

## Management research: why are so few of its ideas taken up?

There is a debate among academics as to whether research ought to be more relevant to industry — but some remain sceptical

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In the past half century, the number of business schools, faculty and academic publications has mushroomed. One estimate, from the business school accreditation body AACSB, suggests their total research activities cost almost \$4bn a year.

Yet these research findings often don't penetrate far from academic journals into what might be considered their target market: senior leaders in business, government and other organisations beyond their authors' universities.

There is a growing discussion, both inside and outside business schools, about how far research output ought to be measured by the reach of ideas that are taken up in practice.

Sharon Hodgson, a former senior consultant with IBM and PwC, and now dean of Ivey Business School in Canada, has no doubt about the urgency of closing this so-called "relevance gap" through tighter connections between professors and practitioners, which she has made a priority.

"There is a lot of money and expertise in universities, but a lot of research is not going to market or takes too long," she says. Academia is very insular, so Ivey's goal is to accelerate and broaden the innovation cycle.

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**Who has the right to determine what the right mix of style and content and research is relevant?**

Tim Devinney, professor, Manchester Alliance Business School

A [recent analysis of papers](#) published between 2015 and the end of 2020 suggested few business school authors predicted or explored the managerial and economic consequences of a pandemic, even months after Covid-19 emerged. Despite a surge in publications cited online and on social media on these themes, most were written by authors outside the leading business schools.

There are opportunities for business school faculty to connect with wider audiences, but they are relatively underused. Beth Daley, editor of The Conversation US, a website that publishes articles for general readers written by academics, says she receives "an enormous number of pitches on politics, health, environment and science, but less on business, art and religion — although they are among our best-read material."

Academics receive scant credit for writing in “bridging publications” aimed at people in business, such as Harvard Business Review, or for the ultimate uptake of their ideas in policy or organisations — something that is far more difficult to track.



Sharon Hodgson, left, of Ivey Business School, and Usha Haley, at Wichita State University, suggest that academia is too insular. For Tim Devinney, at Alliance Manchester Business School, the drive for increased relevance may be misguided © Charlie Bibby/Benjamin Statham/FT

Others caution that encouraging dissemination of academics’ ideas can be counterproductive, even dangerous. As Sumantra Ghoshal, the founding dean of the Indian School of Business, warned in a [paper](#) in 2005, “many of the worst excesses of recent management practices have their roots in a set of ideas that have emerged from business school academics over the last 30 years”.

He cited cases widely studied by business school students praising companies such as Enron before they collapsed, and the application of academic concepts to justify excessive executive bonuses, distrustful over- supervision of employees and antipathy to regulators.

For Ghoshal, one of the most influential but negative ideas originating in academia was the focus on maximising shareholder value preached by the economist (not from a business school) Milton Friedman.

Instead, he said, they should place renewed emphasis on synthesis, teaching and application of ideas, and engagement with business.

Recent initiatives suggest more applied research can be beneficial in a wider business and societal context. The FT’s [Responsible Business Education Awards](#) have highlighted academics who have identified and helped reduce racial bias in insurance algorithms, boosted organ donations and mitigated crop losses for African smallholder farmers.

One barrier to change is structural. Business school research is largely supported by tuition fees and alumni donations. They have fewer of the larger external grants from governments, philanthropists and businesses that go to science, medicine or engineering faculties — in exchange for an expectation of useful results.

Another block is an increasing trend to promote academics based on a narrow measure of using metrics to track publications and their citations in prestigious peer-reviewed journals — which are read almost exclusively by other academics.

The Financial Times has its own FT50 list of influential business school academic journals, a component of its annual global MBA ranking. Its ranking team is exploring ways to broaden the research assessment to track not only academic rigour, but also resonance with a broader audience and relevance to societal needs.

Usha Haley at Wichita State University, a specialist on the impact of research, says: “We are not rewarded within the systems in which we operate for having external impact through research. We are rewarded for contributing incrementally to the knowledge pool. Yet very little of what we do actually captures policymakers’ or managers’ attention.”

For some academics, the drive for increased relevance and application is misguided. Professor Tim Devinney, at Alliance Manchester Business School, says: “Who has the right to determine what the right mix of style and content and research is relevant? One aspect of academia that is critical is freedom of expression and thought.”

Ultimately, academics’ greatest influence may come less through research than teaching to students and executives, the vast majority of whom then move into or return to business. Julian Birkinshaw, professor of strategy and entrepreneurship at London Business School, cautions that much academic research serves in any case more to identify and scrutinise existing management practices than to develop new ones.

But pressure for reform continues. Andrew Karolyi, dean of Cornell’s SC Johnson College of Business and incoming head of the Responsible Research in Business and Management network of academics, says his school has appointed an associate dean for strategy and societal impact.

“Our hope is that more faculty members see the potential to engage with industry, that reminds them why they may have decided to seek a career as a management scholar in the first place.”