

1

The Nature of Research

Robert MacIntosh and Nigel Caldwell

In this chapter ...

Depending on your viewpoint, management and organization studies as a discipline is either as old as civilisation itself or in its infancy. Whilst it is true that we have been organizing and managing in social groups since our earliest days as hunter gatherers, the formal study of management only emerged at the start of the last century with the seminal work of people like Henry Fayol and Frederick Taylor. Since the work of these pioneering figures, management has become one of the most studied phenomena of our times. Each year throughout the world, millions of people choose to study management at university or college.

In the latter stages of their programme of study, these individuals are usually required to complete a research project, dissertation or thesis. For our purposes, we will refer to any such extended piece of research-based work as a research project in the remainder of this chapter. To prepare and submit a research project, you must first conduct a piece of original research. This can be a daunting prospect and is often seen as a rite of passage during your studies. A research project typically represents the longest piece of writing that you'll have had to tackle to date. Many people find it challenging and there are common issues which most students experience as they work on their project. This book offers structured and clear advice for those at the start of the journey from a blank page to a completed research project.

We begin by considering the nature of management research. Broadly speaking there are two ways of thinking about management research, each of which takes a different starting point and focuses on a different primary audience. One view holds that the purpose of management research is to understand the problems facing managers.

Therefore the starting point is to engage with managers and their experiences in such a way that, as researchers, we can develop insights that will enable managers to carry out their roles more effectively. Any findings from the research should be targeted at managers since the primary objective is to improve the practice of management. Consider the ways in which medical schools interact with hospitals and other healthcare providers. There is a close relationship and it is relatively uncontroversial to suggest that most medical research is aimed at providing better treatment for patients through new drugs, procedures, etc. Strange though it may seem, this view does not hold universally for management research.

Rather, a counter view exists, which holds that the starting point for any new research is the body of theory already generated about management and organizations. Here management is seen as an interesting, perhaps even important, phenomenon which merits attention. The primary audience however, comprises other academics engaged in the study of management. Knowledge, insights and theory represent suitable ends in themselves and the practice of management is a secondary concern. As the university sector has expanded, more and more business schools have been created with many thousands of academics hired to teach and to research management. One of the consequences of this expansion has been that thousands of new journals have been developed and the academic profession is sometimes accused of lacking engagement with the community of practicing managers in the wider world. In this chapter we will investigate these different views of management research before setting out the structure of the rest of the book.

Management as a discipline

The American academic Jeffery Pfeffer believes that those disciplines or fields of study where there is broad agreement about the nature and purpose of research tend to do better than those disciplines which are contested. He suggests that “consensually shared beliefs about the nature of knowledge and methods in a field ... guide decisions on grant allocations and publication” (Pfeffer, 1993: 605). Hence, whilst management research has grown hugely over the last few decades with new business and management departments springing up in universities across the globe, conflicting views about the nature of management research aren’t helpful. In fact, there is a long-running debate amongst the management research community about where to focus energy and attention. Over the years, scholars have wor-

ried about “the complex and sometimes problematic relationship between management practice and the practice of management research” (MacLean and MacIntosh, 2002). Periodically, senior scholars write about this relationship (see for example Smith and Robey, 1973; Kelemen and Bansal, 2002). Susman and Evered even suggested that we face a crisis, the principal symptom of which “is that as our research methods have become more sophisticated, they have also become increasingly less useful for solving the practical problems that organizational members face.” (1978: 582). Donald Hambrick, the then president of the world’s largest management research community (the Academy of Management), asked what it would be like if management research mattered to those in managerial positions (1995). In the decades since he asked this provocative question, almost half the Presidential Addresses to the Academy of Management have dealt with this or a related theme.

Part of the problem is that management itself is something of a magpie subject, borrowing ideas and traditions from a range of root disciplines including but not limited to anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics and engineering. Earlier we examined the ways in which medical schools relate to healthcare institutions. Two management scholars, David Tranfield and Ken Starkey, argue that we should conceptualise management research as being like medical research (1998). Management research, they suggest, should be a process where new scientific discoveries are converted into practices that have the explicit intention of helping managers understand what works, in what circumstances and why.

Returning to Jeffery Pfeffer’s concern, the problem is that one scholar pursuing management as applied psychology may not even be able to agree on the definition of terms with a colleague studying management as applied sociology. If the academic researchers talk past each other, what hope is there for them when communicating with practicing managers? In practical terms, the business school community has responded by disseminating ideas via two related but distinct channels. Academic research tends to appear in peer-reviewed journals where it is expressed in technical language intended for other researchers. There are many thousands of these outlets ranging from the highly prestigious to others which are a much less reliable source of good research. This is discussed in some detail in Chapter 3. Alongside these academic journals, the same research findings are often written in a different, more accessible format, to appeal to practicing managers. Outlets

like *Management Today*, the *Harvard Business Review*, the *Financial Times* or the *Economist* often present new management ideas in a much more readable format.

So where does this leave us? Management research is a booming industry beset by structural problems. There is little agreement on the nature and boundaries of management research. There are multiple root disciplines within the management research community and, despite calls for multi-disciplinary research, scholars face difficulties in engaging with each other. Further, the more sophisticated our theoretical and methodological approaches become, the harder we find it to make an impact on the practice of those in managerial jobs. These are significant challenges and should not be underestimated. Developing an appreciation of these difficulties is a useful first step on the journey to producing your own piece of management research.

Knowledge production

Research is essentially about the production of new knowledge. In Chapter 2 we discuss where ideas for new research projects come from, but first we set the scene by introducing some a distinction between two different approaches to knowledge production. Michael Gibbons and his colleagues (see Gibbons et al 1994), argue that recent decades have seen the emergence of a new approach to research which he calls mode 2 knowledge production. To place this in context, it is first necessary to explain that mode 1 represents the traditional, and some would say, ancient approach to discovery.

Think of those historical figures who have made breakthrough discoveries. Whether it is Galileo's radical suggestion that the earth moved around the sun (which incidentally earned him a conviction for heresy and a life under house arrest) or Newton's 'discovery' of gravity (though one suspects that gravity was there all along), new insights produced new theory. In Gibbons' terminology, the traditional approach to research is theory led. We begin by reviewing our understanding of a particular phenomenon and design a piece of research which is intended to push our understanding further by scientifically confirming our theoretical hunch. There are few better examples than the use of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN to confirm the existence of the so-called Higgs boson. Peter Higgs had speculated on a theoretical possibility in 1964 but it took huge investment to create the