

Chapter 12

Practical Relevance of Management Research: The Role of Doctoral Program Graduates

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ABSTRACT

Recently, a number of academics and practitioners have questioned the relevance and practical impact of management research. This study, based on an analysis of interviews with 20 doctoral program graduates, demonstrates that such claims are not fully warranted. Instead, academic research reaches practitioners because graduates of doctoral business programs act as knowledge-transfer intermediaries that aggregate, summarize, communicate, and implement findings reported in academic publications. Demand for evidence-based knowledge in the practitioner's environment determines his or her probability of applying academic knowledge. However, not all academic knowledge is perceived as useful by practitioners, and limited access to academic literature is a major impediment to the application of scholarly findings in practice. The practitioners' connection with academia after graduation influences their probability of using academic literature. Academic journals also have the potential to disseminate scholarly knowledge beyond the academic world.

INTRODUCTION

The debate about the perceived irrelevance of academic business research dates back to the 1980s when scholars, practitioners, and public officials started criticizing scholars for placing priority on scientific rigor over relevance to industry (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Knights, 2008; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

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The disconnect between academics and practitioners has been deemed “the Great Divide” because the theoretical contributions of researchers are rarely implemented in practice (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001). The very value and relevance of academic research has been called into question as a result of the perceived lack of applicability and generalizability of academic knowledge (Benjamin & O'Reilly, 2011). For example, the utilization of academic research on a regular basis by human resource managers is below one percent (Rynes et al., 2001), and information systems professionals are generally unaware of academic research in their field (Pearson, Pearson, & Shim, 2005). As a result, a flurry of papers has been published which reflects on this divide between academia and practice (Jennex, 2001; Rottman, 2008; Simmons et al., 2001; Starkey & Madan, 2001). Literature suggests that the “academic-practitioner gap” exists in virtually all social science disciplines including management (Bartunek & McKenzie, 2018), and researchers should focus on the actual value of their research by asking unique questions, addressing problems that others cannot address, and consolidating their discipline's fragmented body of knowledge (Hassan, 2014; Hassan & Mathiassen, 2018). At the same time, all of these works clearly emphasize the importance of transferring academic knowledge to practice (Straub & Ang, 2011).

There are several factors that justify the importance of the transfer of academic knowledge to practice. First, in the current knowledge-based economy, organizations must utilize recent and relevant knowledge in their decision-making to remain competitive (Parent, Roy, & St-Jaques, 2007). Second, the volume of scientific research of a nation is positively correlated with its overall wealth (King, 2004; Rousseau & Rousseau, 1998). This correlation, however, becomes even stronger when a larger proportion of scientific discoveries reach practitioners. Third, the application of academic research has been shown to increase an organization's sales and productivity (Fontana, Geuna, & Matt, 2006). Fourth, empirical evidence suggests a positive relationship between the commercialization of academic findings and organizational performance levels (Susanty et al., 2011). In order to ensure the success of an academic discipline, it must have an impact on the state of both theory and practice (Jennex & Olfman, 2005, 2006). At the same time, managers see value in academic findings as long as these may help them improve their efficiency and effectiveness (Heisig et al., 2016; Lönnqvist, 2017). Therefore, calls have been made for studies that examine possible transfer methods of evidence-based knowledge to practitioners (Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007).

Knowledge refers to people's ability to act based on the information they possess (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Knowledge provides a justification and motivation to alter decisions (Hannabuss, 2001). Accordingly, industry practitioners require knowledge to develop and implement action strategies. Therefore, academic knowledge is only relevant to industry if it motivates practitioners to take action inspired by its content (Taylor, Artman, & Woelfer, 2012). However, prior investigations have identified a glaring gap between the knowledge presented in scholarly publications and the use of this knowledge. Booker, Bontis, and Serenko (2008) studied how knowledge management professionals access and utilize academic research in their daily work. They found that, while practitioners value academic research, it is the accessibility of this research that produces the detachment. This accessibility refers to the receiver's (i.e., the practitioner's) ability to effectively consume knowledge. Simmons et al. (2001) also established that the process of knowledge transfer mostly fails on the side of the receiver. Serenko, Bontis, and Hull (2011) argued that future research examining the transfer of academic knowledge to practice should focus on knowledge transfer mechanisms, specifically indirect knowledge transfer channels. Direct channels of knowledge transfer work when an individual accesses, understands, and executes the knowledge directly from the source (i.e., from an academic publication) (Almond, 2001). Unfortunately, direct knowledge dissemination channels are underutilized by practitioners. In contrast, knowledge is transferred through

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