Enhancing Relevance of Research
POMS 2015 Plenary

Mike Toffel
Harvard Business School
Enhancing Relevance of Research
My agenda

Why research relevance matters
What relevance means to me
Enhancing research relevance
  • Finding relevance
  • Conveying relevance
Setting context...

The (ir)relevance of business school research has been causing concern for decades

A view from mgmt/OT/strategy ...
increasing numbers of organizational scholars have begun to express concern that organizational/administrative science has had little effect on life in organizations.
“Is the field of organization studies irrelevant? The body of knowledge published in academic journals has practically no audience in business or government. [We need] research that is motivated by the problems faced by practitioners”
Why research relevance matters
“Some of the smartest thinkers on problems at home and around the world are university professors, but most of them just don’t matter in today’s great debates.

The most stinging dismissal of a point is to say: ‘That’s academic.’ In other words, to be a scholar is, often, to be irrelevant...
The supply side

What’s your ambition?

1. Teach your students √

2. Create knowledge √

3. Improve decision making of managers and/or policymakers (“practitioners”)?
1993
Academy of Management Presidential Address
“What if the Academy Actually Matters?”

“If we believe highly in what we do, if we believe in the significance of advanced thinking and research on management, then it is time we showed it.

We must recognize that our responsibility is not to ourselves, but rather to the institutions around the world that are in dire need of improved management, as well as those individuals who seek to be the most effective managers they possibly can be.

It is time for us to matter.”
What relevance to practice looks like to me
Relevance in a research paper

1. The research question
2. Hypothesis motivation
3. Implications
Relevance in a research paper

1. The research question
2. Hypothesis motivation
3. Implications

How could your findings influence decisions of managers or policymakers?
Relevance in a research paper

1. The research question
2. Hypothesis motivation
3. Implications

Does your rationale resonate with (at least some) managers or policymakers?

- *What do they find ludicrous--and why?*
- *What alternative explanations do they offer?*
- *What conditions do they propose? (moderators)*
Relevance in a research paper

1. The research question
2. Hypothesis motivation
3. Implications

How *should* your results influence decisions of managers or policymakers?
- Who in particular?
- Under what circumstances?
How to enhance research relevance

Step 1: Choose questions relevant to practice and ground your arguments in their reality. But how do you know what’s relevant?

Step 2: Convey your findings to managers and policymakers.
Learning what’s relevant to practice (1/6)

When I’m not reading journals....

-the guardian
-sustainable business
-
-environmental LEADER
-
-The Economist
-
-grist
Meet managers on campus
- Class guests
- Guest speakers students invite
- Executive education students

Attend practitioner conferences
Learning what’s relevant to practice (3/6)

Attend/create scholar–manager joint conferences
✓ Present research to get feedback from managers
✓ Managers share news from the field

- Transparency & accountability: The role of information disclosure
- Research on effective government: Inspection and compliance workshop
- Consortium for Operational Excellence in Retailing (COER)
- Service Supply Chain Thought Leaders Forum
Learning what’s relevant to practice (4/6)
Guest star as a practitioner
Learning what’s relevant to practice (5/6)

- Your prior work experience?
- Write teaching cases?
- Site tours
Learning what’s relevant to practice (6/6)

Develop an sounding board of practitioners
How to enhance research relevance

Step 1: Choose questions relevant to practice and ground your arguments in their reality

Step 2: Convey your findings to managerial audiences
Unfortunately, there is no “invisible hand” that conveys research findings to managers or policymakers.

So we need to do it ourselves. How?
Conveying your findings to influence practice (1/5)

Write a short translation piece:

The Factor Environmental Ratings Miss

Could more women auditors help prevent another Rana Plaza?

OSHA Inspections Should Be Welcome

Government Regulation That Actually Works

ISO standards stamp approval
Conveying your findings to influence practice (2/5)

Present at practitioner conferences
Conveying your findings to influence practice (3/5)

Write a long article that translates & integrates
Conveying your findings to influence practice (4/5)

Attract attention of those translating research
Conveying your findings to influence practice (5/5)

All of these venues require a different kind of communication

Describe the managerial problem
Seldom mention prior literature
Describe your solution or findings clearly
Be persuasive: why should we believe you?
Provide detailed examples
Provide practical advice
Frameworks, charts, and graphs help
Read venue to absorb its writing style
Avoid “endogeneity”, “stochastic”, and all jargon
What can our academic institutions do to promote managerial relevance?

Conferences:
1. Facilitate interchanges between scholars and managers

Journals:
1. Accelerate publication for timely results
2. Provide writers to co-develop and place short translational articles
3. Provide editors to ensure clarity of managerial summaries, with free access at journal website
No abstract is available for this article.
Final thoughts (1/3)
Are there tradeoffs to being more relevant?

1. Is investing in relevance worth the time, especially pre-tenure?

2. Does relevance *erode* credibility among reviewers? Among peers?
Final thoughts (2/3)
Cause for optimism

There is a positive feedback loop

- Relevant research
- Management inquiries
- Access to field sites and data
Final thoughts (3/3)  
Cause for optimism

“I notice from reading the many applications to our Ph.D. program at London Business School that very few people aspire to become business academics with the intention to publish journal articles that will only be read by other academics (at best); rather, these applicants are much more inspired by the thought of gaining and developing truly relevant knowledge that might change the world of organizations.”

Thank you