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Strangers in a Strange Land? Reflections on Practice and Theory

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Is the academic research done at Business Schools relevant to business? How is it used and does it influence or affect business decisions and operations? These questions were first posed to me four years ago as I transitioned from retirement to academia. My initial response was: No way! Academic research has no relevance or impact on how business is conducted because it is essentially a retelling of what has already happened!

Teaching for four years has provided an opportunity to become better acquainted with the culture, goals and objectives of higher education and to gain insight into the rationale, emphasis and process for research. While it represents less experience than my years in business, my life in academia provides a basis for commentary on my initial opinion about academic research.

In 30+ years as a business executive, exposure to research came in the form of frequent surveys submitted to my office, the occasional presentation by an academic/consultant at an industry meeting or conference, and from research data and information incorporated into the work of industry consultants. Overall, the material was viewed as a study of historical events; work anonymously gathered, tabulated and analyzed to yield lessons learned, case studies and theories about the cause and effect of success or failure. While providing food for thought, the timeliness of delivery and relevance to issues at hand marginalized its value. There was also an underlying skepticism in this view: How can someone not experienced in ‘the real world’ offer any practical advice or solutions to the complex business problems facing managers?

A different perspective existed for the works of noted authors/academics/consultants such as Peter Drucker, Tom Peters, Michael Porter, et al. This group of thought leaders is effective at crystallizing events and trends in a form that business people can relate to. For example, Drucker’s view of flattened organizations or pluralistic society or Porter’s competitive model and value chain theories represented broad strategic commentaries. Senior managers read and discussed these works, and to a good extent they were viewed more as business documents than research results because of the author’s extensive involvement with the business community. They were perceived as ‘one of us’ rather than as academics.

However, these works were not as widely read at lower levels of management and many MBA students receive an introduction to their works in the classroom rather than the workplace. Also worth noting is that first hand experience in working with some of these authors left the impression that they tended to oversimplify the obstacles to implementing their ideas. While in the abstract their thinking may be valid, application was far more complex because each implementation was unique due to organizational and cultural factors.

'Real world' business experience is derived from participation in and the ability to influence a wide range of initiatives and events in a very dynamic and competitive environment. An individual or business succeeds based in good part on their ability to meet objectives in high risk and unpredictable situations. Results generally can be defined as protecting and growing the assets of the company, improving revenue or reducing expenses. Technical expertise, leadership, political skills and relevant experience are some of the traits exhibited by people who succeed in the business world. Also very necessary is the ability to acquire and apply data and information to problem solving along with a heavy dose of intuition and judgment. Individual effectiveness in these areas translates to greater responsibilities and greater rewards.

For a career that started in the late 60s and continued through the dot-com explosion, mine included numerous and possibly unique ground shifts in business history. Among the many changes:

- the emergence and growth of foreign competition evolving into today's global economy
- the decline of traditional American industries like steel and automobiles
- dramatic economic cycles tied to interest rates, recession and other factors
- a variety of 'guru' inspired efficiency strategies ranging from six sigma quality to downsizing and outsourcing
- the 'softening' of management demeanor via transactional analysis, empowerment and self managed team initiatives
- adoption of numerous 'silver bullets' in pursuit of excellence such as Business Process Reengineering
- the frenetic need to merge with or acquire other businesses linked to the need to satisfy financial markets
- the rise and fall of the conglomerate as a successful model
- the often questioned to the now glorified use of technology in the workplace

Many of these events ran concurrently, challenging my ability and those of other managers to adapt while moving into the unknown. Leading people and controlling events to improve the business while dealing with the latest controlled or uncontrolled variable was stressful and demanding.

While on the job experience was the primary influence in my personal growth, it was supplemented by company sponsored management development programs. In addition, membership in industry and peer group associations provided a forum to share experiences and network with colleagues. Both are generally considered investment in training and development. In my early years as a manager, the company's investment in formal training classes and seminars was extremely helpful since my undergraduate work was in Liberal Arts. The field of business and management, in particular, was unfamiliar territory. Organizations such as the American Management Association and others offered a variety of training courses both at their location and on the company's premises for initial and advanced training in management.

For me, first hand experience and occasional training fueled personal growth and skill development and shaped a perspective and operating style tailored to the environment. As more responsibility was assumed, management skills were refined, tuned and adapted because the

nature of interactions with people and events became more complex and diverse. Changes in the environment meant adapting methods, procedures and operating style to that change – new company, new organization, new management, etc. Information gathering, communication and diplomacy become more important within the arena of the technical and operational aspects of the job. In particular, timely and accurate information to support the decision making process is vital. For example, involvement in a merger or acquisition, the development of a new product or marketing strategy or simply developing next years budget generates requirements for information in many areas such as demographics, economic forecasts, technology futures etc. that may not be readily available within the business.

This need for information represents a significant challenge for managers. The dual management priorities for most executives – effectively running the business while concurrently developing a vision for the future – leave little time to directly gather information. Operational data is less of an issue because it can be addressed internally on a rapid basis utilizing IT systems. Strategy development on the other hand requires a broad view of the environment, competition and the marketplace. These cannot and should not be developed internally because it would be too subjective and narrow. Gathering information on competitors and the market place can best be done by independent organizations and the trends and projections they provide are a key ingredient for the business plan. Filtering this information with equal parts intuition, calculated risk and business necessity from the management team create differentiation in business strategies.

Various organizations specialize in providing strategic information, some by specific industry, and others serving multiple industries. Businesses have membership in these organizations; or utilize them on a contract or retainer basis. Generic research may be incorporated or more often, they are chartered to perform custom research and analysis for the business. At times, academic professionals may interact directly with the business e.g. Porter, Hammer et al or more often, their research and thinking will be utilized by the third party organization doing the research. Of the various areas where academic research is encountered – training, seminars, business meetings, literature and strategy development – an assessment of value comes down to the quality of the information - relevance, accessibility, timeliness and context. These represent the challenge for academic research to becoming more meaningful to business organizations.

It might be helpful to categorize the types of academic research and then speak to these categories. The two that will be used are raw or basic research, and historical or applied research.

Basic research done in academic institutions clearly has been influential on business, particularly in technical functions. The exploration of thoughts, ideas and the experimentation to validate or disprove them has provided views of the future that regularly influence business strategies and plans. It is the look to the future that provides the value. For my field of Information Technology, research in the areas of ergonomics, human computer interface, productivity, information management and programming languages were factored into near term plans while research in the areas of robotics, nanotechnology, quantum physics, DNA processors, played a role in long term thinking.

Use of applied research was more often found in development of broader business strategies that could benefit from its historical context. Environmental and demographic analysis was regularly incorporated into marketing and product development planning. The study of fertility rates and the near and long term effects on populations and in turn taxes, social programs etc. comes to mind as information used for planning purposes. As mentioned earlier, access to this information came more through industry intermediaries rather than from academics directly so it is difficult to assess the source of value. The general perception was that the provider, i.e. industry organization, had an expertise and that the information was a synthesis of ideas and research from a variety of sources including their own.

While there is inherent value in research, finding what is needed in a timely way is an obstacle. The amount of academic research done across all institutions far outweighs what is ultimately used by business. This may be due to the primary emphasis being establishing and maintaining currency in one's field with a secondary purpose being use by business. Contrast this with professional publications in various functional areas such as IT which are totally focused on the business market. These are sponsored by business and managed, produced and distributed with business efficiency. These paper and web based periodicals and journals are both topical and analytical providing much of the same material academic research seeks to provide but with currency and context. Case studies, interviews, best practices based on proven methods and open forums on issues serve as valuable resources for managers in a variety of fields in business. Unlike the volumes of work produced on campuses across the world, industry publications are very accessible following a 'push' model of delivery. Seeking out academic research requires knowledge of the storage system, time and tools not generally available to business people. Relevant material may be available but it is not being delivered via email or the inbox. So in addition to content value, the pragmatic aspect of accessibility is a challenge for the relevance of the research.

The immediacy and context of information also strongly influences its perceived value. Consideration for the current influence of politics, culture, competition and other factors creates context. History can and does provide valuable lessons and there is ample opportunity for the historical nature of academic research to mine and propagate the value. The key is in the perspective taken, the timeliness of the conclusions and recommendations, and the mode of delivery. In business there is rarely the luxury of time to reflect and go back again to revise assumptions and conclusions. In business those who succeed do it by being decisive; those who fail are the ones that cannot make decisions. It could be argued that the academic works in a purer more objective environment and therefore the work is less subject to outside corrupting influences. But that may result in more absolute or generic conclusions missing the variables at work in the 'real world'

Those noted academics that have influenced business balance research and analysis with real world issues to produce something not previously known or fully understood. They combine the process of academic rigor while benefiting from immersion in the real world of which they write and are assumed expert. It is an effective combination but not always available to the average faculty member. This involvement allows them to capture those business variables that often escape routine efforts in applied research. Unique cultural influences, politics, inherent

institutional biases and individual idiosyncrasies are not readily apparent in surveys or random interviews.

An open question at this point is whether academics risk isolation in their practice. If the primary purpose of research is as stated above – establishing and maintaining currency in one’s field – then isolation may not be an issue because it is fulfilling its mission. However, if the objective of research is to directly benefit some external organization, then they may risk isolation because the world of work is moving at light speed and they must find some way to add value in this environment. The need is for more articulate ambassadors who can tie together the past and the present. Over time, the perceived wisdom of my decisions was simply based on having seen the same problem or issue in another guise. The business world lives on a steady diet of reinvented problems and challenges. In the field of technology, components and applications changed but the people issues – change management, business need, organizational dynamics, etc. stayed relatively constant. Focusing on technology was the wrong approach to solving the problem. Focusing on the implications of technology was at the heart of the matter. The ability to articulate this context and put it in perspective is an opportunity for those doing research. There are many opportunities to tie historical research to a real business issue in a timely and effective way and to influence business operations and strategy. Absent this context, the immediacy of the findings and ease of access and availability, the majority of academic research will not optimize the efforts of those who do it.

Peter Daboul began his career in Information Technology in 1967 as a programmer/analyst, and his industry experience included executive level positions in banking, insurance and manufacturing in addition to having served as Chief Operating Officer of a software subsidiary of ITT Corporation. In 2002, after two years of retirement, Mr. Daboul joined the School of Business at Western New England College as Executive-in-Residence. He received his undergraduate degree from Providence College and graduate degree from American International College. Email: pdaboul@wnec.edu