repertoires, i.e. by contrasting our direct observations of the events with observations of less visible, informal practices that existed outside of these events.

In our data we traced the innovation unit as a token (see Beard et al., 2016): a circulating quasi-object that transforms through the discussions it evokes (Latour, 1996). Data analysis comprised three steps: (i) we repeatedly read the interview transcripts, observational notes, and research diary to familiarise ourselves with all data; (ii) we chronologically ordered relevant data to identify the aggregated sequence of events constituting the innovation unit's evolution; and (iii) we used combinations of initial and focused coding (see Charmaz, 2014) to detect multiple, evolving interpretations of TUI, innovation (within TUI), and the innovation unit. In terms of data triangulation, we treated the interviews as standard accounts – distinct representations of TUI's institutionalised repertoire – and the observations as interfering accounts that did not share this interpretative tradition (see Czarniawska, 2009). We regularly discussed our interpretations of the data and reviewed the coding process. And we deployed document analysis (websites, annual reports, academic publications) to verify, supplement, and contextualise data. Initial findings were shared with TUI Benelux. Meetings with key informants in April 2018 and June 2019 further enhanced our interpretations. The result is a comprehensive case-study account illustrating the innovation unit's evolution and related reality effects, as presented next.

#### 4. Case: innovation in TUI Benelux

First, we situate our case in its organisational context. Then we present the evolution of the innovation unit.

##### 4.1. TUI, a brief history

The history of present-day TUI is one of corporate venturing. It started around the millennium when the German company Preussag, a diversified industrial conglomerate at the time, implemented what Dittmann, Maug, and Schneider (2008) describe as a rarely seen strategy of business migration. Holdings in mining, oil exploration, and ship-building were disinvested; different tourism-related companies were bought. Among the acquisitions was TUI: Germany's main tour operator. Preussag changed its name to TUI in 2002 and has developed its tourism enterprises ever since. Through vertical integration it sought control of the entire tourism value chain and directed consumers to company-owned airlines, hotels, and cruise ships to secure high occupancy rates. Shareholdings in different hotel groups were acquired and large tour operators in Europe's main source markets, including Belgium and the Netherlands, were procured. In 2007, the tour operating business of TUI AG merged with the UK listed company First Choice to form the London Stock Exchange listed company TUI Travel PLC, which merged in 2014 into the TUI Group.

TUI Group is presently structured as a matrix organisation based on the components of its core business (Markets & Airlines; Cruises; Destination Experiences) and the source markets of its tour operator acquisitions (Northern, Central, and Western Region). TUI Netherlands and TUI Belgium form the TUI Benelux cluster of the Western Region Segment (TUI Group, 2018). They operate under a shared TUI Benelux management board.

In the Benelux as well as elsewhere, stories of mounting pressure on the standard package holiday market had been circulating for years (see e.g. World Tourism Organisation, 2004). Today's challenges include strong competition, low margins, seasonality, and the impending market entrance of global tech companies like Google (R12). To address these challenges and safeguard its future, TUI adopted a new strategy in 2014, transforming itself into a so-called integrated tourism company that offers customers an end-to-end holiday experience (flights, hotels, cruises, activities) (see TUI Group, 2018).

The TUI Benelux board (hereafter referred to as board) welcomed TUI's transformation despite the enormous challenge of implementing the new strategy. The different country offices of TUI Nederland and TUI Belgium had to be aligned with the new matrix organisation of the Western Region Segment. The purpose of the matrix organisation was to have different departments learn from one another, the rapid transfer of "successful models" from one market to another, and harmonisation of "non-customer facing activities" (TUI Group 2018, p. 7). This transformation proved more difficult than expected:

'We have seven content departments now... seven! And that's only in our region! So, the effort put in coordinating that is enormous. At the same time, we need to merge things within the company, simplify things. At present, we do a lot of double work. In my opinion, that is the biggest challenge for top-level management.' (R11)

The board realised that the on-going strategic realignment process constrained rather than improved the identification and uptake of new ideas in TUI Benelux, and that – as a result – they wasted a lot of potential (R11, R12). In January 2017, they therefore decided to set up an innovation unit. This unit, they envisioned, would operate as a cross-functional team rather than a business incubator independently pursuing new business opportunities (see Gonthier & Chirita, 2019; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004). It would identify and centralise the different innovation initiatives in the organisation (R10; R11). A senior manager (hereafter referred to as C.) was assigned to coordinate this process, and form an interdepartmental team.

##### 4.2. The evolution of an innovation unit in TUI benelux

On August 9, 2017, fifteen TUI Benelux staff members received an email from C. informing them that the board had selected them to join TUI Benelux's innovation team. Recipients held different positions and worked in different departments, equally representing TUI Nederland and TUI Belgium.

Three weeks later, ten of the invitees met up. C. led the meeting and started with a presentation explaining that participants would develop an innovation agenda together. C. emphasised the importance of growth – 'an important Key Performance Indicator (KPI)' – and reminded participants that 'they had been picked by the board' to join this initiative. C. concluded with some pointers, mainly formulated by the board, about organising innovation in TUI: 'Looking further ahead (2–5 years); Define priorities and make an action plan; 'Thinking' separated from 'doing'; Facilitate; Structurally rather than ad hoc; Platform for ideas and solutions sourced from stakeholders; Innovation-driven.'

A second presentation followed, delivered by an external expert in industrial product design, who talked about design thinking techniques. Then, participants collectively started working on an innovation agenda that resulted in the ranking of twenty problem statements that covered a wide range of topics, including sustainability, technology, customer relations, human resources, and the relevance of TUI's business model. After this exercise, C. announced that a project management structure would set implementation priorities based on internal and external needs. This sparked unease among the participants. A discussion started, in which the idea of the innovation team got entangled with various operational concerns. Participants expressed unease about the board controlling the projects, the additional work on top of their regular jobs,

the organisation’s culture, and possible friction with operational and sales targets. C. tried to calm everybody down by proposing that the attendees would answer two questions for themselves: ‘do I want to be involved?’; ‘can I get time for this from my manager?’ It was a futile attempt. Participants demanded clear targets and deliverables. Energy in the room drained. The meeting ended in an employee-manager dichotomy and without clear conclusion. C. was disappointed but did not give up and called a second meeting on September 29, 2017.

This time, nine TUI staff (seven had also participated in the kick-off) and another external expert (an agile business consultant) gathered in a room decorated with pre-drawn flipchart papers. C., who again led the meeting, had opted for a more directive approach. C. introduced (a flipchart with a drawing of) ‘the innovation engine’ (Fig. 1). This innovation engine, which C. had developed earlier with the help of the agile business consultant, was a generic innovation process based on Cooper’s (2011) stage-gate model. The engine’s purpose, C. explained, was to put something in and to get something out. The innovation engine consisted of four different silos. The innovation team was supposed to staff the engine. In each silo, there would be a smaller team carrying out specific tasks. These smaller teams would be ‘self-steering’ and, because of that, C. contended, they would ‘automatically add value’. Yet, the tasks of these self-steering teams had already been defined on some of the flipcharts. The first team would be responsible for portfolio management, and manage and prioritise the innovation agenda. The second team would be the creative engine team, manned with people who could ‘think out of the box’ to identify solutions to selected problems. The third team would set project parameters for implementation, and the fourth team would execute the project. Collectively, these teams had to ensure that the innovation engine would ‘produce’ ‘innovations’ on a three-monthly basis.

The explanation raised all sorts of questions and turned the conversation to product design, which seemed to narrow the engine’s possibilities. Participants wondered whether the engine was going to ‘facilitate’ or ‘create’ new ‘products’? Was the engine going to be fed with problems, opportunities, or ideas? One participant quoted TUI’s Chief Executive Officer, who once said that companies with innovation

teams often find it unnecessary to ‘create’ things and that it is more useful if an innovation team would solve real problems. Others wondered whether it was feasible to complete one ‘innovation’ within the proposed three-month timeframe? Was this engine capable of stimulating an innovation-minded culture in the company? And how to measure results?

‘If you want to see results, how can you do that with opportunities only? How do you calculate the results? When you use problems, you can measure results.’ (R7)

There was discussion about vision, scope, and KPIs. About what the engine should *deliver* and what it should *not deliver*. The engine’s innovations had not yet been defined. Yet, there was consensus that TUI was an organisation that celebrated success and results first and foremost. Therefore, the engine should deliver rapid results and solve practical problems fast. They ran out of time with many questions unaddressed.

‘The main thing I remembered (from that meeting) was the lack of a goal and the road towards it’ (R1)

‘Are we the ones that should decide upon the future of TUI? It was completely unclear what was supposed to happen.’ (R4)

The meeting ended without a clear conclusion, but one thing had become clear. Those who had participated in both meetings had become the innovation team of TUI Benelux.

In the third innovation team meeting, on 29 and 30 November 2017, 11 TUI staff participated. The vibe was positive. A guest speaker advised the innovation team to define their purpose. This inspired the team. ‘Customer-centric innovation’ was embraced as purpose. They decided to address a business problem as a test case: how to motivate customers to book again as quickly as possible after their trip? The team came up with the travel box concept: a meta-holiday package offer that sells customers multiple package holidays at once, strengthens ties with customers, and accomplishes lock-in, i.e. high-volume repeat business (see Amit & Zott, 2001). There was an atmosphere of enthusiasm when

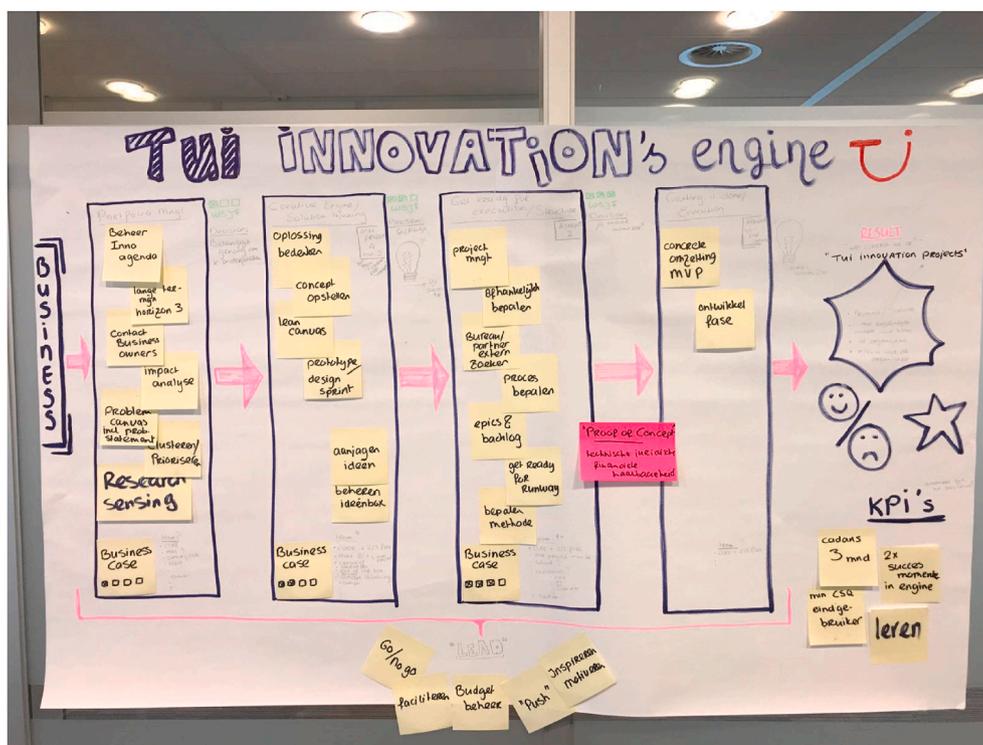


Fig. 1. The ‘innovation engine’.

the meeting ended. Some proposed to present the team's purpose to the board.

To continue the discussion and plan for the future of the innovation team a follow-up meeting was planned in December 2017. Eight TUI staff participated. Initially, there was little trace of the last meeting's enthusiasm. Focus concentrated on the travel box. Some questioned it, wondering whether this concept was really 'customer-centric'. Nevertheless, they decided to proceed with the travel box, eager to demonstrate commercial success. To this end, C. proposed a multiple-day design sprint in which an external facilitator would push the team to develop a solution. This proposal went down well and the meeting ended.

The design sprint took place from 6 to 8 February 2018. Nine TUI staff were present. The external facilitator asked the team to do various assignments, including goal-setting exercises and customer interview role plays. They had to develop a pitch and sell their ideas to the board. After 3 days, despite all good intentions, they still lacked concrete output. Energy levels were low. People wanted to go home. At that moment, C. started a discussion about the next steps and proposed to send the outcomes of the design sprint to the Project Management Office (PMO), a department responsible for the implementation of ICT-related projects in TUI Benelux. This caused a stir. Some were worried they would end up at the bottom of PMO's priority list. C. acknowledged that, at PMO, 'must have' comes first, and 'nice to have' second, and said PMO would be difficult to convince. They also knew they could not show up at the board with half-baked ideas and felt they had not progressed much since December. C. concluded.

'If I don't believe in this product, if I don't believe in it, then, who does?'

At the end of the design sprint, we observed a sense of failure. Despite all the hard work, the travel box concept had remained a concept and the team stood empty-handed.

At first, the idea of the innovation engine was kept on the table, as a work in progress. In April 2018, its proclaimed purpose was culture change by achieving tangible results and vice-versa. The engine was still to be fed with 'problems' that the business could not solve. 'Solutions' at the other end would have to demonstrate (quick) success. At least two of the four envisioned silo teams were still incomplete. The travel box concept also lingered. There were design-sprint participants who wanted to give it another try. Some blamed the external facilitator for its initial failure.

Eventually, as the innovation team disintegrated in the course of that spring, the ideas of the innovation engine and travel box stalled.

'The whole thing collapsed, there was no follow up. People were preoccupied with their main tasks, changed jobs, or left the company (...) it did not work.' (R13)

Over summer, C. looked into design thinking techniques and took a change management course. A consultancy firm was hired to restructure C.'s department and to jointly develop an innovation programme that would organise 'real' innovation in TUI Benelux. This program, named the 'employee journey', depicted innovation as a 5-pillar employee development process. The first pillar was about 'inspiration', and consisted of in-company sessions about trends and developments. The second pillar they called 'the academy', in which employees were offered courses in lean methods and design thinking. The third and the fourth pillar were 'accelerators'. The third pillar was about process optimisation and aimed at efficiency gains:

'How can I improve operational processes and make them more efficient, so that it no longer is an 8-h but a 6-h task, and I create time to work on different things?' (R13)

Employees that succeeded in reducing the time they spent on their operational tasks could join the 'accelerator tomorrow programme' (the

fourth pillar) and work on new customer-centric products. The fifth pillar, 'the sandbox', was about playing: experimenting without clear targets, for instance with new technologies. By making their own work processes more efficient in the third pillar, people created their own space to develop new capabilities, which they could subsequently deploy for business development and innovation:

'Without time and capabilities, it is not possible to work on new things anyway.' (R13)

Meanwhile, C.'s department had gained prominence. In September 2018, TUI hired a new innovation head with a background in business and innovation rather than ICT. In January 2019, C. joined the TUI Benelux board. By June 2019, C. managed a team of fifteen. Most staff were new hires; none of them had participated in the innovation team. 'Process excellence' was added to the department's existing tasks of 'business development' and 'innovation'. Team members had job titles ranging from 'lean consultants' and 'design experts' to 'business development managers' and 'category managers'. In June 2019, when our empirical enquiries ended, the implementation of the 'employee journey' was about to begin.

## 5. Analysis: innovation as a concept in TUI Benelux

We will now analyse our case in three sections. We first analyse innovation as an open concept. Then we examine its generative and transformative functions.

### 5.1. Innovation as an open concept

In this case study, innovation operated as an open concept. Multiple interpretations of innovation emerged, through discussions about innovation and the innovation unit, and there was no consensus on its meaning (cf. Kooij et al., 2012).

In the board, some depicted it as an integral aspect of daily operations (R11), and talked about a constant collective process of implementing incremental improvements that, over time, enabled the company to thrive. Others represented it as a means to advance strategy (R10). Innovation could comprise anything new, provided it fitted the strategy. And there were those who portrayed innovation as something that covered multiple scales, distinguishing between small, incremental improvements and a strategic exercise to address long-term, more profound issues (R12).

Innovation team members mostly presented innovation as something that would solve problems. Once addressed, there would be success, in the shape of (more) growth, relevance, bookings, and/or profit (R2). To some, innovation was about creating new products that generated media attention and served as a means to earn the company a reputation of being innovative (R9). Others talked of innovation in terms of organisational transition, asking oneself existential questions, and getting rid of ingrained habits (R3).

Also, the innovation unit was open to different interpretations. When the board decided to establish an innovation unit in January 2017, they wanted a panel that would structure and streamline idea uptake in support of TUI's corporate strategy. But during the August 2017 kick-off meeting, rather than mapping existing ideas in the organisation, attendees ranked a selection of individually prepared problem statements. Those with an interest in changing the product viewed the innovation unit as a 'creative engine' (R1; R4). They used start-up vocabulary, such as design sprints, Minimal Viable Products, and Proof of Concepts, to describe their ideas. They talked about (the need for) an external incubator that could develop ideas independent from TUI's regular procedures (see e.g. Gonthier & Chirita, 2019). Others wanted it to address urgent operational issues (R2; R6; R8). As a result, some staff wanted to end this babel and expressed a longing for clear definitions:

'We must avoid confusion of tongues. We should be clear about what innovation means! Let me ask you the same question; do you know what innovation means in TUI? Did people give you the same answer ten times? Did people tell you ten times the same about the purpose and importance of innovation? Is it just an add-on or is it a necessity? If these people gave you the same answer ten times, then it is well communicated. If not, then I made my point.' (R1).

The multiple interpretations of innovation and the innovation unit proved productive in different ways, as presented next.

### 5.2. The generative function of innovation

Discussions about innovation and an innovation unit generated different tensions and conflicts. We observed unease about TUI's concentration on short-term gains. Respondents understood that, as part of a public listed company, they had to perform. There was constant pressure to deliver quick returns; the KPIs they worked with were designed to guarantee immediate success. Yet, there were concerns that, to some extent, this came at the expense of long-term investments vital to address fundamental challenges and safeguard the company's future:

'We are listed on the stock market and therefore have only one prime goal: being attractive for investors. (...) When investors lose interest in our company, our cash flow will decline, we will have no resources to invest. Consequently, our potential as a venture diminishes; we cease to exist.' (R1).

We also noted doubts about TUI's new strategy. Some wondered whether the integrated tourism company concept would be viable in the market of the Western region, which was structurally shrinking. Others wondered whether TUI had got what it would take to implement this new strategy. Despite all the efforts to distance itself from traditional tour operating, they felt that TUI Benelux remained mired in traditional tour operating conventions.

Some board members of TUI Benelux shared these worries. There were doubts about the persisting convention that TUI always had to compete on price and the corresponding need for operational excellence, despite all efforts to emphasise the TUI brand:

'Take for instance a five-star all-inclusive trip to Turkey. Nobody cares about whether the accommodation belongs to TUI. (...). I think if you ask the average customer what tour operator they booked with, they will give you the name of their travel agency.... As a result, we primarily compete on price. The customer simply does not care about the tour operator they booked with. And people who do not care about that, base their choice on price' (R12).

In addition, the establishment of the innovation unit prompted discontent within various organisational practices. Some felt unhappy with their workload and described how (their) innovation efforts failed because they got stuck in project groups with unmotivated people (R2; R3; R5; R8; R9). Others argued this was due to a flawed employee assessment process and a correspondingly low staff turnover rate:

'When I accept a new task, I keep my present workload; none of my current tasks are redistributed to others.' (R5)

'Managers seem reluctant to score their staff either high or low. Obviously, there are a lot of people doing the same job, which makes it more difficult, but if people are constantly graded 3 out of 5 it results in a lack of sharp-mindedness, a lack of feedback. So, yeah, individuals are valued here, but also people that should be doing something else.' (R8)

Talking about innovation made people complain about managerial hierarchy complicating idea uptake. In their eyes, disliked or misunderstood ideas were dropped; and the grounds for these decisions were often unclear. Also, when managers liked ideas, this did not

automatically result in implementation:

'If he (the manager) likes it then he will work on it himself or pass it through to the general manager.' (R9)

Others felt that TUI missed a method to systematically learn from mistakes. According to some, the problem was not that mistakes happened, but the astonishment, blame-game, and finger-pointing following such mistakes, at all levels of the organisation:

'I believe this is so bad. Especially senior management has to admit mistakes, show that they learned from it, and how they will do a better job next time, rather than shifting the blame onto others, or even denying that something went wrong in the first place. That would show a lot more leadership and professionalism.' (R8)

These tensions and conflicts – confronting innovation team members with their own conflicting loyalties (cf. Grabher, 2004) – revealed discontent with the functioning of the organisation. From April 2018 onwards, some of this discontent created a 'burning platform' for reflection on TUI's current situation and its future (cf. Van Assche et al., 2020), as it was turned into a productive argument to create a sense of urgency and mobilise support for an integrated innovation approach in TUI Benelux. We examine this next.

### 5.3. The transformative function of innovation

Some argued that, in TUI Benelux, innovation had become an aim in itself. This, they felt, fostered inertia rather than a transformation of organisational routines.

'Everybody wants to have the word innovation in his or her job title or company, since it is hip and trendy. They just want to paste the name on it, but don't want the action. So, eventually, nothing gets done.' (R4)

'Sometimes, I have the feeling that we are innovating just to innovate, just because we have to, not because our heart is really in it.' (R5)

Yet, the events since February 2018 paint a different picture. Initially, indeed, there was inaction. A period of lack of resolve followed the unproductive design sprint of February 2018. That spring, there was no joint evaluation, with or without the board, on the failed attempt to establish the innovation engine. There was simply no time to learn from mistakes:

'We are always running (...) from project to project. Always in a hurry. Often, we do not even complete a project, because there is already something new that demands our attention. We never stop. We never look back, and think about how did I do this, how can I do this better next time?' (R13)

At that point, interest in the necessity of changing the culture of the organisation had waned. The board was under the impression that culture change had been achieved. Staff, after all, had been granted more freedom, but the problem was, as we were told, that they did nothing useful with that freedom.

This was followed by a period in which the concept of innovation displayed its transformative function. From the summer of 2018 onwards, the first 8 months of the innovation unit, with the innovation team and innovation engine, evolved into a history of failure, in which some of the organisational discontent was used to explain the engine's lack of success (cf. Akkrich et al., 2002a). Staff were overburdened and lacked the required know-how. The engine lacked a clear scope and sat in an organisation that rarely granted people time for reflection, to think things through:

'Initially, I went straight into doing new things, full focus on new passengers, new services, but it did not work. I ran into a brick wall,

in spite of my drive, of working 24 hours a day. I blamed it on other people (colleagues). But they were not to blame. The cause of failure was a lack of time, and that people simply do not know how to do new things. They have been trained to do their daily jobs.’ (R13)

(In such situations) ‘one tends to forget, what is actually the problem we are trying to solve. The essence. Verify for whom we are doing it. What are suitable solutions? (...) A lot of it was waste because it did not create any customer value. We were doing the wrong things.’ (R13).

Lessons were learned too. Developing and delivering new products and services and tapping into new markets requires an organisational culture embracing innovation and staff that strive for constant self-improvement:

‘So, a culture of constant improvement contributes to an innovation culture, contributes to innovation and contributes to customer value.’ (R13)

To accomplish this, the history of the innovation team and innovation engine was integrated into a new narrative, in which the innovation unit re-emerged, this time renamed as the ‘employee journey’. The engine metaphor and its mechanical, impersonal, and product-oriented connotations gave way to an emphasis on inclusive employee development. The focus had moved from solving problems to fostering talent while achieving efficiency gains: two elements that fitted – and contributed to – TUI’s concurrent strategy (see [TUI Group, 2018](#)).

Process excellence is the creation of spare time. And innovation, ‘is using that time to address tomorrow’s challenges and opportunities.’ (R13).

The narrative of the ‘employee journey’ was subsequently used to create leverage for an integrated innovation approach in TUI Benelux. It downplayed the importance of the innovation team and innovation engine. The team’s struggles were retrospectively labelled as an ‘experimentation phase’, ‘chaos’, and a necessary *first* step that involved ‘ambassador’ employees, generated initial ideas, and harboured experiments, like the failed design sprint in February 2018. The team’s lack of success was instrumentally insignificant: it did not harm the organisation, affect sales, scare customers, et cetera. Yet, rhetorically, it made a valuable pretext for the employee journey, strengthening the plot of this narrative. Failure lends itself well to dramatisation ([Czarniawska, 1998](#)). In our case, failure was strategically deployed to create a sense of urgency:

‘Sometimes, you just have to create that sense of urgency, you know, like, dear people, it is really great I am working on this, but it is not going to work. And then actually show that it is not going to work.’ (R13)

‘You get (leverage), because I have this burning platform, and that is, I think, to create that sense of urgency, and I think I am good at that.’ (R13)

The ‘employee journey’ aided coalition building (cf. [Nordin & Hjalager, 2017](#); [Rodriguez-Sanchez et al., 2019](#)) and provided focus to innovation discussions (cf. [Van Assche et al., 2020](#)). Upon completion of our case, we learned that initial reactions among TUI staff were positive. There was a feeling that this time they were on the right track.

## 6. Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, we examined the productive role of innovation in a large tourism organisation (TUI). Our study showed that in this organisation innovation is subject to many interpretations and definitions. These ‘misunderstandings’ about innovation initially created a self-

perceived failure as it generated tensions and conflicts typical of efficiency-driven organisational cultures (see [Doz & Kosonen, 2010](#)). It also enhanced reflexivity within the organisation by highlighting different forms of discontent with the functioning of the organisation, including doubts and speculations about TUI’s future, corporate strategy, and its implementation. Some forms of organisational discontent operated as ‘known unknowns’ that staff were generally aware of but did not directly communicate to management. Other forms of organisational discontent were part of an implicit knowledge within the organisation that foregrounded when the innovation unit was being set up and people discussed innovation. The different forms of discontent made the structural limits of innovation in the organisation explicit. Posed as barriers to innovation (cf. [Rodriguez-Sanchez et al., 2019](#)), they functioned as a reservoir of productive arguments that enabled strategising actors to mobilise support for their agendas and actions. In the end, this resulted in a version of the innovation unit – the employee journey – that bolstered TUI’s concurrent corporate strategy and with that the position of its proponents: the TUI management.

In TUI Benelux, the concept of innovation thus eventually strengthened established institutions and actors (cf. [Kooij et al., 2012](#)). In other words, ‘doing innovation’ simultaneously undermined and stimulated innovativeness in this organisation, thereby demonstrating the paradox of innovation ([Bontems, 2014](#)). On the one hand, the discursive presence of innovation in organisational practices generated fundamentally different understandings of the organisation’s future. On the other hand, it illuminated the transformation of this wish to innovate into the conservative practice of gradually adding minor modifications to the status quo. Or, as Bontems (p. 55) puts it, “everything must change so that everything can stay the same”, highlighting innovation’s political dimension: ‘politics’, i.e. coalition building, is not a phase or task than can be delimited and planned in the innovation process (cf. [Rodriguez-Sanchez et al., 2019](#)), but is inherent to the use of the concept in organisations.

### 6.1. The productive role of innovation

This paper studied innovation as a concept with multiple meanings that are produced through organisational practices. This approach diverges from many studies measuring innovativeness, which tend to assume that definitions of innovation are well-understood in organisations (cf. [Tajeddini, 2010](#)). Human aspects of innovation, i.e. the recognition of opportunities, the acceptance of and willingness to take risks and change, are often reduced to proxy variables fit for measurement (see e.g. [Fraj et al., 2015](#); [Kallmuenzer & Peters, 2018](#); [Martínez-Román et al., 2015](#)). The resulting statistics on innovation and related terminology depict innovation as a technical matter and obscure that innovation involves many different negotiations with uncertain outcomes.

This approach also deviates from studies examining the innovation process and its sources (see e.g. [Lowe, Williams, Shaw, & Cudworth, 2012](#); [Nordin & Hjalager, 2017](#); [Smith et al., 2016](#)). These studies also highlight innovation’s inherent uncertainty, but focus on the (combined) character traits and cognition, i.e. the acquired knowledge and skills, of specific (collaborating) people. Both literatures display an actor-focused interpretation of agency (cf. [Garud et al., 2014](#)). Contributing to and at the same time diverging from these bodies of literature, we examined the possibility that the concept of innovation, through its presence and use in organisational practices, also accrues agency.

Our study showed that the concept of innovation served as an open concept to ‘store’ a multiplicity of interpretations. This makes innovation not only an attractive management idea, but also a political device in organisations ([Czarniawska, 2009](#)). Strategising actors operating under the innovation banner can pursue different goals as they turn circulating interpretations into productive narratives and mobilise support for their agendas, without disclosing the disparities that would be obvious if the innovation lexicon were more exact ([Bontems, 2014](#)).

These narratives necessarily fluctuate to maintain their function as “trigger for actions towards goals that are forever changing” (Garud et al., 2014, p. 1181). In our case, the evolving enactment of distinct organisational representations about the organisation of change – the ‘innovation engine’ and ‘employee journey’ – created impressions of knowing, of collective reasoning and of consensus that is necessary to maintain coordination in an organisation (cf. Kooij et al., 2012; Van Assche et al., 2020). Thus, ‘innovation’ can become productive through its conceptual vagueness. Vagueness allows actors to contextualise innovation through evolving narratives that gradually add more specific meanings to the concept and delineate innovation in an organisation (cf. Garud et al., 2014). This raises implications for (tourism) innovation research.

### 6.2. Innovation beyond accomplishment

The findings of our study open up analytical space to evaluate the productive role of innovation as a concept for the creation and adoption of novelty in tourism organisations. We therefore encourage researchers measuring innovativeness to treat vagueness as an important empirical feature of innovation, rather than as a definitional and methodological obstacle inhibiting its accurate measurement (see e.g. Montresor, 2018; Camisón & Monfort-Mir, 2012). Innovation accumulates different meanings that result in site-specific effects that are not easily foreseen or masterminded (cf. Kooij et al., 2012). We argue that it is precisely the anticipated and unanticipated, wanted and unwanted, reality effects that simultaneously strengthen and limit innovativeness in organisations. They can turn discussions about innovation into actual innovation, or its opposite. Rather than veiling innovation’s conceptual vagueness with presupposed substance (Van Assche et al., 2014), studies measuring innovativeness in organisations, we believe, should acknowledge these contradictory effects. Innovativeness thus, is best observed as an emergent effect embedded in distinct organisational practices. To acknowledge this specificity, studies can use more proximate (micro- or meso-level) performance indicators (Guérard et al., 2013), or develop context-specific indicators in collaboration with actors in the organisation.

For the same reason, we call for researchers examining the innovation process to foreground innovation’s political dimension in their studies. Coalition building, rather than a processual stage or task that can be delimited and planned (cf. e.g. Rodriguez-Sanchez et al., 2019), can be viewed as integral to innovation itself; narratives play a prominent role in this process (Garud et al., 2014). The accomplishments that individuals describe when describing their innovation journeys can result from prior intention or hindsight attribution and are strengthened through observation (Van Assche et al., 2020). We therefore believe that there is value in evaluating the accounts of these innovators not only for content-related aspects (see e.g. Lowe et al., 2012; Nordin & Hjalager, 2017), but also for their productive functions.

And lastly, we invite practitioners to evaluate innovation beyond output-based performance indicators. In (tourism) business and beyond, innovation is generally understood and represented in the context of competitiveness. In this frame, the difference between successful and failed innovation equates the realisation of distinct outputs – new products, technologies, processes, et cetera – that are expected to achieve a (competitive) advantage for organisations (see Pikkemaat et al., 2019). This frame, we conclude, is too narrow: innovation comprises generative and transformative functions in organisation. Output is an important aspect of innovation, but requires and results from divergent interpretations and ideas about novelty and its limitations in organisation. A one-sided focus on output, thus, risks failing to grasp these other important functions of innovation. Process-based indicators, such as indicators that capture the ability of an organisation to reflect on its own practices and learn from its successes and failures, are equally important.

### 6.3. Final remarks

Innovation will remain prominent in organisations, as a discourse, a goal, boardroom rhetoric, as practice and so on, not less so in the (post-) COVID-19 era. Actors pursuing change, like the TUI Benelux staff, will always run up against structural limits of some kind (Akrich et al., 2002a, 2002b). Ultimately, their desire for recognition drives submission to and mastery of the dominant organisational discourse (Laine, Meriläinen, Tienari, & Vaara, 2016). In TUI, as we showed, this is a discourse of corporate venturing: maintaining profitability for the company’s shareholders. In times of crisis, this discourse arguably gains prominence. Successful corporate venturing requires top-level coordinated responses to secure shareholder and related executive interests. At the same time, top-down coordination and control progressively limits space for open-dialogue, productive conflicts and misunderstandings, and the consideration of new ideas. In the case of TUI Benelux, this contributed to the rigidities that limit the kind of innovation deemed necessary by those working to instigate change from within.

There are various ways to soften these rigidities and strengthen the adaptive capacities of efficiency-driven organisations. Reflexivity at board level can be strengthened (see Doz & Kosonen, 2010) and organisational structures that separate exploration from exploitation can be installed (see O’Reilly & Tushman, 2004). We believe that acknowledging and stimulating the productive role of innovation as an open concept in organisations can smoothen the entire process. Open concepts enable actors to mediate present and future uncertainties (Kooij et al., 2012), like those presented by the current COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020). They accommodate constant adaptation, also when actors cannot admit this: plans and policies rarely work out as intended, yet their presence in organisations is essential (Van Assche et al., 2020). To make innovation more productive within an organisation, the vagueness of this concept should therefore be cherished rather than scorned.

### Credit author statement

**Harald Buijtendijk:** Conceptualisation; Methodology; Investigation; Formal analysis; Validation; Project administration; Writing – original draft. **Joost van Heinigen:** Conceptualisation; Methodology; Investigation; Formal analysis; Data curation; Validation; Resources; Project administration, **Martijn Duineveld:** Writing – review & editing; Supervision.

### Impact statement

Our paper’s main contribution is that it provides an alternative, reflexive approach for understanding, evaluating, and implementing innovation in (tourism) organisations. Key beneficiaries are (tourism) practitioners who seek to instigate change from within. The approach shifts focus from innovations themselves to the productive role of innovation as a concept for creating novelty in organisations. Innovation is not only a goal that has to be reached or an activity that requires specific expertise and resources; actors need to actively carry out – and debate – innovation in organisations. By making the resulting wanted and unwanted, anticipated and unanticipated reality effects of innovation in an organisation explicit, the approach accommodates evaluation beyond accomplished results. In this way, the structural limits of innovation within organisations can be softened to strengthen their adaptive capacity. In times of crisis, this is particularly relevant and urgent.

### Declaration of competing interest

No.

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