

FROM THE EDITORS

SEEING PRACTICE IMPACT IN NEW WAYS

Does our research impact management practice? That is, does it influence how practitioners think, talk, or perform their work? Many researchers, journal editors, and academic administrators worry that management research has little practice impact. And some argue that, as academic rigor demands escalate, even less time, opportunity, and incentive to impact practice are available (e.g., Eckhardt & Wethherbe, 2014). A sizeable collection of writing exists about whether and why our research has practical relevance, as well as about how researchers can close gaps that may exist (Kieser, Nicolai, & Seidl, 2015). Currently, however, it seems that we know far more about our irrelevance than we do about practitioners, or the diverse connections between research and practice.

Our aim in this editorial is not to join the collective hand-wringing, but rather to offer insights aligned with our editorial team's focus on *new ways of seeing*. The truth, as Oscar Wilde once said, is rarely pure and never simple. True, our literature contains some irrelevant and outdated findings and insights, and we may be personally accountable for some of them. But, there is more to the picture. In the present editorial, after recognizing differences in viewpoints between academics and practitioners, we outline three research pathways to practice impact. The first pathway, "trailing," is the common way of thinking about whether management research impacts practice. The second pathway is that of "leading," whereby practitioners inform researchers' questions and research design prior to the research commencing. The third pathway, described here as "concurrent," recognizes the potential and opportunities for joint, reciprocal, and other co-creative impacts between research and practice. Highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each pathway, we make the case for a paradigm shift in favor of more encompassing frames of references, especially research streams and the collective body of knowledge, than the practice impact of individual studies.

We suggest that the field's views on impact are mostly unidirectional, focused on the ways in which researchers and practitioners see or do their jobs, to the exclusion of a deeper consideration of the connections and complementarity of the two knowledge

systems. We believe our discipline has inadvertently and unnecessarily limited itself by focusing on a narrow view of impact—one that probably deserves to be lamented as conceptualized—that practice impact is overwhelmingly an issue of ex post considerations and evaluations of individual studies. By acknowledging that multiple pathways exist for impact and by emphasizing more encompassing frames of references, we see the impact of management research in new and decidedly more positive ways.

RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS SEE IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Researchers and practitioners are guided by different logics, incentives, motivational frames, time horizons, and forms of discourse (Kieser et al., 2015; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Practitioner knowledge is context specific, grounded in time and space, and focused on immediate actions and causal or attributable outcomes, which means that it is difficult for practitioners to extract generalizable insights. By contrast, researchers seek abstract, generalizable patterns and regularities in concepts, relationships, and predictions across time and space. Parsimonious theories and frameworks that can be applied to the widest possible empirical concepts and contexts, rather than the idiosyncrasies of practitioners' specific perspectives, are the "holy grail" of management research.

These differences in knowledge systems and respective aims highlight the challenges that researchers confront in impacting practitioners—especially the way impact is conceptualized by the Academy of Management's Practice Theme Committee as an "auditable or recordable occasion of influence" (Haley, Page, Pitsis, Rivas, & Yu, 2017: 3). By seeking generalizable, abstracted patterns of insights, researchers are viewed as having difficulty in satisfying practitioners' needs for specific, timely guidance. Practitioners seek research that advances, changes, or challenges how they think, talk, or practice their work, but developing and testing generalizable theories is not a part of their job. Taking into account the differences in logic and perspective, we next outline three research pathways to practice

impact, and, in so doing, formulate the contours of a broader perspective on the connections between research and practice. The core insight is that practice impact emerges from multiple pathways and evolves over time as a result of the dynamic, complex, and recursive interactions among research, researchers, and practitioners.

RESEARCH PATHWAYS TO PRACTICE IMPACT

The Trailing Pathway

A key finding in the Academy of Management's Practice Theme Committee report was that most researchers see impact as something that happens after the research is complete (Haley et al., 2017). That is, practice impact is unidirectional, whereby research findings affect practice *ex post*, and are often tied to a single research output or project. Researchers regularly must translate research for practice, given the research norms that make the language and ideas impenetrable for managers. Researchers often try to tackle on such translations in jargon-free terms in a section on managerial implications in the paper, but these implications are often general and/or trivial and offer relatively little practical guidance to managers (for the record, this section is no longer required by *Academy of Management Journal (AMJ)*). Alternatively, at some later point, the author or someone else translates the findings for a managerial audience through some other communications medium.

In such an approach, stakeholders assume that researchers hold privileged knowledge because researchers are objective interlocutors who can assess the validity and reliability of abstract patterns in the empirical world. Practitioners, conversely, are seen as biased participants who are too close to their context to offer dispassionate insights. Researchers assume the position of "thought leaders" who spend their time collecting and analyzing data and producing results and insights that can help practitioners see in new ways. These insights are often communicated through fungible artifacts, such as journal articles, slide decks, teaching cases, or books that practitioners can consume and apply to their specific contexts.

There is tremendous value in this academic viewpoint and in the objectivity provided by unbiased observer-scholars, who can see the empirical world differently than those who directly shape the world and offer generalizable empirical patterns in the form of theory. This very separation between researcher and practitioner has been researchers' disciplinary domain and has led to important

advances that do indeed help practitioners see in new ways. In fact, some theories, such as agency theory and the behavioral theory of the firm, have been birthed in laboratories or through academic discourse, as researchers reflected on what they knew of the practitioner experience or summative data on such experience.

Interestingly, however, our profession can be particularly harsh in judging this impact pathway. It is here that we see that researchers, journal editors, administrators, and other stakeholders tend to be most critical. When a researcher concludes a study and finds little to say about direct or immediate practical implications—"a recordable occasion of influence"—the tendency is to throw up hands in despair. But, we believe that such findings contribute to a mosaic of insights and findings that could over time have significant, if not powerful, influence on practice.

Our point of contention is that, when judging the impact of this pathway, the individual article often serves as the frame of reference. But, it is a pretty large call to ask of each study published in our journals to change the way that practitioners think or act. In considering the (lack of) practice impact of research findings, an individual article may often be the wrong unit of analysis—that is to say, impact correlations and patterns observed at the level of individual studies are used to inform broader debates on practice impact. The odds of a single article advancing practice in meaningful ways are stupefying (Anderson, Ellwood, & Coleman, 2017). At minimum, additional confirmatory studies, possibly in different settings and with different samples, are needed. The great tragedy of science, as Thomas Huxley once said, is the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact.

We suggest that it is more salient to evaluate a body of theoretical work or a meta-analysis of robust, empirical findings. Individual papers often offer a narrow view of the phenomena, but when viewed *in toto*, the insights offered can serve to turn the perspectives of practitioners upside down. Taking a more encompassing frame of reference, rather than individual studies, scholars can often step back from the problem and see knowledge patterns across contexts and over time, making connections and discovering nexus that often elude practitioners who are embedded in a particular context. And, if we change our frame of reference to collective knowledge produced from the body of literature on a topic, the practice impact of the trailing pathway is undeniable. We can see the major impact of micro-level

research areas, such as the predictors of turnover behavior, employee reactions to justice, desirable job characteristics, effective and ineffective leadership behaviors and styles, and individual motivation. The same can be said for the collective knowledge in macro areas, such as corporate governance, competitive dynamics, corporate strategy, corporate entrepreneurship and change, and strategic leadership, among others. Management researchers' "trailing" insights and findings have made significant inroads into the daily functioning of managers and organizations. In short, single, break-through studies will continue to exist, but having the individual article as the dominant frame of reference in understanding trailing impact leaves too much on the table, thus distorting the field's impact balance sheet. As a corollary, we encourage the field to move in the direction of multiple levels and units of analysis for a richer understanding of this impact pathway.

The Leading Pathway

Although the more common approach is to think about impact as trailing research, another perspective is for researchers to think about impact before they embark on research, so it shapes the research. Here, researchers engage practitioners in building the research stages, formulating and refining the research questions, identifying data sources, and even thinking about how the results could be meaningfully represented. Practitioners become a sort of key informant in the early research process. This pathway is common in inductive studies (e.g., qualitative, fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis) and other "phenomenon before theory" approaches (e.g., phenomenological and industry studies) and with other designs as well.

In such designs, the dialogue between researchers and practitioners at the outset of the research can dramatically affect not only the research design, but also researchers' view of the questions being investigated. Researchers can be exposed to new ways of seeing the phenomena, exposing potentially new research directions. This approach also alerts researchers to the meaningful questions and challenges practitioners face. For example, paradox and organizational ambidexterity research has become centered on the choices facing managers and recognizes that organizations face persistent tensions and sometimes find a way to navigate such tensions successfully. This line of research would not have been possible without deep, context-specific insight from those experiencing the tensions. Additionally,

research into institutional work or on identity work has been informed by the relationships that researchers build with practitioners in the research context. In deepening the relationship, researchers have come to understand and empathize with the efforts practitioners make in shaping their institutions, communities, organizations, and themselves.

The artifacts from the first pathway—trailing—are often outputs, such as research publications, case studies, and books, which can be shared and communicated to practitioners. The impact of the leading pathway not only includes these artifacts, but also encompasses the very dialogue between researcher and practitioner. The process of engaging practitioners in designing the research and in the process of collecting the data should not be dismissed, as this dialogue alone can be impactful. Whenever researchers interact deeply and meaningfully with practitioners, the researcher shapes and is shaped by the person with whom s/he is interacting. This form of direct impact of research on practice is often overlooked by the research community, because it is notoriously difficult to observe the associated gradual cognitive and behavioral changes in practitioners (and researchers). And yet, the dialogue between the communities of research and practice inevitably impacts and shapes the worldviews of both.

Scholars have long adopted methods of inquiry-driven research and other forms of intensive collaboration with practitioners that enable impact to precede research outputs. In this regard, our collective experiences at *AMJ* reveal diverging trends. Submission trends have shown a steady, incremental increase in inductive and qualitative designs, which are typically motivated by the research phenomenon or context. But, we often see cases in which the research design and measurement instruments, for example, are clearly at arm's length from the research context or setting. Researchers' engagement with practice is often only superficial or shallow, even when the features of the research design puts the two groups of actors in each other's proximity. A one-sided, unreciprocated, or sterile view is sometimes called for, but, in many instances, the lack of richness and contextual insight is an opportunity lost. Such a lost opportunity may negatively affect the quality of the overall study, but our contention here is that it is an overlooked chance for impact to precede the ultimate research output as well.

In contrast, for quantitative designs, the trend appears to be away from large-scale primary data collections in which the researchers develop detailed context-specific knowledge in conjunction

with practitioners. Rather, it seems to be toward more sterile (arm's-length) primary field data collections or analysis of archival data sets—observe, for example, the ongoing frenzy over big data. *AMJ* is a “big tent” journal and there is certainly a place for many different approaches, but an uptick in submissions of quantitative designs within which it may be possible for impact to lead research would be valued—and, according to our thesis, it will add a critical piece to our impact portfolio.

The Concurrent Pathway

A third pathway to impact, and perhaps the most undervalued in current considerations, is research conducted with practitioners. This approach involves concurrent, reciprocal, or other co-creative forms of impact between researchers and practitioners. Not only do practitioners help shape the research design, they can be the sources of data, help to analyze data, and actively shape the research findings. Here, the execution of the research happens simultaneously with the impact of the research. Such an approach falls under various labels, including engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), relational scholarship (Bartunek, 2007), action research, and sometimes even participant observations.

We recognize that, when researchers deeply embed themselves in a research context, they will shape the context. The gap between researcher and practitioner closes, so that researchers see through the eyes of the practitioner and practitioners can see through the eyes of researchers. These insights offer both knowledge communities new ways of seeing. Instead of the researcher being an outsider looking into the empirical domain, they become an insider. The researcher can see facets of the practitioner experience that cannot be seen from the outside, which then becomes the basis for practice impact.

Researchers will often ask *AMJ* editors if we are receptive to such work. The answer is “yes,” presuming it fits the mission of the journal to publish rigorous empirical research that challenges, changes, or advances extant management theory. In fact, *AMJ*'s pages include many such studies, such as participant observation designs and ethnographies, but also some examples of engaged scholarship and action research. It is relatively uncommon to see a full research–practice collaboration in which data are co-analyzed and findings co-written. It is also rare to see research in which researchers actively manipulate the practitioner context to assess the veracity of the emerging theory in isolating the true cause-and-effect

relationships. When done well, the researcher fully discloses his or her role, and reflexively considers his/her experience in this research endeavor. Not only, then, are researchers able to see in new ways, but the impact on practice can be profound too. Impact is not necessarily seen as artifacts or “things” that sit outside of the research process, but, rather, as part of a dynamic process.

Practitioners have access to an abundance of online data sources and already face significant attentional demands. Consequently, another important avenue by which researchers can impact practitioners is through research and teaching *processes*, rather than through research *outputs*. Although significant publications may result from such efforts, the co-creative and discovery process, not just the dissemination and utilization of research outputs per se, is also a significant part of *impact*.

COMPLEMENTARITY OF THE TWO KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Today's world presents many challenges that require coordinated effort for correct problem diagnosis and the development of effective policies and coordinated actions (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). A concern among many is that management researchers are doing too little, doing things too late, or perhaps doing the wrong things to address these challenges. These are points well taken. We do not contest vigorously such sentiments, but instead have outlined how management research does impact practice in ways that are typically not formulated. When impact *trails* research, we should consider the body of knowledge and not look for silver bullets in single studies. When impact *leads* research, we should consider the dialogue that is created by bringing research more proximal to practice as presenting different but complementary impact opportunities. And, when research is *concurrent* with impact, the co-created process and knowledge need to be considered. Ultimately, as March (2008: 13) put it, “it is the combination of academic and experiential knowledge, not the substitution of one for the other, which yields improvement.”

The ambition of this 21st editorial team has been to expose *new ways of seeing*. This editorial suggests that the question of practice impact offers our community an opportunity to see the research context in new ways, and, in doing so, see practice impact in new ways. Practice impact calls more for a logic of complementarity and mutual dependence than of substitution and independence. Practitioners will

be best served by a portfolio of research that provides a cornucopia of options, including a body of reliable quantitative evidence (communicated through meta-analyses, policy statements, and other evidence-based summaries), as well context- and phenomenon-embedded research that allows impact to precede and impact to occur jointly with the research process.

We would be remiss if we did not conclude by considering a different but related issue about which the reader might still be pondering: “Should individual researchers strive to impact practice through multiple pathways?” We think “yes and no”: “no,” because each pathway requires different practices, processes, and competencies; “yes,” because any one pathway yields new insights and widens a researchers’ perspective. Ultimately, though, the selected pathway and practice impact domain is a matter of taste. We are also curious about why researchers downplay their role as management educators as a form of impact. Textbooks, slide decks, and reading lists undoubtedly contain examples, anecdotes, idiosyncratic author/lecturer experiences, and the like, but they are also chock full of summarized research findings that are read and used by students at all university levels. Teaching introduces functional knowledge to students in all programs via research-informed case studies and findings, offers research-based frameworks for simulating solutions, and disseminates evidence-based insights, which affects students’ mindsets and managerial practices. Together with the three impact pathways, such teaching impacts suggest that the perspective we hold of the field’s cumulative body of knowledge could also be the key to understanding and bridging the research–practice gap at the correct level of reasoning.

To conclude, the concept of practice impact provides an important lever for evaluating and informing managerial and organizational returns on research. Our aim in this editorial was to enrich the ongoing conversation in three ways. First, we suggested and elaborated on multiple research pathways to impact practice. Second, we have identified a need to move away from individual studies toward more encompassing levels and units of analysis for a deeper, richer description of our field’s impact. And, third, we outlined a vision of the management field wherein studies of different impact pathways are valued and encouraged to strengthen the field’s impact balance sheet. Different kinds of concepts, tools, and techniques are needed for probing and understating that balance sheet. The three impact

pathways we delineated here provide one framework for guiding and supporting a systematic development.

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