

Research With a Purpose

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Abstract

The article emphasizes the need for systematic research in the developing knowledge based world. It goes on to suggest that since knowledge is a dynamic entity, the key to advancement of knowledge is good theory building based on sound scientific research. An understanding of research and research methods needs to be an integral part of the managerial process. The development of the field of management owes its existence to research. Though the position of management research in our country has improved over time, there is a need to develop a closer interface between the business organizations and management institutions to conduct research for mutual benefit. While stating the need to encourage high quality original research in the management schools, the article outlines the kinds of researches that are possible in management. The relevance of an interdisciplinary approach to management research is highlighted. The article concludes with focussing on the importance of meaningful and purposeful research to improve theoretical foundations as well as the practice of management.

Key Words: Management Research, Applied Research, Research Purpose.

Research is a highly advocated but one of the least practiced phenomena in the field of management, as well as in many other professions, areas of study, and realms of human endeavour. It is often treated as a sacred activity to be talked or written about in academic circles, or to be pursued to complete some course requirements for obtaining a degree, or presenting a paper in a prestigious conference, rather than a practical, effective, and scientific tool for solving problems and advancing knowledge. Very often practising managers, business leaders, and policy makers consider research to be too esoteric, time consuming and academic to be of much practical value to solve their pressing problems. They are seldom convinced or clear about how research can be a powerful tool to solve their complex, deeply rooted and recurring problems, and, therefore, prefer to fall back on their intuition, common sense, counsel of experienced people, or what they believe to be the 'words of wisdom' passed on by their parents, elders, and gurus.

In its simplest form research may be described as a systematic, logical and scientific method of studying a problem, obtaining information, finding a solution, and in the process advancing our understanding and knowledge. In a more elaborate form, research may be described as the process of utilizing scientific method and logical approach for identifying a problem; collecting relevant, valid and reliable information about it; analyzing it carefully and systematically, through various useful and well developed statistical and analytical techniques; drawing valid inferences and generalizations that can help in understanding the causes leading to the problem; gaining insights through such analysis that can lead to effective solutions; and thus discovering new knowledge that can provide a better foundation for policy, decisions and action, or build a better theory to explain causal relationships. Research needs to be viewed both as a "systematic inquiry aimed at providing information to solve problems,"¹ and as "a process through which new knowledge is discovered."²

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Knowledge is often described as power. But the true meaning of this statement is seldom fully understood, realized or practised. We rarely reflect on the fact that it is knowledge that has

given man the ability to tap the vast resources of nature, to reduce barriers of time and space, to overcome the most dreaded deprivations and diseases, to harness the atomic energy, and to place man on the moon. Knowledge as a means of solving human problems and creating wealth is becoming more obvious in the contemporary unfolding information age, emerging knowledge based industries, and knowledge based society.

The major source of productivity, competitiveness, and profitability will increasingly be knowledge, expertise, and competence of people in the organizations in the coming age. The organizations, which can learn, acquire new knowledge, and quickly provide better products, services and solutions will capture the markets in the challenging new global business environment. The secret of the success of development of societies, economies, organizations, and individuals will be their willingness and ability to learn, develop, and apply new knowledge in all spheres of action. No wonder the industrially advanced countries and globally the most successful organizations invest heavily in research and development, and for attracting, retaining and developing the potential of the knowledge workers. They consider no price too high to obtain the best knowledge and expertise to solve problems, enhance their problem-solving ability, and improve their strategic position and operational effectiveness.

We are witnessing dramatic changes in the business environment, because of liberalization, privatization, globalization, rapid growth of technology, impact of information and communication technology, and imperatives of the World Trade Organization agreement. These changes are making great knowledge demands on managers and organizations to survive and grow in the highly competitive and dynamic market situations. Further, knowledge demands are arising from the need to produce and deliver high quality products and services at low costs leading to problems in logistics, supply chain management, distribution and marketing

system. Managers have also to be more knowledgeable on account of developing e-commerce and internet based transactions, problems of mergers and acquisitions, restructuring of organizations, transfer of technology, major social and ecological concerns, macro-economic issues affecting business, infrastructure constraints, etc. Managers now and in the coming years will have to know more than any managers in the earlier eras.

In a simplified paradigm, knowledge may be described as a multilevel abstraction of reality. Its base consists of facts, observations, experiences and perceptions, which when recorded constitute the *data*. The data, when logically and meaningfully organized, tabulated and presented become *information*. Information, when carefully processed and analysed, may lead to inferences, generalizations and *insights*. Insights based on empirical observations are thus derived inductively; but insights can also be arrived at deductively. Both these processes are relevant for advancing knowledge.

Insights can lead to formulation of *concepts*; which become the basic tools for thinking, analyzing, and discussion. Concepts are also the basic elements for building a *theory*. A theory is an abstract formulation of ideas based on inductive analysis of empirical data or deductive reasoning that explains causal relationships and predicts outcomes of identified variables in a given situation. Theory is thus the epitome of *knowledge*, and as Kurt Lewin has stated, "a good theory is the most practical thing." However, it may be underlined here that a theory can be only as good as the foundation of data on which it is based, the quality of analysis and insights, its reliability in prediction, and its simplicity in explanation and application. The key to advancement of knowledge is good theory building based on sound scientific research, continual questioning, critiquing and testing of the existing theories, and persistent endeavour to develop better information and theories. The ability to absorb knowledge, understand its

intricacies and apply it in real life situations leads to *wisdom*. But as stated by Charles Gragg of Harvard University, "Wisdom cannot be told." It grows from within through learning, experience and reflection.

Knowledge is a dynamic entity with continuity as well as constant change. The rate of change is phenomenal, specially in the fields of science, social sciences, and inter-disciplinary and applied professions like management, which deal with the rapidly changing socio-economic-technical-political environment. Obsolescence in such fields, therefore, is very high, and a great deal of effort is needed to constantly update oneself to remain effective as a practising professional or academician in such fields.

Knowledge can also be inert, dated, and ineffective, if it is not rejuvenated through application, testing, and research. Unfortunately, many academic institutions are passing on inert knowledge to the students and not devoting enough time and attention to developing ability to apply, test and generate new and contextually relevant knowledge through dynamic learning processes and scientific research. Many institutions of higher learning are not paying enough attention to the fundamental purpose of higher and professional education, which is the development of the art of acquiring, generating, and applying knowledge, and enhancement of the ability to continuously learn and grow to deal with more complex problems and situations, and provide creative solutions for society's changing needs.

Research is essential for developing the field of knowledge in management, for improving the quality of teaching, and for providing a sound academic and theoretical base to the profession of management. It is equally required to deal with the persistent problems as well as newly emerging challenges before management, and to enhance the competitiveness and effectiveness of organizations. Research is not a luxury to be indulged in only by the Government funded institutions and affluent organizations, but a

critical necessity for improving managerial and organizational effectiveness in all its strategic, functional, operational and human processes.

We need to de-mystify and simplify the understanding of research and research methods to make it an integral part of managerial process for making sound decisions and their implementation, as well as to develop knowledge in the field. It is also important to impart knowledge and skills for understanding and utilizing scientific research methods and to develop scientific temper among students and practicing managers, as in the case of medical profession.

The analytical framework for the practice of management profession is similar to medical profession, i.e., both professions emphasise clear identification of problems and objectives; obtaining reliable data relevant to the problem; careful analysis of data through application of knowledge, experience, intuition, and insights; finding alternative solutions; exercising the choice of a decision and its implementation; following up and monitoring feedback, and obtaining results. Besides, both these professions are multi-disciplinary, applied, problem-solving and result oriented. In both these professions analytical and integrative thinking skills, application of knowledge, ethical values, positive attitudes, and action orientation are important. The advancement of both these professions demands priority to research and constant updating of knowledge to meet the challenges of change, new problems and opportunities for action.

If we take a historical view of the development of the field of management, we will find that it owes existence to the pioneering work of research-minded practitioners, analytical thinkers and application of scientific methods by persons like Charles Babbage, Frederick Taylor, and Henri Fayol, and path breaking studies by researchers like Hugo Munsterburg and Elton Mayo, and application of mathematical methods to managerial problems

by the Operational Research Teams. The body of knowledge has grown to a considerable level of sophistication and maturity in the different traditional functional areas of management like Marketing, Finance, Operations, Materials, Management Information Systems, Human Resource Management, etc., which have now been completely transformed and integrated into newer forms of conceptualizations, as well as more specialized branches. The supporting areas like Organizational Behaviour, Quantitative Methods, Managerial Economics, Business Laws, Business Environment, and integrating subjects like Strategic Management have also developed significant theoretical and conceptual richness and specialized applications.

The development of new areas like Information Technology, Supply Chain Management, Enterprise Resource Planning, Business Intelligence, E-Commerce, etc. have further advanced the field of management. In all these areas research and case studies have advanced the field and extended the frontiers of knowledge. However, the point to be noted is that most of the research and conceptual development in these fields has been done abroad, and very little contribution through original research has been made in our country. Lamenting on this state of affairs, Prof. Moonis Raza had stated: "In the absence of theory building on the basis of indigenous experience there is tendency to fill the conceptual vacuum by importing ready made goods from the glittering departmental stores at the developed world, particularly of its English speaking segment. It cannot be said that the situation has changed qualitatively in the recent past. Not rarely the Indian scholar still tends to acquire the character of a research assistant validating the hypothesis evolved in one or the other countries in West. This is generally not due to paucity of financial but intellectual resources. Though there have been some pioneering endeavours to build conceptual frames on the basis of indigenous experiences, they have been too few and still embryonic to be able to compete with goods from abroad."³

Presently the position regarding research in management in our country is not so dismal. There are good researches, few of these reported as books, and many as articles and research papers in a large numbers of journals some of which have existed for a long time, and several that have been launched all over the country in recent years (see for example works of Ishwar Dayal, J. B. P. Sinha, Udai Pareek, and Pradeep Khandwala)⁴. Interestingly, business reporting, analysis and journalism have developed to fairly good standard and can match international levels. Fairly well researched case studies, write-ups, and articles on management subjects are being published by the Indian business newspapers and journals. However, original conceptual writings and frontier area researches are still very few. Research work in the management education institutions is generally a marginal activity, pursued mostly as a part of the course requirements for Masters', M. Phil or Ph.D degrees. Similarly the case writing and case research work is very little leading to dependence on foreign cases, which may not have much relevance to the business and managerial problems and situations in India.

A survey of the Doctoral Level Research Studies in Management Schools was conducted by the author under the auspices of the Association of Indian Management Schools (AIMS) in 1994, entitled "A Decade of Management Research in India".⁵ Thirty nine management schools including management departments of universities participated in this study. The number of researches reported was 389. Of these 93 were in the area of Human Resources management, 66 in Finance, 48 in Marketing, 36 in Public Systems, 22 in Management Science, 17 in Operations, 16 in Managerial Economics, 12 in Management Information System, 11 in Management of Technology, 4 in Business Environment and 2 in International Business. Sectoral research was relatively small. The number of researches reported in Cooperative Sector was 7, Public Sector 6, Health Care 6, Education 3, and Non-Government Organizations 1 only. The

maximum number of researches were conducted by institutions established by the Central Government (192), followed by University Departments and Faculties (129). The average number of studies conducted in the University Departments of management was only 6 in the decade 1983-93. It was also found in this study that research work was a monopoly of a selected few institutes. Research was generally given a very low priority in the institutions studied. Important emerging areas like International Business, Management of Technology, Changing Environment of Business, were the least researched areas.

Research in management and business requires close interface and relationship between management institutions and business organizations. A study was also conducted on 'Interface between Management Institutions and Private Sector in India' under the auspices of the AIMS in the year 1994.⁶ The study revealed that most firms in the sample (75%) visited business schools only once a year in connection with campus interviews. Very few firms (only 25%) reported to have assisted students in their project work. A very low percentage (5%) reported to have participated in a workshop/conference organized by the business schools. Only 15% of the firms indicated that they have approached some business schools to undertake consulting work. All firms studied without exception wanted changes in the curriculum and courses of the business schools and wanted inclusion of the Indian cases. They considered the summer training work quite useful and suggested that this period be extended from the existing two months to four months. Some organizations have recently expressed desire for on-line availability of research students/scholars for their problem-based research requirements. It was evident from this study that there existed a strong need to develop a closer interface between the business organizations and management institutions to conduct research, consultancy and case-writing for mutual benefit and advancement of knowledge. However, the situation seems to persist, with little or no

perceptible change.

There are several reasons why familiarity with research methods, ability to conduct research and assess the quality of research are important for practicing managers, teachers and students of management. They may need to conduct, supervise, or sponsor research for their own requirements, or for the requirements of others. As users of research services and studies they will require ability to judge the reliability and validity of information and research findings. Besides, they may like to specialize in research and utilize the expertise as researchers or consultants. It is, therefore, necessary that knowledge and expertise of research methods be made an integral part of management courses. At present generally a limited exposure to research methods is given in courses like Marketing Research, and very few schools offer an exclusive course in Research Methodology as a part of Master's level programme.

It is also necessary to encourage high quality original research in the management schools for developing good quality of management education in India, which is at present highly dependent on knowledge generated in the western countries. The Association of management Schools has taken initiative to conduct national research workshops and national competition for Best Research Paper award given annually at the National Convention of the AIMS. The AIMS has also been publishing the workshop proceedings and research papers.⁷

Research in management has to be of many kinds depending on the nature of problem and purpose of study. We need Applied Research which has direct and immediate relevance for problem-solving and decision-making; and Basic Research (sometimes called Pure Research) to advance knowledge and develop theory for solving management problems in a larger perspective. The research study can be as elementary as only to report some data, usually in a statistical form or as a case study. Investigative reporting can be qualitatively very

useful and may be like clinical research. The next level of research can be a descriptive study, which addresses questions like what, where, when, who, and in some cases how also, but may not answer why. According to Dubin, " In every discipline, but particularly in its early stages of development, purely descriptive research is indispensable. Descriptive research is the stuff out of which the mind of man, the theorist, develops the units that compose his theories."⁸

Exploratory Researches seek explanation and go beyond description. They utilize some hypotheses to analyse the relationship between different variables or to account for the forces that cause certain phenomenon to occur. Predictive Research is the next level of research study, which is more rooted in theory, and assists in theory building. As emphasised by Emery and Cooper, "Any of these four types of studies - reporting, description, explanation, or prediction - can be properly called research."⁹ They also rightly emphasise that "whether pure or applied, simple or complex, all research should provide an answer to some question."¹⁰

Various kinds of research design are possible depending on the nature of problem and purpose of research, ranging from Experimental, Quasi-Experimental, to Non-Experimental designs like Coorelational, Historical, Descriptive, and Case Study. Each one of them has its own merits and limitations, and should not be under-rated, as is often done by 'purists' in research. The methodology often becomes a greater obsession with researchers than the purpose of research, and consequently practicing managers and students consider research too complex and theoretical and become disinterested in research. A large number of such complex research studies are reported in journals, which enhance the credentials of the researcher, but remain un-utilized by the practitioners.

Case studies have a special significance for teaching and research in professions like management, medicine, and law. Case Studies

bring a fragment of complex realities of life into classroom and enable the students to learn to analyse, test their assumptions, apply theory, and exercise their judgement. It gives them a 'feel' of the real life situations and enables them to test their decisions with peers without suffering the consequences in the real life. It is like learning to fly in a simulator. Case study researches can provide deep insights in complex problems and can also lead to development of new concepts and theory, as demonstrated by Sigmund Freud and Eric Berne. The development of good quality case studies is critical for good quality management education and deserves a very high priority of management schools in our country. In the absence of such work, management education is likely to degenerate into transmitting of inert and non-relevant knowledge for passing examinations as has happened in several other traditional disciplines.

Management problems being multi-faceted, an inter-disciplinary approach has considerable relevance for management research. Unfortunately, the faculty members of different functional areas and disciplines in the management schools tend to work in their own academic silos, which creates difficulties for research scholars working on multidisciplinary problems. It is high time that management schools remove the disciplinary walls and encourage inter-disciplinary teams for research on complex contemporary management problems, and also give support from across different disciplines to researchers working on specific problems.

To sum up, we have to give high priority to empirical research to solve pressing and complex problems being faced and likely to be faced by managers in the challenging and rapidly changing business environment. Management research of high quality and with a clear purpose to advance knowledge of management in the Indian context is essential for improving management education and training. Case writing, case study research and case method

based teaching is equally important to make management education more effective and relevant. For these purposes, a close interface between industry and academic institutions is needed, along with the development of scientific temper among students, teachers and practitioners.

We need research that is meaningful and purposeful to improve theoretical foundations as well as the practice of management. We need research which will be sought and utilized by the teachers and practitioners. We need research that may offer insights and solutions to complex management problems based on reliable and valid information. We need research that can help in making effective informed decisions, and provide a basis for formulating sound policies and their implementation. We need research which can help to build and operate better organizations which can survive and grow in global competition. We need to make original

empirical research, contemporary case studies, and path-breaking classical and new theories as the source of knowledge in management.

We need to encourage all types of researches that can be functional in solving problems and advancing knowledge, rather than be stuck with a 'purist' approach, specially because management as a field of study is still in a relatively earlier stage of scientific development. We need to emphasise more inter-disciplinary and problem-based research in management, in addition to basic research for developing theory. We need to de-mystify research to make it purposeful and attractive to the end users and policy makers. We need to develop research which takes into account and transcends the complex reality to arrive at simpler explanations and workable theories that can be applied to improve the practice of management.

In short, we need management research with a purpose.

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