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The Virtuous Cycle of Practitioner-Based Research: How Academics Continually Break New Ground in Management

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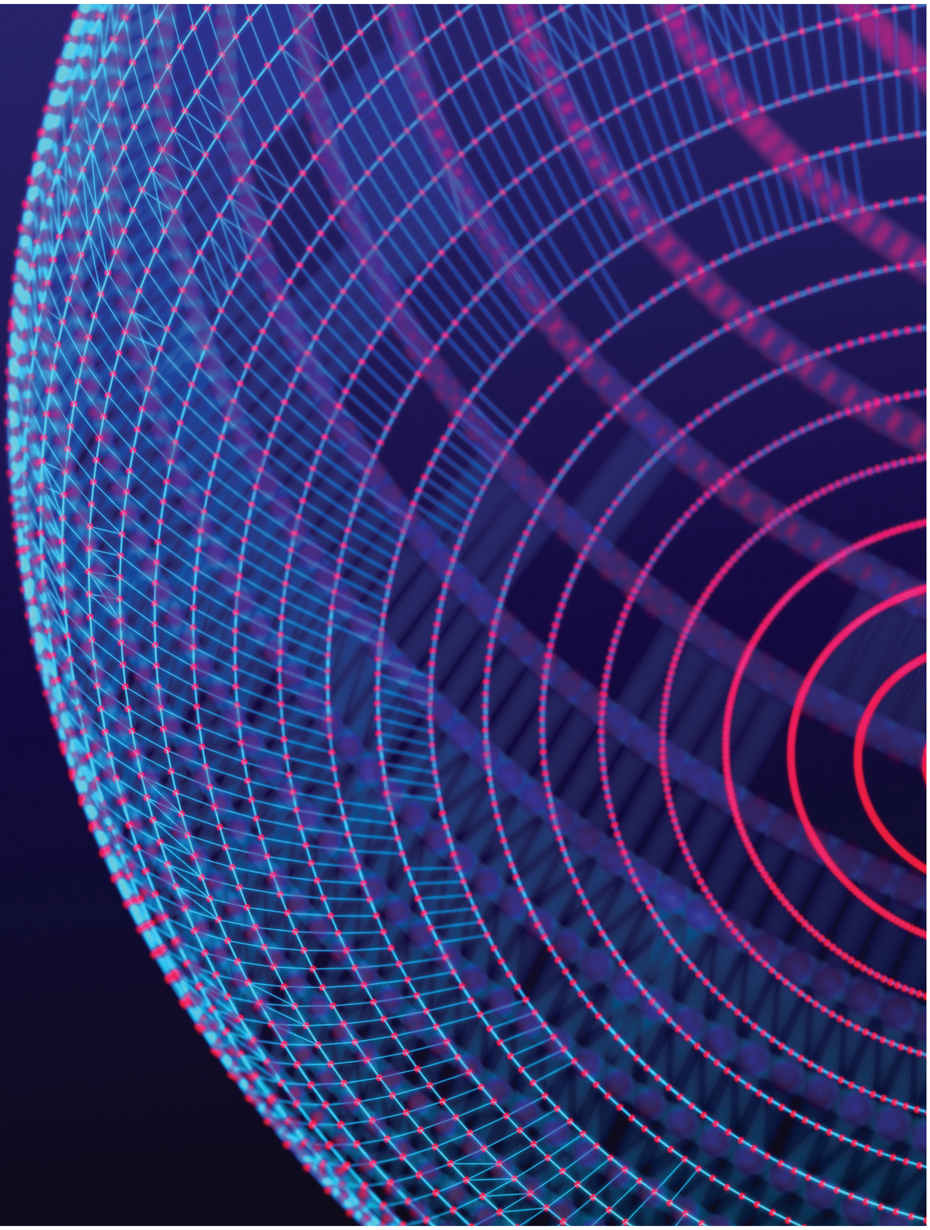
Business Schools around the world are making a pivot and encouraging their faculty to generate more practitioner-oriented research and publications aimed at business leaders and practicing managers. With extensive experience in practitioner-based research and publication, Gregory Unruh offers readers useful insights into what he has learned over the years and an actionable framework for developing and publishing high impact practitioner articles.



In 2000, I was hired for my first academic job, an assistant professorship at IE Business School in Madrid. IE had an established executive education program which facilitated faculty access to managers. I used that network to reach out to executives who were experimenting with circular economy ideas. While the circular economy's closed-loop supply chain methods are more common today, twenty years ago the concept was on the managerial cutting edge. Through interviews and case writing, I discovered several circular economy principles significant enough to pitch to the Harvard Business Review.

As junior faculty, I reached out to my tenured colleagues to tell them I had a shot at an HBR article. Their response flattened me. "Oh, you can publish that stuff if you want," I was told, "but it's not going to count for tenure." And then, menacingly, "In fact, it'll probably count against you."

The conventional wisdom is that practitioner-centered publication is not a real academic pursuit and that it's bad for your career. Critics marshal a battery of arguments: The publication outlets aren't peer reviewed; Harried managers don't have time for academics; There are no mentors to show you the ropes; And most importantly, it takes time away from the real academic work of trying to publish in A-list journals.

While some of these criticisms are valid, in the ensuing years, I discovered a surprising truth that gives the lie to academic wisdom. When done successfully, a practitioner-centered approach can actually be great for your career. It can even beat naysaying colleagues at their own game; blowing them out on a key indicator of academic performance - citations - the academic coin of the realm.

But don't take my word alone. I interviewed academic colleagues at leading institutions like Wharton, Dartmouth, USC and Ashridge Strategic Management Centre about their experiences with practitioner-centered work; this is their story too. (SEE BOX) And, of course, beyond this group of interviewees, there are many academics who have thrived doing this type of work, some of whom have published foundational articles on their approaches (SEE FURTHER READING).

To be clear, the warnings from my senior faculty colleagues were intended to shield me from the career risks of a practitioner-oriented approach. Practitioner work is not for everyone. The success of the scholars interviewed here is rooted in a commitment to developing skills and perspectives that go far beyond the traditional academic tool kit. For those who succeed, however, the work can be richly rewarding.

In what follows, I'll first tackle some myths about practitioner-based work and publication. I'll then explore a trend in business schools toward taking practitioner research seriously and why it may be a good time to explore this option. Finally, I will present a framework that illustrates how the gurus of the field create a virtuous cycle of practitioner research, an advanced state where success feeds on itself.

INTERVIEWS

- Andrew Campbell, Ashridge Strategic Management Centre
- Peter Cappelli, Wharton School
- Tom Davenport, Babson College George Day, Wharton School
- Vijay Govindarajan, Dartmouth College
- Ann Majchrzak, University of Southern California
- Haig Nalbantian, Mercer

Debunking Myths

Let's start with some of the common myths about practitioner-centered research and publication.

—Myth #1 "Managers are hard to access and don't have the time for academics."—

One of the most common misconceptions academics have is about the managers themselves. That they're time pressed, hard to access, and can't give you the attention needed for research. There is a kernel of truth here. Executives certainly are busy and some are hard to reach.

But managers are no more monolithic than any other group. There are executives who value what an academic perspective can bring to their problems. As George Day put it, "Academics will say that these people are too time pressed, which they are, but get over it. They value insights that will help them do their job better." So, one of the tricks is simply identifying the right type of manager and approaching them with the right mindset. Explain that you're not just trying to get something from them, but rather proposing a beneficial exchange in which you bring a new and rigorous perspective that is valuable to their work. When approached this way you will find that many managers are eager to engage.

You can begin with the myriad professionals who are already involved with your school: alumni, donors, speakers, advisory board members, recruiters, and so forth. But don't stop there. As Tom Davenport explains, "Business schools do have relationships with businesses, but I never had any problem just reaching out to people and saying, 'I'm working on this research project, would you be willing to talk to me for a few minutes about it?' And, in general, they are almost always willing to do it."

—Myth #2 "Journal editors are hard to work with and turn down most submissions."—

This myth reflects the perception that editors at publications like Harvard Business Review and MIT Sloan Management Review are difficult people who spend much of their time joyfully rejecting, or worse ignoring, academic inquiries. Again, this is partially true. The editors of these journals do turn down the vast majority of submissions. HBR, for example, receives thousands of articles every year but publishes only a few dozen. Because print space is limited, rejections are inevitable. But this Darwinian reality is not a reflection of the editors' natures. Although they may neglect your inquiries, as Andrew Campbell remarked, "The editors of these famed journals are more friendly than people often presume. You can actually send them emails and get a reply and communicate with them. And they'll treat you like human beings."

As with managers, it depends on how you approach the relationship. Editors are constantly looking for smart scholars who have useful insights for practitioners. If you bring them an interesting idea that is grounded in current practice, they may well work with you to develop it into an article that resonates with their readers. As you do with academic articles, you should expect time consuming rework and revision. Still, while your first effort will require more persistence and a learning curve, once you've developed a mutually productive relationship, you will find editors responsive to future inquiries.

Why a Practitioner Focus?

Once you get past the myths, you will find both professional and personal reasons to consider a practitioner-centered approach.

The Professional

Business schools are intended to be professional schools which, like those of medicine, law, pharmacy, and social work, were founded to serve practice. Campbell pointed out that, "There's a certain logic that people at business schools should help businesses to perform and manage better." Instead, business schools have come to operate more like graduate schools, serving the interests not of practitioners, but of academics and their siloed disciplines. Vijay Govindarajan explained that, "While there are exceptions, business school faculty have become too narrow in the questions they ask, too siloed in their functional areas, and too discipline-based. We need to create ideas that improve the practice of management. We need rigor and relevance."

Doing so requires that researchers engage with the day-to-day realities of practitioners. Medical school faculty, for example, frequently spend time in hospitals, working directly with patients and interns. In contrast, business faculty are less likely to engage directly in managerial realities like stepping onto a factory floor or sitting in on a boardroom discussion. Ann Majchrzak observed, "That's the difference between managerial professionals and other professions; they actually engage with their community." Govindarajan cited Louis Pasteur as a model, pointing out that Pasteur's impressive professional contributions came from understanding, "why people suffered from different maladies and how preventing them would benefit society. This concurrent quest for fundamental scientific understanding and consideration of real-world utility should be the hallmark of business schools."

Some management academics are reconsidering these questions and arguing for business research that serves the needs of the profession as well as society. The AACSB, for example, has sponsored conferences on research impact and now acknowledges practitioner-oriented work in accreditation reviews. Similarly, twenty-three management schools founded the Responsible Research in Business & Management initiative, which promotes a vision of "business schools and scholars worldwide having successfully transformed their research toward responsible science, producing credible knowledge that is ultimately useful for addressing problems important to business and society." And some disciplines, like production and operations management, have long worked to defend practitioner-centered work (SEE FURTHER READING).

Tom Davenport has repeatedly pioneered innovative management ideas. He has a proven track record of identifying the next 'big thing.' He now sees a transformation of management research underway: "I think we've been on a long swing away from relevance and toward rigor. The pendulum is starting to swing back toward relevance. So, it's a good time to position yourself in this regard."

The Personal

Indeed, as Davenport implies, there are clear personal reasons to consider practitioner-centered work. Most importantly, it can be good for your career. While conventional wisdom holds that practitioner publications are not valid because they aren't peer-reviewed A-list journals, there's a twist. Top journals may signal quality, but a more direct measure of an article's academic impact over time is the number of citations it receives. And it is in citations that many practitioner-based researchers stand out. As the adjoining table shows, successful practitioner-centered researchers rack up citations in the tens of thousands and sometimes more.

Plainly, there is a paradox here. Why are academics citing these scholars' work if they "don't count"? Actually, the answer is pretty straightforward. By engaging with managers and working on what keeps them up at night, you are identifying cutting-edge business problems. By proposing original solutions to these problems, you are also pioneering new management concepts, such that every academic that follows will have to reference your work. So new lines of research really are beneficial, for both the practitioner and the academic.

PIONEERS GET CITED

- Tom Davenport - >100,000 citations George Day – 56,000 citations
- Vijay Govindarajan- > 35,000 citations Ann Majchrzak – 19,000 citations
- Peter Cappelli – 19,000 citations Andrew Campbell - >10,000 citations

But beyond citations, many scholars find doing practitioner-based work more enjoyable than writing yet another article validating an existing theory. Campbell said, "It's a little bit like you're an explorer on an expedition. It feels like that. And it's very exciting." Davenport agreed, "For me, it's been much more stimulating than sitting in my office, writing papers that only a few academics would care about." Davenport finds influencing managerial practice gratifying, "The attention to your work can be personally rewarding. Your work is applied and has an impact on the world. It's nice to have an audience." This psychic income is part of scholars' motivation for making the necessary commitments for successful practitioner work.

Engaging with practitioners can also improve your effectiveness in the classroom. As Campbell put it, practitioner work, "can inform your teaching much more than highly rigorous research. Undergraduates and MBAs would probably not be interested in reading the typical academic article, but practitioner-oriented publications work well for students."

Think about it. How many Academy of Management Review articles have you assigned to your MBA and EMBA students? Govindarajan says, "I quickly realized I never used anything from my academic articles with my MBAs."

Finally, practitioner work often leads to opportunities to travel and speak about your research and also helps you break into executive education programs. And executive teaching puts you in ongoing contact with the very managers you are interested in engaging with, creating a self-reinforcing cycle.

The Virtuous Cycle of Practitioner Research

While practitioner-centered work may not be for every academic, it might well be for you. So how is it done? The basic process involves engaging with a community of practice, selecting the right problem to study, discovering a solution and sharing it with the community to verify its efficacy. This process can facilitate a self-sustaining cycle of engagement and publication that may allow you to produce an ongoing stream of breakthrough management concepts.

Connect with a Community and Understand its Concerns

To begin with, you have to engage with a community of professionals and learn about their concerns. "You have to want to communicate with executives," said Campbell. "You have to convert your ideas into something that's useful to executives. So, you immerse yourself in the phenomenon in a conversational way. The research you do is talking to executives." And to do that, you have to enter a managerial "conversational domain."

Academics have been trained to operate in the world of academia and do so largely through a learned conversational domain, which is a specialized set of terms and concepts that allow us to have efficient, contextualized conversations. All professions have one.

While we've been mutually indoctrinated within our conversational domain, the practitioners we're going to speak with haven't. And they're not going to learn it. To engage with practitioners, you have to learn their conversational domain, a task that requires curiosity and commitment. Govindarajan explained, "I don't see any substitute in understanding the real problem other than spending twenty days in conversations with senior executives. That requires an investment in time. And more than just time, it requires a mindset that places value in interacting with executives."

You will likely identify a community of practitioners related to your research interests, like supply chain, finance, marketing, and so forth. From there, you can find many ways to engage. Most of these communities have professional associations, websites, publications, webinars and conferences. Most will welcome academic participants. Enterprising researchers can even create a community themselves. Tom Davenport, for example, has "organized multi-company sponsored research projects where you pick a broad topic area, like knowledge management or analytics. Then you find other faculty at your school who are interested in ongoing research in this area." Faculty fortunate enough to work at institutions with executive education programs can engage with management participants at sessions, lunches, and receptions.

Once you've found a community and have become familiar with its conversational domain, you need to find the right managers to work with. As Majchrzak put it, "So, there's actually two kinds of practitioners that we have to remember. There is the crisis management-type, who do small incremental changes. We're after a different kind of audience. I usually want to speak to what I call reflective practitioners. They're thinking about their future. They're not just trying to crisis manage." George Day calls this group thoughtful practitioners. "I find by working with really thoughtful managers that you get deep insights into problems that managers are facing."

Choose the Right Problem

Once you start speaking to managers, you will find that they have many problems. Your challenge is choosing the right problem work on. Start by looking at the potential impact on the business and its stakeholders.

In measuring potential impact, Govindarajan distinguishes problems as common practice, best practice or next practice (Figure 1). Common practice research is typical of the academic approach that seeks statistical rigor. "If you're an empirical researcher, you're doing common practice," Govindarajan explained. "You collect data from a thousand companies, set up a hypothesis and then you say that the thousand companies are doing it. That research doesn't produce any impact. You're essentially telling me what everyone is already doing."

Best practice, by contrast, describes the practices pursued by perhaps a third of companies. If properly researched and popularized, best practices can influence the remaining two-thirds. Many consulting firms operate by repackaging and spreading best practice ideas to their clients.

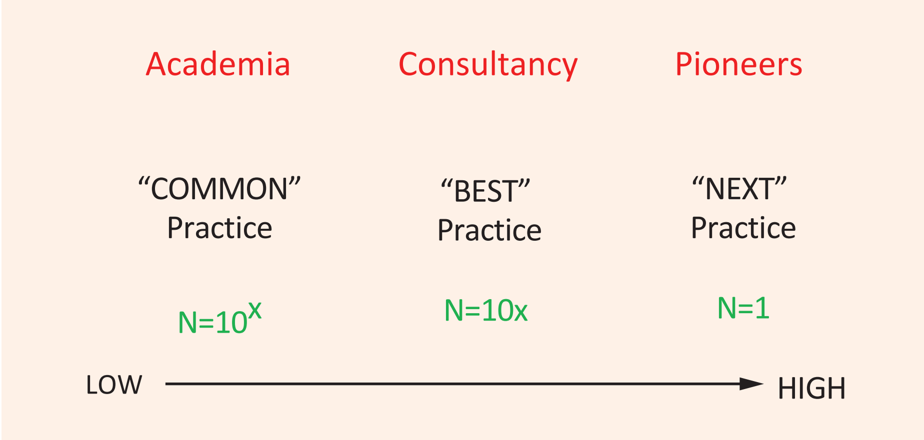


Figure 1: Common practice, best practice or next practice

Govindarajan, however, looks for next practices, pioneering approaches which only one or a handful of companies are using. "Whereas the focus of common practice research is hypotheses testing," he says, "the focus of next practice research is hypotheses generation."

Next practice creates a conundrum for academics. Statistically significant research requires large N sample groups. But large N groups are, almost by definition, common practices and so offer limited potential impact. Next practices, on the other hand, are N=1. But while N=1 may not be sufficient for statistical analysis, that doesn't mean it's not rigorous research. There is a danger of overgeneralizing from a small sample, but delving deep into a single company or small number of companies is a viable path for discovering practices that could advance the future of management. One classic example of this approach is the MIT Future of the Automobile project. This deep look into a single company – Toyota - produced the concept of lean manufacturing, first introduced in the 1991 practitioner book The Machine That Changed the World.

Create a Solution

In practitioner research, you discover the solution to your chosen problem by engaging in the conversational domain and daily realities of managers. As Day explained, "you're not looking back and collecting data and trying to prove a theory, you're

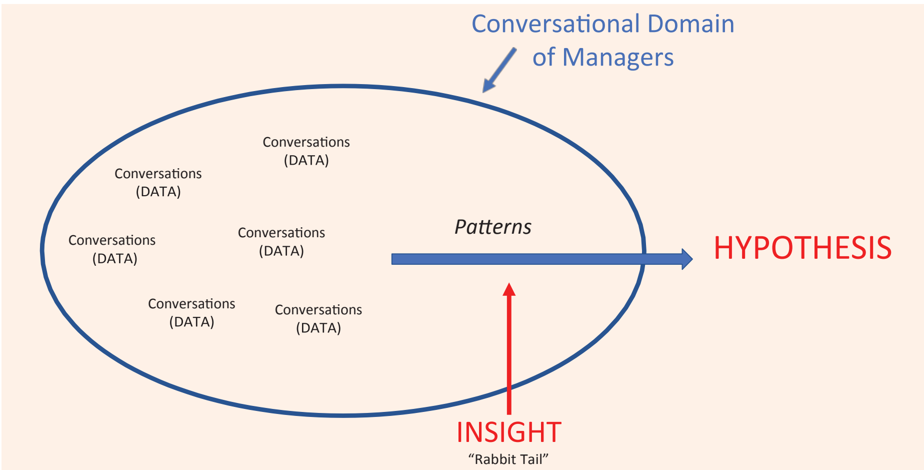


Figure 2: How emergent process works

actually framing emergent problems … it's an immersive process." Davenport concurred, "Your research methods have to be different as well. You have to look sort of anthropologically innocent at what's happening and get a better understanding of it by observation."

Figure 2 shows how this emergent process works. By conversing with managers, you collect data about the chosen problem and, as your discussions continue, patterns begin to emerge. You can then draw inductive insights from these patterns. Campbell described it colorfully, "It's like the rabbit's tail. It's a glimpse. So, you know, a rabbit's tail is white and when it disappears down a hole, you see that little flash of white. It's a glimpse of what might be interesting." From that rabbit tail insight, you can build a working hypothesis about how this problem can be solved.

From the initial insight, it's a combination of art and science to translate your solution into something that is useful and effective for managers, usually taking the form of an actionable framework. This "tool building" aspect of practitioner work is something we are all familiar with. Michael Porter's "Five Forces" framework in strategy, for example. The Ansoff Matrix in marketing. The Agile Project Management methodology. Most academics use one or more of these frameworks in their teaching, so their purpose and function is understood. The best frameworks contextualize the problem and offer a straightforward and easily remembered structure which allows managers to resolve it.

Confirm the Solution with the Community

You have not finished simply because you have created an initial solution framework. It's actually a working hypothesis that needs to be validated with the experts. Keep in mind that the primary audience for this work is not your academic peers, but actual practitioners in the field. The solution is not valid unless it is useful to managers in resolving their problems. As Andrew Campbell put it, "your whole research is about talking to managers and communicating with managers … you're feeding back what you've learned to them." And in so doing, you test and refine the hypothesis.

Yet while the focus is on practitioners, an academic's theoretical and disciplinary training are important in testing the validity of your solution. Conferring with your academic peers is vital to fostering framework refinements and ensuring rigor. By testing against academic theory, you can validate the framework's theoretical soundness; by talking to managers, you can validate its practical relevance.

Ideally, if you're teaching in executive MBA or senior management programs, you can deliver the solution framework in your classes. Often this is done through case writing and case teaching that exemplifies the problem and allows participants to discover and apply the framework through Socratic inquiry. You can also generate opportunities to engage directly with managers through corporate visits during which you share your work. Some academics even act as consultants, helping managers to apply the solution. You will also find opportunities to speak about the work at practitioner conferences.

Communicate the Solution

Eventually, after repeated testing, you will have a validated solution to a real problem which you can present to a journal editor as a practitioner article. Depending on the scale of the project and the discovery, you might also consider a practitioner book. In either case, your engagement and work with managers will have prepared you to write. Campbell explained, "When you're feeding back what you've learned to mangers, you're learning to speak their language. So, it's then relatively easy to write up a good article because you've probably been teaching it in class. You've been talking to managers and interacting. You have dozens of examples to draw on. It is natural to you."

And publishing a practitioner article or book is not the end of the process. In many ways it's just the beginning. Your work may have important theoretical implications

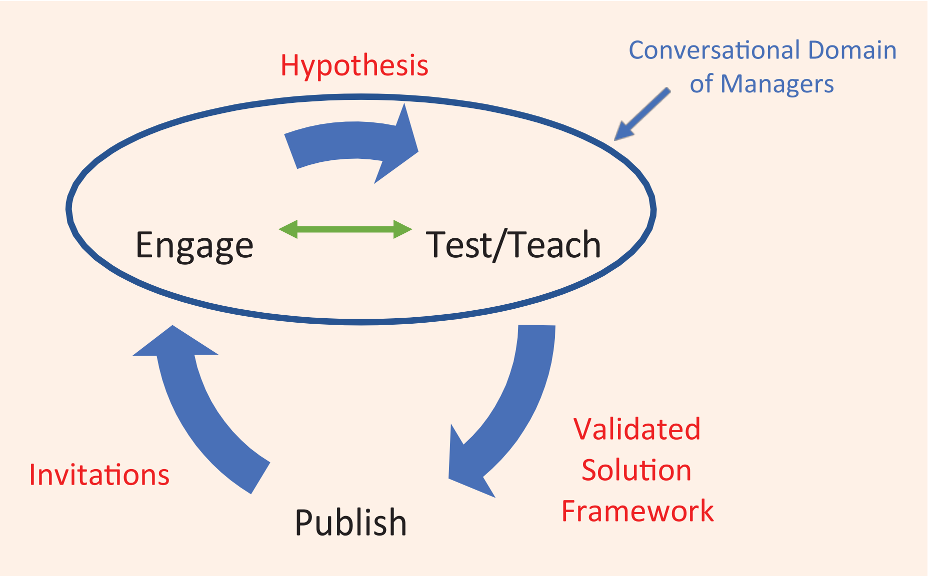


Figure 3: A virtuous cycle of practitioner research and publication

which could lead to more traditional academic publication. Economist Ronald Coase's groundbreaking Transaction Cost Theory, for example, was rooted in a series of conversations he had with purchasing managers while on sabbatical from Dundee University. Successful practitioner researchers become adept at leveraging their work for both academic and applied impact. Better still, publishing an article or book can start a virtuous circle of practitioner-based research.

Cycle: Repeating the Process

Many researchers find that, if their publication is pioneering and impactful, managers pay attention. As the solution is successfully applied by more companies, its impact expands, causing more managers to take notice. As this happens, opportunities like speaking at corporate events, executive education teaching and consulting engagements can be cultivated. Each of these opportunities is another chance to engage with managers, setting up a virtuous cycle of practitioner research and publication, as Figure 3 shows.

The figure offers a simple illustration of both the researcher's ongoing engagement with managers and the larger cycle of research and publication: engaging, testing & teaching, publishing and then re-engaging around the publication. With the help of this virtuous cycle, practitioner-oriented researchers can potentially produce a series of pioneering managerial concepts and solution frameworks.

Going Forward

The social responsibilities of the business sector are rapidly expanding. Now, more than ever, there is a need for academics to participate directly in improving the practice of business management. And there are straightforward approaches to doing so. In fact, this article was written to exemplify what has been presented here.

First, the article is written in a vastly different style than my academic articles and is intended to model what works for practitioner audiences. Also, if you notice, I followed the virtuous cycle framework to produce this article. I reached out and engaged with practitioner-centered researchers. I interviewed them and spoke with them in their own conversational domain. Next, I took what I learned from them and used it to elaborate an actionable framework. Then I fed it back to them so they could refine and validate the framework. And now I am sharing it with you, beginning a new cycle of engagement.-While this type of work is not suited to every academic at every point in their career, for those who enjoy time spent immersed in the challenging day-to-day realities of managers, the rewards of success can be substantial. ■

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Endnotes

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FURTHER READING

While they are not a majority, there are many academics who have done pioneering work with practitioners and have developed a spectrum of approaches far broader than the scope of this introductory article. Scholars in the field of production and operations management especially have long discussed the role of practitioner-based work in the development of the discipline and have produced a range of articles, both introspective and instructive, that are invaluable to anyone considering this type of work.