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ACADEMY OF MANAGEMENT DISCOVERIES

Towards an actionable and pragmatic view of impact

Chris A Voss

Professor of Operations Management
Warwick Business School

Emeritus Professor of Operations Management
London Business School

Contact address

Warwick Business School
University of Warwick
Coventry
England CV4 7AL

Tel +44 1926 337666
Email cvoss@london.edu

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Abstract

Our research should consider research pathways that lead to actionable impact on practice. Such research would require a broader and pragmatic view of impact. DSR and CIMO methods provide an opportunity for doing this. The challenge is that it requires a longer-term view of impact; actionable impact may only be achieved and evaluated after a considerable period of time.

Towards an actionable and pragmatic view of impact

The importance of the impact of research on practice is much debated in many disciplines. For example in my field, operations and supply chain management, despite the excellence of current research, many worry that it is drifting away from the historic pragmatic ties to practice and that this drift reduces the impact of our research. Research has often been concerned with solving specific and well-defined problems. Too often there is little that explicitly leads to, or even discusses in depth, how this research will lead to *actionable* outcome for the practitioner community.

A recent excellent commentary on impact in the academy put forward three pathways to practice impact: trailing, leading and concurrent ((Simsek, Bansal, Shaw, Heugens and Smith, 2018). In the leading pathway there is typically a dialogue between researchers and practitioners, in the concurrent pathway research is conducted with practitioners. These two pathways in particular can enhance both impact and relevance of research to practitioners. The route from such research to practice was seen as through “producing fungible artefacts such journal articles, slide decks, teaching cases or books etc. that practitioners can consume and apply to their specific contexts” (Simsek et al., 2018, p2022). However, are such artefacts always sufficient for wider practice impact of research?

We rarely see our research as producing *actionable* artefacts such as constructs models, methods and installations (March and Smith, 1995) that can be adapted contextually and used by practitioners. Addressing this there has been a renewed interest in design science research (DSR), (van Aken, Chandrasekaran and Halman, 2016). Design scientists are not content with merely explaining and perhaps predicting, but also shaping the phenomenon of interest; the researcher is interested in developing “a means to an end,” an artefact to solve a problem (Holmström, Ketokivi and Hameri, 2009). DSR’s objective is to produce “... well-tested, well understood and well documented innovative generic designs, dealing with authentic field problems or opportunities” (van Aken et al., 2017, p 1).

Although there are differences in approaches, DSR typically involves the following stages: problem identification, problem solution, leading to an innovative generic design and evaluation of the original solution. A fifth stage, an important element of current DSR approaches, is the evaluation of the solution or artefact's wider application in the same domain or in different contexts. A common element is that there will be iteration between the various stages of this process. The researcher can seek "substantive theory [...] that is developed for a narrowly defined context and empirical application (Holmström, Ketokivi and Hameri, 2009 p75). The artefacts developed in DSR can be expressed as *actionable* propositions (Tanskanen, Holmström and Ohman, 2015). These can be field tested in the context of the CIMO logic for design research (Denyer, Tranfield, & Van Aken, 2008): "IF Context contains contextual factor C1, C2,...Cn, THEN apply Intervention I1..In to invoke mechanisms M1..Mn that generate desired outcomes O1..On." (Akkermans, van Oppen, Wynstra and Voss, 2019, p6).

Research paths to *actionable* impact can require a longer-term view. For example, the UK Research Assessment Framework (REF, 2019) in evaluating the impact of research, calls for case studies describing specific examples of impacts achieved underpinned by excellent research, allowing up to a 10 years from research to demonstration of impact. An application or design may be grounded in previous research and the development and testing will take time. A full DSR approach requires field-testing a number of applications of the design within the intended application domain (van Aken et al., 2016) so for example DSR can involve multiple studies conducted over a long period of time (Holmström et al., 2009). This can lead to extended research timescales, and as with other longitudinal approaches, creating a dilemma that a rigorous approach to developing *actionable* impact takes so long that it can disincentivise researchers from using such approaches and could be a barrier to widespread adoption of the outcomes in practice. One way of addressing this is to publish both academic and practitioner outcomes at a number of stages in the research timeline, see for example Tanskanen et al. (2015).

Evaluating *actionable* impact calls for additional criteria. First, prescriptive theory that can be tested by implementation in practitioner contexts leads to the need to examine pragmatic validity. The pragmatic validity of knowledge can be judged by the extent to which goals or intended consequences can be achieved by producing certain actions or using particular instruments (Worren, Moore and Elliott, 2002); whether a generic design will work after contextualization and implementation based on a strong body of evidence (van Aken et al., 2016). Second is the reach of the impact (REF, 2019). For example, is there supportable evidence that the research and resulting artefacts, not just could, but have led to *actionable* outcomes in multiple users? This can be depth of impact in the context of the research and/or breadth of impact into a broader set of contexts.

In summary, I argue that we should consider research pathways that lead to *actionable* impact on practice. A good test is the ability to articulate a narrative linking research to actual impact. Such research would require a broader, *actionable* and pragmatic view of impact. DSR and CIMO methods (van Aken et al., 2016, Denyer et al, 2008) provide an opportunity for doing this. One challenge is that *actionable* impact may only be achieved and evaluated after a considerable period of time.

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