

# 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 ...

**1982**

**Admin. Science Quarterly (ASQ)**

**“increasing numbers of organizational scholars have begun to express concern that organizational/administrative science has had little effect on life in organizations.”**

**1990**

the inaugural issue of *Org Science*

“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

## *The demand side*

David Brooks, "Professors, We Need You!" *New York Times*, 2014

"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 Mattered?”

“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.”

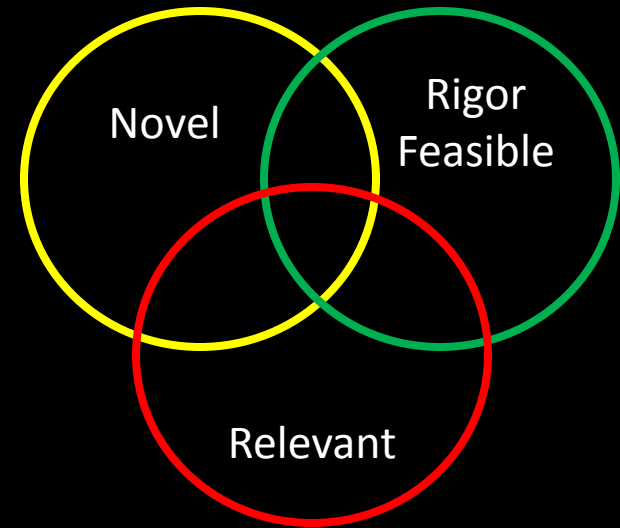
What relevance to practice  
looks like to me

# 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....





# Learning what's relevant to practice (2/6)

## 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



Prof. Stuart Graham



Prof. Aaron (Ronnie) Chatterji



Prof. Jody Freeman



# 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:

**MIT Sloan**  
Management Review

**The Factor Environmental Ratings Miss**

**theguardian**  
Winner of the Pulitzer prize 2014

Could more women auditors help prevent another Rana Plaza?

**The Compass**  
Volume 11 • Number 1

OSHA Inspections  
Should Be Welcome

 **Harvard  
Business  
Review**

**Government Regulation That  
Actually Works**

**EUROPEAN**CEO

**ISO standards stamp approval**



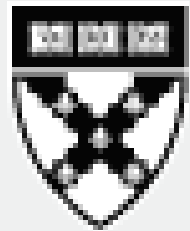
# Conveying your findings to influence practice (2/5)

Present at practitioner conferences



Conveying your findings to influence practice (3/5)

Write a long article that translates & integrates



**Harvard  
Business  
Review**

**MIT Sloan**  
Management Review

California  
Management  
Review

Conveying your findings to influence practice (4/5)

Attract attention of those translating research

The New York Times

The Upshot



DATA COLADA  
THINKING ABOUT EVIDENCE AND VICE VERSA

FREAKONOMICS<sup>®</sup>  
THE HIDDEN SIDE OF EVERYTHING

Le Monde.fr

Julie Battilana

# 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

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Volume 24, Issue 5  
May 2015  
Pages viii-x

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## Final thoughts (1/3)

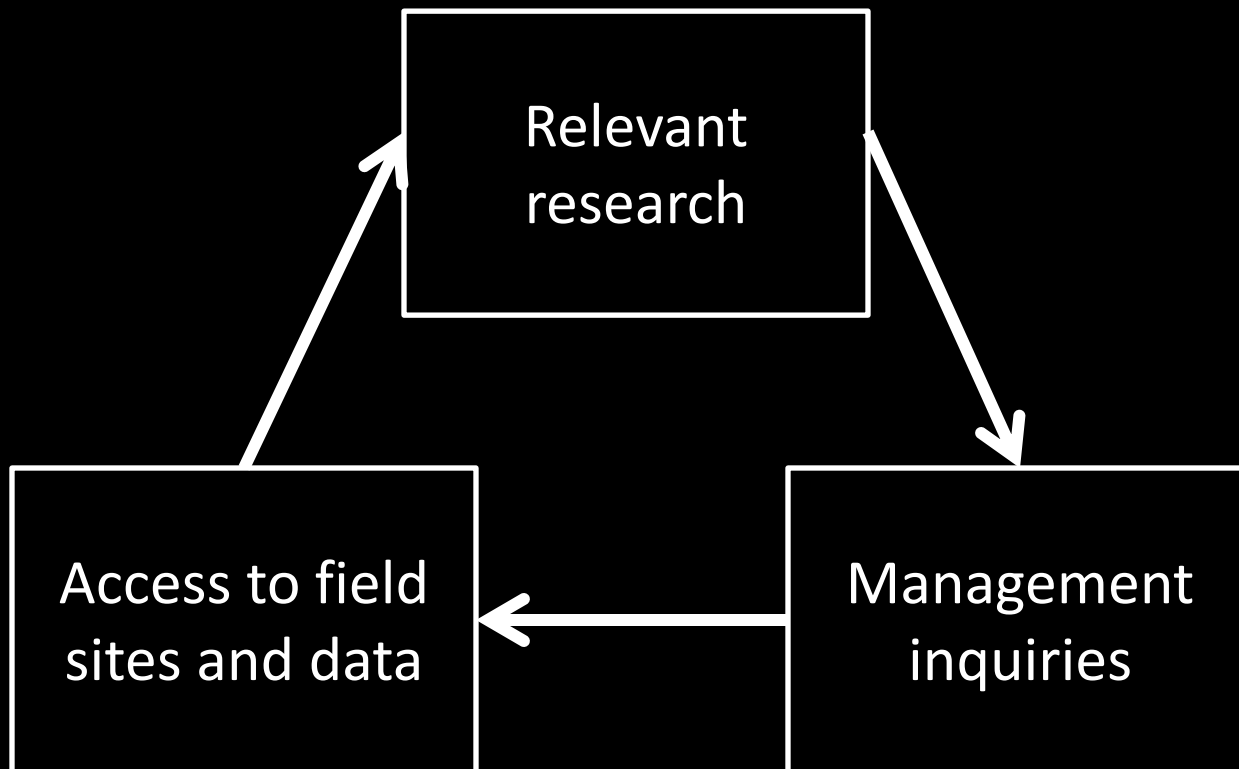
Are there tradeoffs to being more relevant?

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





## 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.”

- Vermeulen, “On rigor and relevance” AMJ, 2005.

Thank you