

The Modern-Day Men's Club

During the Victorian era, gentlemen's clubs were run by members who conspired to keep out the "wrong sort" by making the rules of entry hard to understand and impossible to follow. Today's top scholarly journals function in much the same way. Historically, publishers have burnished their reputations not by publishing useful and readable contributions to practice and teaching, but by becoming narrower and more exclusive. I believe this mindset is damaging the entire field of business.

Let me explain. Scholarly books and journals are typically judged on their exclusivity. The top journals may publish only two or three papers out of every hundred submitted to them. Once they're published, research papers are judged by peer-to-peer citations—that is, how many times they are referenced in other papers published in a select set of journals. This means publications are racing each other to reach greater levels of introspection, narrowness of view, and obscurity of content.

At the same time, the top journals may have a two- or three-year lag time between acceptance and publication. Therefore, papers that appear in them may have taken a year or two to research; spent a year or two being shuttled among editor, author, and referees; and then spent another two years waiting their turns to be set in print. Because of this system, scholarly publications with the greatest prestige tend to reject any form of research except the highly conceptual—otherwise, the publications would be hopelessly out of date.

Despite the flaws in the system, those of us who publish scholarly research provide an important way

for business schools and professors to gauge the impact of their research: We enable a quality-assured "counting" mechanism that measures how much their research contributes to scholarship. We also help determine each individual's productivity by counting how often a scholar has published pieces of such scholarship. Institutions rely on this productivity count to help them decide which scholars to recruit and retain, and which professors are making progress toward fulfilling tenure requirements.

The problem is that this system is deeply focused on a single metric: discipline-based scholarship defined by the rigor of the research. Such a system cannot provide the relevant research the world needs today.

As CEO of a specialty publisher in business and management research worldwide, I acknowledge that publishers deserve a portion of the blame for the failures of our industry. But the problems are caused by players throughout the system—and change must come from all of them.

Calls for Reform

Let me pause a moment to note that those conducting management research are members of one of the highest brain-power clusters in the world. And anyone who has spent time around the professors and publishers producing management research knows that these are not just clever, soulless drones chasing maximum returns with no regard to consequences. They are, by and large, kind, funny, well-rounded, and reasonable people.

But if these people are not using business research to better address the needs of society, why not?

Where's the disconnect? And how can we overcome it?

People both inside and outside of academia are agitating for change, demanding management research that is both relevant to today's complex world and underpinned by scholarly rigor.

From outside of academia, the calls for reform come from industry recruiters and senior HR people who sometimes make presentations at major academic conferences. In their sessions, they might say something like, "Please don't send us people who only can do financial analysis. Give us graduates who can think, who are plugged into what's happening in the world, and who can help represent the external community within the business."

At the same time, provocative thinkers from within the academic community—including Henry Mintzberg, James O'Toole, Jeffrey Pfeffer, and the late Sumantra Ghoshal—have complained that professors in the ivory tower are detached from the real world. These individuals have also offered clever analysis about the need to better connect business school outcomes with business.

The situation reminds me a bit of the "quality problem" much debated in the 1970s and '80s, when Joseph Juran, W. Edwards Deming, Philip Crosby, and others shook the tree on the need for improved quality assurance. Nonetheless, quality assurance didn't become embedded in operating reality until a set of systems was codified by international bodies and standards organizations.

I think the same thing is true now. Relevance and real-world impact will become part of scholarly research only when they are rooted in our quality standards, our awards pro-



“It’s odd that we would even think that the way to help businesses succeed is to train people to process information narrowly.”

grams, and our accreditation processes. We will have a systematic solution to a systemic problem only if AACSB International, the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), the Association of MBAs, and other bodies look at multiple metrics when they accredit schools.

Some of these institutions are already making a start at achieving such a goal. For instance, not long ago AACSB organized a Task Force on the Impact of Research, which issued a report that addresses the way accreditation systems measure business research. Among other things, the report notes that business schools should not simply consider rigor when judging a scholarly contribution. They should also consider how well it contributes to *learning and pedagogical research*, and whether it makes a *contribution to practice*. We need a way to measure all three.

The Publisher’s Role

Yet another group of players needs to join the reformation movement in this field: the organizations that publish scholarly research. We need to amend our policies to make it easier for authors to focus on relevant research.

At Emerald Publishing, we’re trying to do our part. Earlier this year, we revised our publishing strategy to make a place for scholarly research that contributes to practice or to pedagogy. We began asking authors to assess, within a paper and an abstract, what kind of “impact on society” they make with their research. We will not be dismantling our strength in discipline-based scholarship—rather, we will seek to increase its

relevance and impact.

Because of this shift, we will be able to assess and count scholarly research based on how

it contributes to knowledge in three different areas—theory, practice, and pedagogy. Already, many of our journals include sections about works in progress, case studies, and other kinds of research. Our Web platforms also spotlight all three types of contributions.

We have challenged ourselves to rethink the very notion of what a scholarly publisher is and does, and our goal is to increase the impact of research by bringing peripheral ideas into the mainstream. We will share our progress at events hosted by AACSB, EFMD, the Academy of Management, and others. We look forward to the day when validated publishing media welcome more contributions that focus on practice and pedagogy, as well as scholarship. We also look forward to debating how these contributions can best be counted and verified.

One thing is important to note: When we seek to measure a wider impact of research, we might focus on *outputs*, such as published papers, but all players in the chain should be thinking about *outcomes*—that is, whether what was intended to happen actually happened.

Let’s Change the World

In these turbulent times, it’s odd that we would even think that the way to help businesses succeed is to train people to process information rigorously and narrowly instead of encouraging them to understand and adapt to the social *zeitgeist*. And it’s even odder that grizzled corporate hacks like me should be asking

our business graduates to become more socially aware instead of parking their souls at the door.

Our world is greatly influenced by the way our businesses, governments, and other institutions are managed. If we rethink scholarly publishing in the field of management by encouraging our scholars to produce useful, readable, and rigorous research, we can influence management practice. The scholars who produce this knowledge will also be the professors who teach our business students how to deal with complex, global issues in a sensitive and responsible way. We will end up with a better world—one that is fairer, wealthier, more educated, and more careful to preserve the environment.

I believe that almost everyone involved in business research is in favor of change. But all the players need to participate in making change happen. Accreditation bodies first must loosen the shackles of the current system by re-examining their requirements for scholarly research. Publishers must find ways to collect, verify, sort, achieve, archive, disseminate, and assure the quality of all different kinds of research. Schools must reward different kinds of research—and professors must pursue research ideas that have practical relevance.

It will take a great deal of effort. But if the result is more effective research, teaching, and learning that improve management practices throughout the world, I think the effort will be worth it. ▣

John Peters is president of Emerald Publishing Inc., based in Boston, Massachusetts, and CEO of Emerald Group Publishing Limited, based in Bingley, England. He can be reached at jpeters@emerald.us.com.