



EDITORIAL

Preparing for evidence-based management

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Many of the world's information systems departments and institutes are housed in university business schools and colleges. Many of our academics are graduates of business schools. The world's business schools are diverse, often aiming to offer unique and outstanding scholarly environments. University business schools differ from other kinds of colleges because these are the nexus of two rather different cultures. On the one hand business schools are part of the university, a quiet retreat where knowledge is created, preserved, disseminated, and rewarded. On the other hand, business schools are part of the commercial world, a noisy, fast-paced, hustle where capital is created, accumulated, and rewarded.

Many institutes in business schools struggle with the issue of relevance vs rigor. If you think this struggle is only in information systems, you have not been dining in the commons. It also spreads across accounting (Foster & Young, 1997), management (Flynn, 2008), organizational studies (Daft & Lewin, 2008), even marketing and finance (Wind, 2008). The issue not only regards business research, but also business education (Clinebell & Clinebell, 2008). The gap is believed by some to be impossible to bridge (Kieser & Leiner, 2009), yet to others it must be bridged (Mentzer, 2008), and indeed others still believe it has been bridged (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009).

Perhaps business researchers are taking on too much responsibility for this issue. The assumption that prevails is that ivory-tower university business researchers are investigating uninteresting subjects and producing useless results. Why does this assumption hold? The vast majority of the concern is on the academic end. A review of publications indexed in ABI/INFORM (ABII) indicates about two-thirds of the articles on the subject appear in the scholarly press, and most of the rest are about the needs of education. Our business schools are producing prodigious volumes of research. Yet nowhere do we find widespread published opinions from the practice side that the material is wrong or useless. If business research is so useless, where is the feedback, the complaints, or the protests from the practical consumers? It is not that commerce is rejecting business research ... commerce seems completely unaware such research exists.

Understanding the cause of ignorance is an important foundation for deciding how (or if) it should be addressed. Perhaps researchers are choosing the wrong topics, or applying the wrong methods, or being too abstract, or writing impenetrable reports, or publishing in research journals that are obscure and inaccessible? Are researchers failing to adequately explain to practitioners how to carry the ideas into practice? All of these diagnoses assume that the problem lies on the production side of the breakdown, and not on the consumer side. What if the pathology lies in poor practice? Do business professionals know how to access business research? Do they know how to translate it into practice? Do they understand its value?

There are other professional communities that do value research. Practical professionals follow the research, and use the knowledge to advance their practice. Perhaps the paragon in this area is medicine. Evidence-based medicine is promoted as a paradigm in which practice has

timely and easy access to research where and when it is needed for making clinical decisions (Rosenberg & Donald, 1995). The concept has been translated into business under the rubric 'evidence-based management' (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006a, b). While evidence-based management is not exactly the same as research-based management, it is fact-based. With evidence-based management, solid facts are valued over conventional wisdom and common practice, not to mention the nonsense from some management fads (Baskerville & Myers, 2009). Academic research from business schools certainly has a role to play in supplying at least some of these facts.

The notion that competent business practitioners should actually *search* for the facts related to their immediate practical problems ought not to be surprising. But does this suggest that research journals, like *EJIS*, should retarget their audience aims to accommodate a wave of interested practicing business professionals? Should *EJIS* and other information systems research journals become more tutorial, and reduce their intellectual distance from that of an MBA textbook?

Let us return to the notion that practicing business professionals should be able to access business research. While we may not expect them to know how to produce high quality research, it does seem reasonable that managers pursuing the best facts available for practicing evidence-based management should be skilled in searching and digesting the business research press. They should be, but are they? To what degree have managers been trained in accessing business research results?

There are important skills necessary for evidence-based management. One of these skills is competence in independently acquiring knowledge from the research press. Development of such skills means that business education should be preparing managers by routinely assigning students (at least the graduate students) research articles as critical readings and discussion topics. If this were a prevalent expectation, information systems professionals would be familiar with *EJIS*, *ISJ*, *MISQ*, etc. Further, while at university, future managers should be able to demonstrate that they can digest, critically read, and apply the research, perhaps to practical case studies at hand.

In the really top business schools, this model is not that uncommon. Indeed it is common to more European university business schools than elsewhere in the world. Some business schools emphasize research more than others. (For example, the MBA at School of Management of the University of Surrey has a separate core module in 'Research in Management'. The Copenhagen Business School Executive MBA is entirely research-based. This is especially dominant in their final 5-month strategy project, in which each student has a professor and a strategy expert from industry as coaches. In this project, the student must apply sound scientific research to practice.)

However, business schools around the world seem to be increasingly focussing on smooth, easy delivery of pre-packaged ideas. Education becomes a business supplying knowledge to student customers. Knowledge may ideally be delivered to customers as a flow of beautifully organized, full-color bullet points, simplified diagrams, and textbooks that boil the tough ideas down into elegant take-aways. Where the priority is on focussing student workload, such as the case in many executive programs, it takes great skill and care to craft these programs. Unfortunately, the efforts to make the tough ideas seem easy may unintentionally inhibit the skill development necessary for students to handle discovery of such tough ideas in the wild. The result may create managers who are ill-prepared in their ability to usefully acquire the knowledge needed to manage effectively in an evidence-based setting. As a result, these managers may be guided by the half-truths and nonsense that is sometimes prevalent in the popular business press. Even when managers recognize the shortcomings in the popular press, unless they have the skills needed to access business research, their only recourse is to engage consultants who can boil down the tough ideas for them. (Unfortunately, poorly chosen consultants may sometimes just repackage the half-truths and nonsense.)

To service the need for evidence-based management, management education programs that have moved toward textbook-based courses may find an increasing need to return to broader reading lists that include not only textbooks and practice articles, but also research journal articles, proceedings articles, and scholarly books. Programs anchored on more broadly based readings and subsequent discussions will help students develop skills in locating research, digesting its contents, critically reviewing its meaning, and applying the knowledge in practice. With this approach, we need not 'dumb down' our research articles (or *EJIS*), but 'smarten up' the future readers in practice.

At hand in this issue

This number of *EJIS* is largely dedicated to our special issue on RFID research. This special issue is introduced through a separate article by our guest editors. However, we decided to publish one opinion article in the current number, even though it was submitted and accepted through our normal review process. While this particular article is not part of the special RFID issue, it does regard RFID. It seems natural to present it here. The article is 'Challenges Associated with RFID Tag Implementations in Supply Chains' by Gaurav Kapoor, Wei Zhou, and Selwyn Piramuthu of the University of Florida and ESCP Europe. The authors walk us through their analysis of the major issues that are inhibiting more rapid and widespread adoption of this compelling technology. This article provides an excellent complement to the special issue that follows it.

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