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# Technological change in the Norwegian whaling industry: A case-study in the use of patent-statistics as a technology indicator

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## Abstract

This paper presents an example of the use of patent statistics as a technology indicator in one industry. The first part deals with the problem of interpretation. Through examination of several other partial technology indicators, it is concluded that at least in this industry, patent statistics provide a reliable indicator, not only for the timing of inventions, but for the timing of innovations and diffusion as well. The reason is that the intervals between the stages in the innovation process are very short. This contradicts evidence from many other industries, and it is therefore emphasized that generalizations are unwarranted.

The second part of this paper deals with the possible causes of technological change in Norwegian whaling. The methodology is inspired by J. Schmookler's work. Thus, the

patents are correlated with other indicators of economic development in the industry. But while Schmookler's view is that the patent activity is determined by social demand and economic growth, the conclusions for the Norwegian whaling industry point in the opposite direction: the technological transformation that took place during the 1920s and early 1930s was forced upon the firms in their efforts to cut costs, which was achieved by rationalizing production and catching methods in line with a downward price trend for whale oil.



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† The main part of this paper was first presented to the 1980 OECD conference on science and technology indicators. The background for the paper is found in the author's thesis in economic history; *Theory of Innovations, Patents and Technological Development in Norwegian Whaling, 1860–1968*, The Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration, Bergen, 1980.

— The author wishes to acknowledge the valuable comments which he has received from Fritz Hodne and Richard Matland.

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