Designers as the Determinants of Aesthetic Innovations

Aesthetic innovations have become increasingly important appropriation mechanisms for firms. Since 2003, the number of design patent applications (to protect aesthetic innovations) has tripled compared to doubling in the numbers of both patent and trademark applications. However, despite the growing interest of firms in aesthetic innovations, knowledge on their determinants is limited. Work on labor mobility with in the innovation studies literature focuses mainly on discussion of scientists as crucial for creating technological innovations. This paper adds to work on labor mobility and innovation by examining whether this holds in the case of designers’ mobility and aesthetic innovations. Does the hiring of a new designer generate more aesthetic innovations than in a matched firm, which does not hire a designer? What is the importance of prior experience with aesthetic innovation in the receiving firm for the firm's absorptive capacity linked to translating the hiring of a designer into aesthetic innovation? We use a unique dataset containing information on firms, their hiring of designers, and their aesthetic innovation activity measured by design applications (design patents). Our findings show that hiring a designer does increase the likelihood of producing an aesthetic innovation. Hence, designers are a determinant of aesthetic innovations. However, in order to benefit fully from hiring a designer the firm needs prior experience in aesthetic innovation.