

Applied Business Research – Why It Matters

An Introductory Article for the special editions of Applied Business Research

Editors

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Abstract

This paper and this special edition focus on issues associated with the importance of applied business research and the problems that need to be addressed in a business world that is struggling to deal with the forces of change. The challenges that leaders and organizations are facing to compete, survive, and flourish in the global marketplace have caused the redefining of the relationship between organizations and their employees. Clearly, the indicators for the modern organization suggest that academic scholars and business practitioners need to reevaluate the assumptions that have historically influenced business decisions. Applied business research will help to address the issues that business leaders must resolve to meet the demands of a constantly evolving business world.

Keywords: applied business research, roles of business schools, managing change

1. Introduction

McGill University's Henry Mintzberg, one of the world's most highly respected management scholars and an advocate of excellence in business education (Mintzberg, 2004), has repeatedly addressed the importance of business school's emphasizing practical business research. Mintzberg has explained that much of the alleged "top-tier" business research publications fail to adequately address solutions to the real world problems facing today's business community (Mintzberg & Caldwell, 2017).

In this special edition, we have included four practical articles that are focused on helping scholars and practitioners to more fully understand important issues currently being faced by leaders and employees in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business climate (Popescu, Hysa, & Panait, 2022). This special edition aligns with the recent efforts by the Academy for the Advancement of the Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) to refocus business schools on the importance of the gnawing issues facing business in modern society.

The critique of today's universities and their administrators and their "ivory tower" focus has raised recurring questions over the past two decades about the quality of business school leadership; their struggles in adapting quickly to changes in society; and the decline in the caliber of education being provided by adjuncts, part-time and temporary faculty; and full-time faculty who often seem more interested in getting published to obtain tenure than teaching classes (Pfeffer, & Fong, 2022). This criticism comes not just from business leaders but from many of the most highly regarded academics who echo Mintzberg's concerns about the practical value of business research.

2. Understanding the Problem

It is unfair, however, to suggest that business school leaders and their faculties are the only ones responsible for the decline in the quality of business school programs, the quality of their academic product, or the questionable value of theoretical research with little relevance to today's business issues. The elected officials who choose to fund or not fund quality education, the business owners and Chief Executives who fail to partner with business schools to address social responsibility issues, and other individuals and organizations who have chosen not to address today's challenging societal problems (including those created by businesses), all get their fair share of the blame (Anderson, Ndalamba, & Caldwell, 2017).

Nonetheless, it is also fair to call out business schools and their leaders for a number of easily identifiable problems that currently face today's business schools. Here are three of those problems.

2.1 The Failure of Business Schools to Adapt to Change

The curricula offered by most business schools has been widely criticized for its failure to address the human side of managing and management development (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Rather than addressing issues associated with the importance of unlocking human potential, the cookie cutter curricula at most business schools are undistinguishable from school to school and emphasize business analytics and number crunching (Mintzberg, 2004), even though the latest research has confirmed that today's employees no longer trust many of their leaders (Clifton & Harter, 2019). Rather than addressing the problems of employee engagement and empowerment and their importance in business effectiveness, business schools have neglected opportunities to research those important topics in lieu of emphasizing the "hard skills" that are the by-product of people's hard work (Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer, 1998).

2.2 The Increasing Reliance on Adjuncts and Temporary Faculty

It's the day of the "Gig Economy" and academia has drunk the Kool-Aid (Tan et al., 2021). Rather than replacing top quality retiring faculty who chose to retire rather than convert to teaching online, the tendency of many schools has been to assign the classes taught by those faculty to adjuncts, contract, and temporary faculty. Predictably, many of those new part-time faculty are neither doctoral graduates nor up to speed with the best practices and theories in the classes that they teach (Todd, 2004) and only 23% have PhDs in the field in which they are teaching (Flaherty, 2022). Called "the lowest rung in a caste system" and "academia's permanent underclass" in an *Atlantic Magazine* article (Harris, 2019), adjuncts struggle financially. Nonetheless, the hiring of adjuncts has become so prevalent that the *Washington Post* reports that 70 percent of university faculty are now adjuncts (Lumpkin, 2022). The consequence, of course, is that student suffer, and that to survive, adjuncts create short-cuts, give out fewer assignments, and cut corners to justify their low pay (Los Angeles Times Editorial Board, 2021).

2.3 Increase in Non-Academic and Professional Employees

According to the New England Center for Investigative Reporting, while colleges and universities have decreased the number of tenured faculty, they have more than doubled the number of non-academic and professional employees in the past twenty-five years. The report labels the rate of increase in administrators and professional employees "more than twice as fast as the growth in the number of students (Marcus, 2014). In examining the causes behind the increase in administrative and professional staff, Avenali and colleagues looked at the issue of the increase in non-academic staff in their extensive research and determined that additional non-academic staff had no positive correlation with honors degrees, graduate employability, or research quality of faculty or students – although the increase in non-academic staff was correlated with higher rates of course completion and an increase in tuition costs (Avenali, Daraio, & Wolszczak-Derlacz, 2023).

Business faculty, department heads and chairs, and academic administrators would do well to thoughtfully review these three significant problems and immediately develop responses that will help business schools to improve their ability to address the challenges facing business education today and in the future. We respectfully suggest that these topics are worthy of extensive applied research on the part of business faculty.

3. Contents of this Edition

The articles contained in this special edition reflect a commitment to applied research and the practical problems facing businesses and academic institutions today. The following is a summary of the articles for readers interested in these topics.

"Thriving in a Challenging World: Identity, Self-Regard, and Humility"

This article examines the role of the individual leader and her or his ability to thrive by creating a clearer understanding of the Identity Standard and its impact on the leader's impact on others in organizations. The focus of this paper is on explaining the nature of the identity and its importance in empowering individuals to choose to thrive and flourish. We begin the chapter by identifying the importance of the identity as the key to personal thriving and flourishing – focusing on the identity as the opportunity for developing personal self-regard and placing it in context with personal humility, often defined as "a correct understanding of oneself (Caldwell, 2019)." We identify ten key insights about achieving personal flourishing that are related to developing a clear understanding of one's identity. We close the chapter with a challenge to individuals to choose to thrive, to flourish, and to empower themselves as they seek to live happier and more fulfilling lives.

"Leadership, Commitment, and the Willingness to Trust: What Companies Must Do to Thrive."

Trust in leaders and their ability to earn and retain the commitment of their employees is critical to an organization's success in maintaining a competitive advantage. The focus of this paper is on identifying how organization leaders fail

to earn the engagement, trust, and commitment of their employees – a phenomenon that occurs so commonly that more than three-fourths of all employees worldwide. The paper reviews the importance of trust and trustworthiness and their relationship with employee engagement. It then identifies seven fundamental reasons why so many organizations are ineffective in engaging their employees and achieving their goals.

“Thriving as a Win-Win Commitment: Helping Employees and Organizations to Flourish”

This paper addresses the process of decision-making and problem solving which often occurs because leaders and organizations fail to make the choice to collaborate to identify mutually beneficial outcomes. The paper describes five decision-making alternatives and identifies why the Win-Win option is superior in the quest to achieve optimal outcomes. The paper also identifies seven guidelines for implementing the Win-Win and explains how this approach is superior in helping organizations and their employees to flourish.

7. Invitation to the Readers

As faculty, administrators, or researchers interested in the future of business education, we encourage readers of this special edition to reflect on the importance of applied business research. The issues addressed by the articles contained herein have practical value and demonstrate why applied research is so important. We also encourage the reader to become active participants in encouraging today’s business school faculty and leaders to play a more significant role in addressing the quality of business education provided by their institutions – including the three major problems identified by this brief introduction.

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