



# Management Scholars of the World, Unite!

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The debate about the relevance of management scholarship is not new (Nicolai & Seidl, 2010). Many would attest to our societal impact through our manifold activities: teaching, consulting, outreach—and our research on topics such as grand challenges. Yet, when we look at, say, economists, they have more visibility and impact. Clearly, there is room for improvement. How then can we as management scholars organize ourselves better to collectively achieve more relevance with our research?

Some may argue that our research does not have to be relevant. Good research is good in and of itself. Period. Now, I believe in fundamental research. I also assert that research does not have to be (immediately) applicable, and some will never be. In fact, it may be that we simply cannot anticipate whether certain research has societal relevance. Still, it is good that we do it. Granted.

This is not a call for substituting such work; this is a call for complementary research that aims to be relevant, aims to have impact. Unfortunately, among many colleagues, I sense and see some form of disillusionment. They want their work to have relevance but feel that it does not and that attempts to generate insights for relevance are, at times, frowned upon in our community or not reflected in promotion and performance criteria. Their work is deemed to be either outside the scope of what we normally “do,” such as practitioner engagement, or not valued in our academic outlets, such as design science or future-making perspectives. To this I say: We should encourage—not discourage—such work.

This is especially so as there is undeniably high demand for well-expressed and swiftly provided expertise on topical issues. Yet, oftentimes, we do not cover these themes or we speak in jargon and do so very s-l-o-w-l-y. All this has value, as the short term has caught us in an exhausting net, and public discourse is dominated by an ever-shorter news cycle with fleeting hypes and scandals. This is unhealthy, and we should not desire to adapt to such destructive forces. In fact, we should try to change this public logic, but also reflect upon our own professional values and practices. There are many good shades of grey in between what we currently do and what public discourse demands of us.

So, what are pathways towards relevance? Individually, we can identify important topics, be more engaged, agile or even activist scholars, and embed our research into the public and natural realm (Delmestri, 2023; Ergene, Banerjee, & Hoffman, 2021). More of such work is welcome.

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Simultaneously, I think that we can do much more as a *community*. Here lies potential for transformative change that could allow us to obtain relevance collectively. We have seen important debates about how we as a community (mis)incentivize scholars, from sliced publications to detrimental benchmarking. With our science envy, we have put ourselves into an iron cage of representation, even though we are embedded in the social. We do not (just) represent social reality, we co-create it. When we are practically relevant, we change relevant practices—provided we do institutional groundwork alongside. This is not something to be ashamed of but rather to be proud of.

Hereinafter, I will focus neither on the potential for individual pathways nor on how the collective shapes these pathways. Instead, I will advocate for *institution building*. This builds on and extends wonderful networks. I would like to mention—and praise—the Group for Research on Organizations and the Natural Environment (GRONEN), the Impact Scholar Community, the Network for Business Sustainability (NBS), OS4Future, and the Responsible Research for Business and Management (RRBM) network. These are important communities bundling and bridging scholars(hip) on key societal concerns. They elate, encourage, and empower us. Yet they are not enough.

We are researching organizations, but we are not ourselves well-organized when it comes to leaving our own backyard. We are not influential, because we are not institutionalized enough out there. Individually, many do great work, and we acknowledge this with various awards. Yet to create impact in a lasting way, we need to build institutions at the intersection of academia and practice that surpass and outlast individual scholarship.

I suggest two ways of addressing matters of public significance and public urgency in more coordinated, collective, and cooperative efforts: deep engagement and rapid response task forces. Deep engagement task forces are research clusters that work on a societal concern over an extended period. They bring together diverse expertise on a specific topic to orchestrate knowledge generation and accumulation across disciplinary boundaries, including the intellectual boundaries in our own community. Why not have deep engagement task forces around the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals? I believe we should.

Also, the media and the public are looking for a point of contact. Take management scholarship on climate change or social inequality. How do you find our experts? Whom should you approach? Certainly, many wonderful scholars come to my mind. But is the list complete? Certainly not. Is it biased? Likely. From the outside, our field looks even more opaque. Imagine a journalist or policy maker trying to identify whom to speak to. I cannot blame them if they simply google or fail to find a suitable scholar and give up trying. We need issue-specific go-to addresses. These are points of entry into our globally dispersed profession that are curated both in terms of substance and communication. This incubates, amplifies, and leverages transformative scholarship.

We also need rapid response task forces. Whereas deep engagement clusters are about forming cohesive entities and profiles to address enduring societal challenges, rapid response task forces are about disruptive challenges and crises—from Covid-19 to the war in Ukraine or the earthquake in Turkey and Syria. Here, we need to act swiftly, given the urgency and imminence of the tasks at hand, but again, we will not be able to do so individually. Our loosely coupled profession is not geared towards speed as crises unfold. Teaching, supervision, and administration cannot be parked until a crisis is over. Of course, there are valid arguments for more flexibility in such circumstances, like a teaching reduction, but this is a debate for another time.

As expertise is sprinkled across our community, task forces could bring it together, so that scholars with limited time can nonetheless offer their insights efficiently and effectively to tackle pressing crises. They function as a scaffold or form of participatory architecture that can be adopted and adapted when a new crisis emerges.

These task forces can offer a range of output—from rather traditional formats such as reports and policy papers to less conventional formats such as agile research sprints, collaborative prototype developments, hackathons, and multistakeholder events—to foster both descriptive analysis and prescriptive advice. This requires a rethinking and reevaluation of what scholarly output is and should be. We need knowledge, not only to better understand situations but also to recommend and even legitimize action. As we know from translational science approaches, knowledge is never merely transferred but rather transformed in the process. This may create unease. Yet just as we must let go of our children as they grow, we need to be able to let go of our knowledge.

You may ask why now? First, our jurisdictional boundaries are being contested and scholarship is being (mis)appropriated. Populism is questioning academia and pushing us aside. To counter, we need to move along the academic value chain and perform vertical integration from research to impact. We should speak up or we will be talked out as the academic jurisdictions are infringed upon.

Second, our planetary boundaries are being breached, threatening the very basis of our existence on this *planet A*. As scholars, we should not stand—or rather sit—idly by as the world crumbles in the face of global crises. Unfortunately, we have made the earth into a prison and are playing prisoner’s dilemma. Instead, we need to change the rules of the game and pursue the donut that Kate Raworth baked—a donut between human needs and what nature provides, a donut that is good for our individual and collective health. Maybe the only donut that is.

To “eat” it, we need action-oriented scholarship, and we must orient scholarship towards action. Not for personal fame but for societal gain. This is a “mode x” research that not only bridges knowledge (generation) and action but also yields a new form of scholarly output, moving from back-shadowing to fore-shadowing, from post-factual to pre-factual (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022). The task forces can function as institutions of “forethought” and action.

Where do we go from here? I can envision task forces being grounded in existing associations. They would not speak for the associations but have a mandate to investigate and speak out. Take EGOS. EGOS supports research on sustainability and works on making our conferences more sustainable. An EGOS deep engagement “climate crisis & organizations” task force would complement such efforts. Similarly, we could have formed an AOM rapid response task force on the Russia–Ukraine war. Associations could either form these task forces alone or together with universities, foundations, and third-party funding bodies that could also provide necessary infrastructure.

Of course, there remain open questions, also of power: Who could/should do it? This would be added work, added responsibilities for a strained profession. Maybe only the loudest and most time-rich would end up having a voice. Task forces need to be purposefully inclusive. They may likely demand the support of a new profession of knowledge and action brokers. Within academia, engagement also needs to matter in systemic evaluation criteria such as tenure. Clearly, task forces do not come without their challenges. We need to have a conversation about their structure and pilot schemes to test them. This will include trial and error. Still, the status quo promotes those who are known to speak up or who turn out highest on google searches for certain keywords, not necessarily those who are field experts. Task forces curate expertise—and curation can be misused, but it can also help to channel and promote our scholarship.

There is more to do. Unfortunately, with visibility comes harm. We need protection mechanisms for our community, especially for minorities. Otherwise, we may be silenced when we attempt to speak up. As authority on social media is partially derived from follower numbers, our professional status matters much less; neither does our professional ethos. We need safety nets, and task forces can foster such protection.

To conclude, this is a call to strengthen our community by building new formats of working together: task forces for deep engagement marathons as well as rapid response sprints. This is about governing ourselves or else being governed by others. We need to speak up more, or others will do so “for” us. For that, we need to come together in task forces that engage with the societal challenges of our time and converse with the public—bringing together and protecting important scholarship *in* our community and making it relevant and impactful *beyond*. So colleagues, comrades: to institutionalize, management scholars of the world, unite!

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