

Strategist, organize thyself

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Strategist, organize thyself

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of scholars and hundreds of millions of dollars are devoted to the study of management. What has society gained from this significant and ongoing allocation of scarce talent and money? As many of our most senior scholars have noted, less than we would like. We can do better. Through an organized process, we can develop more managerial knowledge with fewer resources. In this essay, I outline two suggestions -- roadmaps and TOMCat -- that could organize and advance management knowledge and bring us into better fit with our decreasingly munificent environment.

Thousands of scholars and hundreds of millions of dollars are devoted to the study of management. In the last decade, Academy of Management membership has increased by more than 50 percent to nearly 20,000 members. The number of management journals continues to grow as well. More highly educated people are making more presentations, writing more papers, and publishing more articles and books on management each year.

What has society gained from this significant and ongoing allocation of increasingly scarce talent and money? Less than we would like. It is practically a rite of passage for presidents of the Academy of Management to bemoan the sorry state of the output of the Academy over which they preside. Don Hambrick's 1993 Presidential Address pondering, "What if the Academy actually mattered," (Hambrick, 1994) got the ball rolling, and the theme of questioning the fruits of our labor has picked up steam since. Calls to change our ways so that we actually matter have permeated many Presidential Addresses (e.g., Mowday, 1997; Bartunek, 2003; Rousseau, 2006), spurred high-profile conferences (e.g., the LBS conference to honor Sumantra Ghoshal), and been at the core of forums in journals such as *Academy of Management Journal* (Rynes, 2007), *Academy of Management Review* (Hillman, 2009), and *Academy of Management Learning & Education* (Klimoski, 2005).

Can we do better? Yes. But it will require coordination and cooperation – things we often study and sometimes recommend to others but infrequently apply to our own work. Rather, we have enshrined the ideals of independence and individuality as core organizing principles, and this has led us to produce a high quantity of conflicted and contrasting output. By instead coordinating and cooperating, we can develop more managerial knowledge with fewer resources. This could bring us into better fit with our decreasingly munificent environment in higher education and so enhance our prospects for success and survival as a scholarly field during lean times and beyond. Herein I first outline the problem and then offer two suggestions to help resolve it.

The Ivory Tower of Management Babble

It is no secret that there exists deep dissatisfaction with the cumulative state of management scholarship. Many scholars who have spent decades in the profession and risen to its highest echelons have shouted this directly from our most visible pulpits. Much of the dissatisfaction stems from the inadequacy of our interface with practitioners. Many have noted that we tend to pursue rigor over relevance, tackling topics that are not informed by or informative to practicing managers. They encourage us to become “ambidextrous professors” (Markides, 2007) who can translate our findings in ways accessible to managers.

Such calls assume that we have something to say that is worth translating. Do we? Again, I’m not revealing secrets. Many have questioned our ability to produce clear answers to even our chosen topics, regardless of their relevance to practice. We flit from one idea to the next, leaving fads in our wake (Starbuck, 2009), because we favor theory creation over theory testing (Hambrick, 2007) and employ statistical methods that provide misleading results (Starbuck, 2006). We don’t talk to each other enough (Hillman, 2009), and when we do, we disagree on what constitutes a contribution (Starbuck, 2003). As a result, we produce much conflicting information that, even if well translated, would only confuse practitioners.

If we don’t produce a body of knowledge that that we understand internally, we cannot translate it for external use. The problem is systemic and more than a matter of reforming theoretical and empirical methods. Another well-known “dirty little secret” revealed by Bennis and O’Toole (2005: 103) is that “most of today’s best business schools . . . chiefly serve the faculty’s research interests and career goals, with too little regard for the needs of other stakeholders.” Novel ideas, not refining and testing the robustness of existing theories, are what interests most faculty, especially journal gatekeepers, and advances academic careers (Hambrick, 2007). So we proffer new ideas, publish them with a variety of caveats in our “Limitations” sections, suggest others take on the unenviable and often

infeasible task of resolving these limitations in “Future Research,” and then go on to our next papers as we try to emerge victorious in the “marketplace for ideas” by having our incomplete accounts and revised terms capture more citations than those of others.

As we go about creating partial answers to our own questions, we collectively produce much noise and few clear insights. With more time, effort, and publications, we tend to create confusion, not clarity. For example, Margolis and Walsh (2003: 278) bemoaned the result of hundreds of studies published over several decades that intended to specify the relationship between corporate social performance (CSP) and corporate financial performance (CFP): “The CSP-CFP empirical literature reinforces, rather than relieves, the tension surrounding corporate responses to social misery.” The current marketplace for ideas does not efficiently or effectively advance managerial knowledge. If we are to collectively produce more than an Ivory Tower of Management Babble, we need to coordinate our efforts so that our individual insights aggregate into comprehensive and comprehensible answers.

The Roadmaps Ahead

We have seen stunning advances in computing technology over the last several decades. Innovations in computing occur with such predictability that they form a “law.” Moore’s Law dictates that the number of transistors on a silicon chip doubles every 18 to 24 months. But Moore’s Law isn’t a physical law; it’s a social process that has become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Barnett, Starbuck & Pant, 2003). Rather than leaving progress as the hopeful outcome of independent actions, firms in the semiconductor industry, in conjunction with users of semiconductors and others, come together to develop a plan that specifies how they collectively will progress at the pace of Moore’s Law. The plan, known as the International Technology Roadmap for Semiconductors (ITRS), breaks down responsibilities and tracks progress so that individual efforts aggregate into collective advancement at this pace. The originator of Moore’s Law, Gordon Moore, noted, “It really becomes a question of

putting the track ahead of the train to stay on plan” (Korcynski, 1997). Participants know where they’re supposed to go and their role in getting there, so they focus their efforts and, in aggregate, are able to consistently produce expected but stunning results.

Can we do something analogous in management? There are roadblocks, but it is plausible. The biggest roadblock would seem to be discretion. Will scholars who relish their independence join? Many won’t. But enough might. We relish the discretion to choose our research projects, but we face considerable uncertainty about the payoffs to the hundreds and thousands of hours we put into them. Especially for those choosing dissertation topics or who are on the tenure clock, taking on a project wherein the contribution to the literature is given and so need not be laboriously and tenuously proven to a critical group of reviewers, could prove very attractive. When they hear a can opener, even cats come running.

An overarching organization like the Academy of Management could develop a roadmap for all of management scholarship. Given the diversity of perspectives, methods, and epistemologies in use therein, it is more feasible to start at a lower level, though, such as that of the division. Divisions vary in size and unity but in general are a more cohesive group and so more likely to coalesce around a roadmap. Each division has a domain statement that specifies topics of interest. For example, the Business Policy & Strategy (BPS) Division:

Specific domain: the roles and problems of general managers and those who manage multi-business firms or multi-functional business units. Major topics include: strategy formulation and implementation; strategic planning and decision processes; strategic control and reward systems; resource allocation; diversification and portfolio strategies; competitive strategy; cooperative strategies, selection and behavior of general managers; and the composition and processes of top management teams.

Each division has an elected chair and leadership team, and a set of bylaws. Through an internal process, each division specifies its domain and topics of interest. Likewise, through its own chosen process, each division could organize its roadmap.

Given its domain, for BPS the roadmap would chart a path toward understanding the roles and problems of general managers, and this path would be paved with insights about

topics that stretch from strategy formulation and implementation, to the composition and processes of top management teams. The roadmap would explain how each topic contributes to the overarching aim. Each division has a plenary session and a business meeting at the annual meeting and could use them to discuss the roadmap. Adoption could be by a vote of the Executive or Governance Committees, or the membership at large.

The core work, that of advancing managerial knowledge of the contributing topics, would be organized within working groups, as is done with the ITRS. Divisions hold annual elections and could augment their ballots to elect leaders for each topic's working group. If each topic leader is elected to a 3-year term and these elections are staggered, then the number of new elections each year would be quite manageable. Depending on the Division's chosen guidelines, topic leaders would then appoint members to their working groups, choosing those with diversity in perspective, career stage, geography, etc. This might include executives and consultants, though as noted in the prior section, the primary aim here is to first advance scholarly understanding, as a necessary step toward future relevance.

Each working group would commission a set of studies that they deem would advance knowledge of their topic, to be completed by the end of the leader's term, or for longitudinal studies requiring longer time periods, by other arrangement. The committee could issue an open call and select from amongst applications, invite authors, or some combination. In line with current cycles, leaders might be elected in the spring, assemble their team and hold an organizing meeting at the annual AOM meeting, issue calls and invitations in the fall, submit plans for a manuscript development PDW by the January AOM deadline, hold the PDW in the next AOM meeting (end of year 1), submit a symposium proposal for the next AOM meeting in which contributing authors share their initial findings, hold that symposium in the following AOM meeting (end of year 2), and finally, have authors complete and submit full papers to the next AOM meeting. Some divisions might offer research and travel support to

encourage participation or organize workshops and conferences outside the AOM cycle. The final papers might be published in a journal special issue. But not all divisions have a journal affiliation, not all journals will be open to this, and for divisions with many topics and many commissioned papers in each, established journals lack adequate space. Other options include creating a dedicated book series or new journal. Each paper is on the same topic and its contribution well-specified, so the full papers ought to be no longer than research notes, allowing an issue to contain dozens.

Advancing knowledge is of course an ongoing process. As one three-year cycle is completed, a new leader and working group would be elected for the next cycle and commission a new set of studies. Every other cycle – once every six years – the division would assess the progress of its roadmap and adjust topic areas accordingly. Currently, each division is reviewed every five years by the AOM's Division & Interest Group Review (DIGR) Committee, which focuses on ensuring various processes are in place. Adopting roadmaps would allow the DIGR Committee to instead focus on outcomes, holding divisions accountable for their effectiveness at advancing managerial knowledge within their domains.

In time, as research gaps are systematically filled across Divisions, it may become possible to create the managerial equivalent of the *Physicians' Desk Reference* (PDR) to provide comprehensive insights about how organizations are likely to respond to various managerial actions. In concept, the *Managers' Desk Reference* (MDR), akin to the PDR's lists of known drugs and their effects on people, would contain entries for known managerial actions and their effects on organizations, the people therein, and ideally even those outside the organization, such as communities, society, and the natural environment.

Yes, I hear you: but, but . . . we're dealing with people embedded in social systems, not molecules traversing circulatory systems. True, and this limits how closely an MDR could approximate the PDR and how comprehensive the set of entries might be, but renders it

asymptotic, not asinine. Consider downsizing. Presently, if a manager were to ask me how a proposal to downsize would affect her firm – a reasonable question that a management professor ought to be able to answer – I would first consult the literature, perhaps via a search of Google Scholar. I just did so, and in 0.04 seconds I found about 195,000 results. After refining the search to “organizational downsizing,” I got a mere 85,300 results. Let’s incorrectly assume that I am remarkably efficient at weeding out irrelevant results and so can hone this list down to one or two thousand truly relevant articles. How do I divine an answer therefrom? These hundreds and hundreds of studies use different samples and methods across different contexts and time periods, in ways that are not apparent unless I read through them in detail. I could turn to any of dozens of review articles, perhaps selecting the most recent or the most prestigious journal. This would ease my search burden, but the studies therein would still provide inconsistent results and none may have been tested in the particular context that this manager faces. Thus, I am presently unable to provide a clear answer to this manager.

In contrast, suppose the MDR exists and has an entry on downsizing. The MDR entry would list the known effects of downsizing, in various permutations, on various outcomes across various settings and time periods, to include mitigating and moderating interactions, with reference to the supporting studies. Variations might include whether the firm is public or private, large or small, young or old, undertaking other managerial actions, in a particular industry, has a particular organizational structure, faces technological upheaval, confronting a recession, experienced CEO turnover, etc. The “dosage” might vary, such as quick layoffs across the board, elimination of a whole unit over time, or just a few isolated people by attrition. Outcome measures might include changes in stock market and accounting returns, reputation, or employee turnover at various time intervals, as well as employee welfare, community support, pollution emissions, corporate philanthropy, and so on. The reported effects need not be numerical, but could be in the form of narrative summaries as well.

With such a resource, I, or better yet, the manager directly, becomes much more likely to find a relevant answer with relative ease. Granted, every situation is unique in some way, and past performance as revealed in the contributing studies is no guarantee of equivalent future performance. Implementation is yet another can of worms, though variation therein could also be a factor discussed in the entry. Nonetheless, as the roadmaps continue to fill research gaps, and these results feed into the corresponding MDR entry, the likelihood that managers will be able to find results for the set of conditions that reasonably approximate those they are facing improves considerably. Of course resources are limited and there are an endless number of permutations, each of which might be replicated and validated across myriad settings and time periods for each entry. We cannot study them all. Working groups would prioritize research gaps and commission studies to fill the most pressing.

Through roadmaps, we can direct scholarship toward areas that warrant further study and, over time, advance understanding of important management topics in a systematic and comprehensive way. However, even if divisions broadly adopt the roadmap structure, much scholarship will still occur “off-road,” undirected and outside the scope of entries included in the MDR. We need a way to understand the full breadth of scholarship produced. With so much out there, central organization is infeasible. I next describe a distributed system for organizing the voluminous management research in real time.

Organizing Beyond Roadmaps

There’s just too much stuff out there to keep track of. Have you read all the latest studies even in your own sub-field? There are almost certainly studies of relevance to your research but of which you are unaware. I propose creation of the Theories of Management Catalog (TOMCat) to cope with this information overload. TOMCat would be an online database containing key parts of management studies, cataloged in meaningful ways, and continuously updated as articles are accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

TOMCat would make it easier to find relevant studies amidst all the clutter and harder, whether intentional or not, to cherry pick supporting evidence by ignoring disconfirming studies. There are myriad theories, concepts, and relationships lurking in the literature that have been discounted, questioned, and even disproven since they were published. It is possible and even probable that many are unaware and so base their research on disproven studies. By establishing a way to keep the latest findings at the fore, we can be more efficient by heading off misdirected research before it begins. We can also help reviewers and editors to recognize the state of the art so that they can better assess and advise. By making new findings, even if by less-established scholars, harder to ignore, it is more meritocratic to boot. Thus, TOMCat can help researchers, reviewers, and editors to become more informed, efficient, effective, and even egalitarian.

As discussed in the prior section, given the sheer volume of publications, current key word search methods are problematic. They typically provide a hefty reading list rather than a clear answer. It is one thing to find that there are 1,621 documents in ABI/Inform for, say, corporate social responsibility. It is a whole other thing to clearly portray the current state of knowledge on the subject.

- INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE -

TOMCat would provide relevant portions of articles (e.g., definitions, findings) inserted into relevant categories (e.g., constructs, debates, relationships) and arranged in ways (e.g., recency, citation counts) that enable researchers to gain clearer understanding of the state of various management research areas. Figure 1 provides a mockup of a TOMCat page for corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR is listed as a *construct*. TOMCat might also categorize entries by *relationship* (links between two or more constructs), *theory* (or view, approach, etc; things more defined than just relationships), *debate* (between two or more

theories), and *phenomenon* (interesting findings that haven't been tied to a theory). The aim of a construct page would be to provide a clear understanding of the nature of the construct. Specifically, how is it currently defined, has it been empirically validated, and to which other constructs is it related?

As shown in Figure 1, the top of the page lists the top five most cited papers about the CSR construct. Citation count is a common metric for assessing journal articles. Listing the top five by this metric helps ensure that the researcher does not overlook the “classics.” Google Scholar is now a standard source for citation counting and could be updated automatically so that the list always reflects the most-cited articles. Thereafter are several sub-category headings, beginning with definitions. These sub-categories would vary with the overall category (e.g. construct vs. debate), but in general, they would be related to defining, testing, conceptualizing, and critiquing the category item. Entries should be as specific and narrow as possible. For example, definitions should be verbatim and the page number on which they appear in the publication should be specified. If researchers want more detail, they may go to the full article, knowing exactly where to look and with a good sense of if they want to bother.

Note that entries for all sub-categories are also linked to Google Scholar citation counts as a way to provide a sense of their acceptance in the field, and are also organized so that the most recent publication is on top. This is the mechanism for ensuring that the latest findings are visible. It is now the norm that articles are accepted and placed online on a given date, not just in a given year. Thus, it is feasible to determine which article is most recent even within a given year. There is also a “Report Concerns” button to report incorrect entries. To keep the system simple, a rule could be established that if, say, five members report concerns with an entry, that entry would appear faded, and if ten report concerns, the entry is hidden, though the user would be able to uncover it. It is also possible to add space for comment, though if

online media outlets are indicative of the sorts of comments that might arise, then this may not be a constructive feature to add. Finally, note the “Related Entries” sub-category, which allows members to identify categories related to the focal entry and then organizes these entries by the number of members selecting each.

TOMCat is useful to the degree that it is fully and continuously populated with research findings, of which there are tens of thousands. A publishing house might see merit in taking on this significant task, but they’d likely privatize access. Google might decide to augment Google Scholar with a database like this, perhaps even expanding it well beyond management. But short of that, populating TOMCat only seems feasible if authors enter their own information, as with sites like the Social Science Research Network and Research Gate. For example, from a paper I published in *Academy of Management Review* in 2007, I might enter definitions of corporate social responsibility, corporate social performance, and stakeholder influence capacity, as well as the relationship between corporate social and financial performance, and its contributions to instrumental stakeholder theory and the “Friedman-Freeman” debate. Some might err or even lie in their entries, but members can report such concerns. Overall, the entries might be more accurate than if centrally controlled.

To get over the initial hurdle, AOM might ask all its Fellows to enter details of at least some of their work or (help) fund a data entry effort. Perhaps we start with a single Division. Once the pump is primed, self-interest and pride ought to be sufficient to keep it updated. If TOMCat gains traction, it is possible that journals will want to enter details as they accept new papers and so eliminate much of the need for authors to update the database. Such efforts could replace the email blasts from various journals vying for our attention at present.

On-roaders and Off-roaders Unite!

As thousands of metaphorical monkeys independently banging away on typewriters for decades, we have consumed many resources but produced relatively few Shakespearean

sonnets. Some suggest that we've also flung around quite a load of crap (Ghoshal, 2005). Let's move beyond this by coordinating our efforts. If rivalrous firms can come together to create institutions that strain their discretion but help to resolve their shared problems (Barnett, 2006; Barnett & King, 2008), management scholars can work together a bit more.

As with most organized approaches, positivistic empirical work fits most neatly within the systems proposed herein. But inductive, qualitative, conceptual, and other such studies still fit within the roadmaps and TOMCat and even within the MDR. Working groups can commission any sort of study they deem necessary to advance understanding of their topics. The sub-categories listed in TOMCat accommodate details of such studies and can be modified where necessary. In the MDR, such studies could be summarized in narrative.

Disagreements arise in academia – no, really – and can be accommodated and even ended through this system. Rather than leaving islands to stand apart, TOMCat brings competing views together, literally getting them on the same page. Working groups can commission studies to untangle debates or to at least closely define and establish boundaries of competing views. Because they commission studies, working group leaders do have outside influence, but they are elected, their terms are limited, and they are part of a working group. Moreover, their divisions can set approval and veto rules. As a result, they have less authority than do journal special issue editors, to which their role is comparable.

We don't all need to follow a roadmap, but hopefully many will. Others can do their part to systematically advance management knowledge by ensuring that their "off-road" adventures are captured in TOMCat and so are made more visible to fellow scholars. We will never produce a perfect understanding of all things managerial, but that is no reason to dismiss roadmaps or condemn TOMCat before it starts. We do not need to build an all-encompassing nomological network of management to move forward. Better organizing what we do know, and selectively aiming scholars toward what we don't know, will do much.

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Rousseau, D. 2006. Is there such a thing as “evidence-based management”? *Academy of Management Review*, 31: 256-269.

Rynes, S. 2007. Editor’s foreword—Carrying Sumantra Ghoshal’s torch: Creating more positive, relevant, and ecologically valid research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50: 745-747.

Starbuck, W. 2003. Turning lemons into lemonade: Where is the value in peer reviews? *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 12: 344-351.

Starbuck, W. 2006. *The production of knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Starbuck, W. 2009. The constant causes of never-ending faddishness in the behavioral and social sciences. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 25(1): 108-116.

FIGURE 1: Sample TOMCAT page

CONSTRUCT: Corporate social responsibility

Top 5 Most Cited References:

- 1) Smith, A. & B. Jones. 2001. Here is your definition of CSR. *Journal of Good Stuff*, 7(1): 15-22.
Current Google Scholar Citations: 463
 - 2) Jones, A. & B. Smith. 2000. I think you define CSR this way. *Journal of Bad Stuff*, 14(5): 87-99.
Current Google Scholar Citations: 382
 - 3) Starbuck, W. H. 2002. Why are you defining CSR? *Skeptics Journal*, 4(3): 1-14.
Current Google Scholar Citations: 380
 - 4) Jones, Q. 2006. CSR is really this. *Journal of CSR*, 18(2): 112-122.
Current Google Scholar Citations: 185
 - 5) Freely, I. P. 2007. You don't know jack about CSR. *Journal of Criticism*, 44(9): 1123-1199.
Current Google Scholar Citations: 9
-

DEFINITIONS (In order of publication, most recent first)

Jones, A. & B. Smith. 2011. All you ever wanted to know about CSR. *Journal of CSR*, 23(1): 1-17.
Current Google Scholar Citations: 2

“Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a discretionary allocation of corporate resources toward improving social welfare that serves as a means of enhancing relationships with key stakeholders.” (p. 7)

Report Concerns

....

EMPIRICAL TESTS (In order of publication, most recent first)

- **Supportive Findings**

Yu, A. & B. Mi. 2009. Is CSR a distinct construct? Yes. *Journal of Methodology*, 45(1): 24-42.
Current Google Scholar Citations: 19

Evidence: In experiment on 62 students, CSR shown to be distinct from philanthropy.

Report Concerns

...

- **Contradictory Findings**

Us, A. & B. Them. 2010. CSR is not a distinct construct. *Review of Methodology*, 14(2): 75-82.
Current Google Scholar Citations: 8

Evidence: 75 managers interviewed; CSR shown to be indistinguishable from advertising.

Report Concerns

...

- **Mixed and Inconclusive Findings**

Up, A. & B. Down. 2007. CSR is all over the place. *Business Issues*, 23(3): 118-129.

Current Google Scholar Citations: 84

Evidence: In panel data set covering Fortune 500 firms from 1982-2005, CSR shown to be different from advertising but not distinct from philanthropy.

Report Concerns

...

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND CRITICISMS (in order of publication, most recent first)

Friedman, M. 1970. The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. New York Times Magazine, Sep. 13: 122-126.

Current Google Scholar Citations: 10764

Argument: CSR is a misallocation of wealth, from the shareholder as rightful owner, to stakeholders who have no legitimate claim on the wealth.

Report Concerns

...

OTHER (In order of publication, most recent first)

Kramer, A. 2006. A topic related to CSR in a way not categorized in TOMCAT. Journal of General Knowledge, 21(2): 187-192.

Current Google Scholar Citations: 76

Relevance: The author must justify relevance of anything not otherwise fitting into a category.

Report Concerns

...

RELATED ENTRIES (in order of support by members)

- Stakeholder Theory	Supported by XX members
- Corporate social performance	Supported by XX members
- Corporate social irresponsibility	Supported by XX members
- Corporate reputation	Supported by XX members
- Corporate citizenship	Supported by XX members
- CSR and CFP relationship	Supported by XX members
- Stakeholder influence capacity	Supported by XX members

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Michael L. Barnett (mbarnett@business.rutgers.edu) is a professor in the Department of Management & Global Business at Rutgers Business School – Newark & New Brunswick, at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Mike has held tenured positions at Oxford University and the University of South Florida and holds visiting positions at EGADE Business School and Seton Hall University. Mike is 2014-15 Chair of the Social Issues in Management Division of the Academy of Management and will spend 2015-16 at Baruch College as Fellow of the American Council on Education. He researches how firms' efforts at stakeholder management, through acts of corporate social responsibility and via communal institutions such as industry trade associations, influence their reputations and financial performance and affect society. His work has been published in *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Strategic Management Journal*, and many other journals and books.