Recalibrating Management Research for the Post-COVID-19 Scientific Enterprise

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Scientific experts have traditionally enjoyed high public trust, but their stock of social capital is eroding (Jacobs, 2020). This is particularly the case for management researchers, who are already viewed as elites disconnected from practice and the public. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated lingering concerns about using public resources for university education and social sciences that yield questionable social returns with obfuscated outputs, lack of timeliness and accessibility, and fragmentation, but it has also ‘changed science forever’ (Yong, 2020): The post-COVID-19 scientific enterprise demands responsible use of societal resources through fast-paced research, social embeddedness, and coordination. Management research is everything but. For management scholars, this means recalibrating how research is conducted, evaluated, and disseminated to society. This commentary briefly outlines some tangible pathways toward that end.

\section*{CHRONIC PROBLEMS TURNED EXISTENTIAL}

The notion that management research seldom reaches a broad audience or lacks pivotal societal impact is not new (Buckley et al., 2017), but stakeholder patience for using resources for management research has rapidly depleted due to COVID-19-driven resource constraints. The endless calls for individual researchers to do more ‘impactful’ or...
‘responsible’ work have had little impact. A major reason is strong incentives focusing researchers’ activities on intellectual aesthetics, ultra-differentiation, and storytelling. The slew of papers on how COVID-19 will change management research and phenomena is in itself a sign that management researchers tend to be behind and often lack the standing to inform practitioners and the public on such matters. Exploratory, pluralistic, and debate-driven inquiry into Grand Challenges is helpful (Howard-Grenville, 2021), but it is not enough. The Grand Challenges and big questions that management researchers should study are hard to answer satisfactorily and often do not yield the intellectually stimulating findings that top journals expect.\[^1\]

Another structural problem is dispersion. Other than journals and loose associations, there is not much coordination and purposeful collective effort taking place. One of the reasons the biomedical scientific community was able to tackle COVID-19 quickly and with resolve is organizational efficiency and common purpose (Yong, 2020). In contrast, the management field nurtures niche and often trivial divisions rather than promoting a more coordinated approach to studying Grand Challenges and big questions. Yet, there are many management scientists nowadays, so it is possible to allocate a lot of effort to select problems.

These structural problems further interact with the field’s processes in problematic ways. It takes years to publish a study in leading management journals, and it comes at the estimated average cost of $400,000 per article (Byrne, 2014). Meanwhile, COVID-19 has significantly accelerated the pace of scientific inquiry and exposition of findings. Many scientific fields have demonstrated agility, rapid dissemination, and openness, but not much has changed about management research. COVID-19 is increasing the rift between management research and society to the point of no return. The management field can no longer afford to exacerbate its questionable output and exuberant costs with processes that make its science less timely and broadly inaccessible.

**WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

Although management research provides insights into some pressing issues practitioners face today, it needs ‘fundamental, sometimes counter-intuitive changes’ (Pielke and Lane, 2020) to build expert capital in society and among practitioners. While Wickert et al. (2021) detail how management researchers can make their research more impactful, including through dissemination activity, it is not clear why said researchers would be motivated to do so given the current structures and processes in the management field. In munificent times of equilibrium, this was less acute of an issue. But the post-COVID-19 resource constraints on the educational system and the rapidly changing scientific enterprise demand that management journal editors, deans, and senior scholars drive incentive changes from the top. The field’s senior gatekeepers ought to incentivize more research on big questions and Grand Challenges, even with less precision, than on small questions with superior precision, to increase the social value of management research. In this way, Wickert et al. (2021) perhaps miss critical structural and processual aspects of the field that require profound changes, as we discuss next.

First, the scientific process must instil trust by being much more visible and rapidly self-correcting. COVID-19 has made it abundantly clear that society is no longer willing to
expend significant resources and then, wait years for obfuscated research. We are encour-
aged by the recent surge in short-format articles, special issues on pressing topics with
accelerated review processes, and the emergence of journals that empower phenomenon-
driven research. Even so, this is incremental, and management research continues to be
longwinded and written in a language alien to all but insiders – sometimes, even to insid-
ers. We argue that more open, crowd-sourced designs are warranted. The technological
tools available today, some significantly better as a result of COVID-19 (De et al., 2020),
enable the creation of collaborative virtual platforms that can combine the need for
scientific rigor with the need to share, review, correct, and accumulate scientific output.
Management research would be a living entity broadly accessible from the early stages
of projects, and the platform can use artificial intelligence and algorithmic approaches
to categorize, aggregate, and synthesize scientific findings, particularly into concrete in-
sights that directly inform pressing issues such as Grand Challenges. This should help to
improve timeliness, accessibility, and rapid self-correction. The concept of doing a multi-
year study that undergoes hidden, multi-year blind review and that does not change after
publication (barring unusual occurrences) is a model of the past. A more open (including
to the public) platform should replace the existing publisher-journal-driven model, rather
than being a mere pre-publication supplement or a communication forum (e.g., Research
Gate, SSRN). The upshot is that management research should be seen as an ongoing
contribution to the scientific community and society rather than corporation-owned in-
tellectual property cemented in history once published.

Second, as a field, management must be known for mastering a limited, well-defined
set of big questions to have real standing as scientific experts and a seat at the table for
addressing Grand Challenges. Management schools cannot be experts in everything but
should at least have brand capital of strong expertise in some things. This requires coor-
dination at the highest levels: A portfolio of big questions and research based on present
and nascent issues. This portfolio must be built with practitioners’ and other stakehold-
ers’ participation and relate to issues that the field is uniquely positioned to address. Like
consulting firms reflecting on the year that was and is to come, management researchers
can work with stakeholders to drive topics and user-friendly reports that can be broadly
circulated in society and business circles. Management researchers have the science as
a basis to drive actionable insights in key areas; hence, there is no need to worry about
differentiating such reports from the many buzzword-driven, rigor-lacking reports out
there. Individual researchers vying to make an impact (Wickert et al., 2021) will not take
the field sufficiently forward. Management research needs a collective effort coordinated
by senior management scholars and promulgated via a technological platform that can
yield usable output, as we discuss above. Furthermore, intermediaries embedded in di-
verse networks of practice and society, especially where management research does not
reach or resonate, must be part of the dissemination processes. Recent initiatives, such
as the Management Studies Insights Blog, help translate research to outsiders. However,
this is not enough. Disseminating research must be an integral, coordinated part of the
profession because social showcasing of scientific work is a staple of post-COVID-19
science. Deans and promotion committees should put more value in such activities.

Third, rather than only producing scientific articles based on data either compiled for
other reasons or collected by the researcher for the purpose of publishing an article,
management researchers should make it an integral part of their work to generate, compile, and circulate high-quality data that non-academics can use, namely support decisions by practitioners and policymakers and actively inform the public as a means to establish the field’s expert capital in society (Sharma and Bansal, 2020). Now more than ever, organizations can benefit from the scientific prowess of management researchers to drive speedy decisions and cope with major challenges (Ahlstrom and Wang, 2021). But management research is often lagging and assesses challenges ex-post. The steps we suggest here will help make the management field more anticipatory, relevant, and instrumental, thus making it a point of reference for outsiders rather than a backward-looking conversation among insiders.

CLOSING REMARK

Despite its many adverse outcomes, COVID-19 has given management researchers the opportunity to become a leading force of experts in the new scientific enterprise. Several aspects of work and organization in the post-COVID-19 world are ripe for inquiry along the lines proposed above. For example, an area that can benefit from a concerted effort by management scholars is the future of work, the topic of an in-process Journal of Management Studies special issue. The COVID-19 pandemic is bringing forth disparities based on factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and nationality. These disparities pose problems for talent management, workplace diversity and inclusion, and employee mental health, thus requiring new sets of management skills. The management field is well-equipped to address these issues, but it must be done in a coordinated, timely, and open manner; in collaboration with stakeholders; in a way that prioritizes a focus on big questions over intellectual aesthetics; and by way of producing not only research but also user-friendly reports and data that are forward-looking for broad use.

More generally, management research is well equipped to address issues with systems that will be the focus of post-COVID-19 scientific inquiry, such as food and crop management, energy organization management, robot and artificial intelligence management, disaster management and systemic resilience, education system management, and innovation management for global diseases (Bansal et al., 2021). These are not typical topics in management research, but they should be because management scholars have the expertise to break new ground in these topics tied to the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals. If management researchers make such issues part of a coordinated portfolio of big questions, study them rapidly and openly using intelligent technological platforms, and produce accessible reports and data, the management field will have been well on its way toward regaining expert brand capital in society and being calibrated for the post-COVID-19 scientific enterprise. To make this a reality, we call on the senior leaders of the management field to make the needed structural and processual changes.

NOTE

[1] Grand Challenges and big questions are not the same: the former is society-driven, while the latter originates within the academic agenda (Buckley, 2020).
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