

# **Academic/practitioner engagement in management: knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange**

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# **Academic/practitioner engagement in management: knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange**

## **Abstract:**

Despite the continuing debate over the relevance of management research there has been little research into the actual ways in which knowledge passes between academics and practitioners in the management field. There are conflicting views on the size and importance of the problem and more fundamentally there are also differing views on the very nature of knowledge. The research reported in this paper starts to explore the academic/practitioner gap by reviewing the different routes through which management academics engage with practitioners and analyses how far and under what conditions knowledge transfer and two-way knowledge exchange is enabled through each route. The primary research undertaken involved depth interviews with 62 respondents made up of academics, practitioners and other experts with relevant experience in the management field. From this a number of preconditions and conditions necessary for effective engagement are proposed and the implications of creating these are discussed.

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## **Introduction**

The question of the relevance of academic research and teaching to practising managers has been a subject of debate for at least twenty years with the discussion becoming more intense in recent times (Leavitt, 1986; Porter and McKibben, 1988; Bailey and Ford, 1996; Mintzberg, 1996; Starkey and Madan, 2001; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Van De Ven and Johnson, 2006; Shapiro et al. 2007). Concerns about the size of the gap have been raised across a number of management disciplines including marketing (for example Baker and Erdogan, 2000; Mentzer and Schumann, 2006); accounting (for example Kaplan, 1984; Reiter and Williams, 2002); strategic management (for example Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999) and human resources management (for example Rynes, 2007). The issue of the extent to which management research and teaching can or should be closer to practice needs to be seen in the light of political pressures for higher education in general to improve links with business (in the UK this view is articulated in the Lambert Report, December 2003).

Given the length of time that this debate has gone on and the importance of the issue to business schools it is surprising that there has been little research into the actual ways in which knowledge passes between academics and practitioners in the management field. Starkey and Madan (2001) point out that there are no clear models relating to how management research is developed and disseminated between academics and practitioners. Baldrige et al. (2004) argue that research is needed to better understand the relationship between academic quality and practical relevance. This knowledge gap, relating to understanding the process of development and exchange of knowledge between the two groups, is the subject of the research outlined in this paper. The primary research undertaken involved depth interviews with 62 respondents made up of academics, practitioners and other experts with relevant experience (such as commercial consultants) in the management field. The broad aim is to explore the different ways in which academics and practitioners engage with each other and exchange knowledge in order to make some recommendations for improvement.

The paper will commence with a review of the literature concerning the academic/practitioner divide in management. In particular, this will be concerned with different perceptions over whether this is, in fact, a problem that management academics should be concerned about and the nature of the challenges involved. Based on literature from across the management disciplines we will argue that this is an important ontological issue for academics working in the field and set out the aims of our research. This leads into an outline of our critical realist methodology and to the research approach adopted. We then summarise our findings and open up a discussion on the possible practical implications for the management discipline.

## **Literature**

It might reasonably be assumed that there would be a high degree of interdependence between the academic and business worlds in an applied subject such as management. However, the literature suggests that this is often not the case and indeed the gap between the two is widening. Bennis and O'Toole's influential (2005) paper argues that business schools have adopted an inappropriate model of academic excellence in order to gain credibility within the university environment, measuring themselves solely by the rigour

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of their scientific research, and becoming less and less relevant to practitioners. Broadly the argument is as follows. Because of the need to get academic status, business schools have become over focussed on analytics and problem finding rather than problem solving and implementation (Leavitt, 1986; Porter and McKibben, 1998). Management is taught as a science rather than as rooted in action (Bailey and Ford, 1996) and this has led to a separation from the management profession (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). As a result much of the teaching and research carried out in universities is irrelevant to the needs to business (Beer, 2001; Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005).

There are conflicting views on the size and importance of the problem. A major concern for some is that business schools may lose their legitimacy in knowledge generation (Huff, 2000; Starkey, 2001) if their research is seen as irrelevant (Crowther and Carter, 2002). This could have potentially serious implications for future funding and the healthy operation of the sector. For those in the academic community who believe that those who apply academic knowledge are important stakeholders (Anderson et al. 2001) the pervasiveness of the gap (Rynes et al. 2007) can be seen to be a source of some despair. The counter argument to this is that if business schools are no more than producers of commercially usable knowledge (Grey, 2001) they stand to lose what makes them distinctive. Much knowledge emerges from fundamental research that is not known to be useful at the time of doing the research (Weick, 2001).

Perhaps more fundamentally there are also differing views on the nature of knowledge. Assudani (2005) discusses two broad perspectives in the literature: an epistemology of possession (where knowledge is a resource that can be possessed and something that can be generated by organizations) and an epistemology of action/process (where knowledge is a dynamic process). There is a strong argument that conceptions of knowledge as abstract, disembodied, formal and divorced from context are unrealistic (Lave, 1993; Blackler, 1995; Cook and Brown, 1999). This standpoint acknowledges that knowledge creation is partly a social process and emphasises processes of learning through participation and interaction (Nonaka, 1994; Amabile et al, 2001; Tsoukas, 2005). The view taken on the nature of knowledge impacts on how the academic/practitioner divide is described. Typically the gap is framed in terms of knowledge possession as failure to effectively transfer academic knowledge (Tranfield et al. 2003). However, Van Den Venn and Johnson (2006) argue that it can also be seen as a knowledge production problem requiring a two-way co-production of knowledge between academic and practitioner communities. This would seem to be a key question. Is the problem one of poor communication of academic knowledge (requiring better knowledge transfer) or a knowledge creation problem due to lack of sufficient involvement of key stakeholders (requiring two-way knowledge exchange)? Shapiro et al. (2007) recently surveyed Academy of Management members to get their views on these two points of view. The results of this research suggest that AoM members support the argument for both ways of framing the problem. That is to say that while poor communication to practitioners is an issue, equally the involvement of practitioners in creating knowledge is important. This conclusion supports the need for a Mode 2 approach to knowledge production in management (Tranfield and Starkey 1998). In Mode 2 research discovery, application and use are closely integrated (Gibbons et al. 1994), therefore the research process involves working closely with those involved in application and the social context in which the research takes place is crucial

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(Nowotny et al. 2001). Closer integration with practice occurs in a number of other fields such as medicine, engineering and computer science, which do not lack scientific credibility (Pfeffer, 2007). There is also some evidence that practitioner/academic partnerships can lead to better management research and greater utilization of it by practitioners (Landry et al 2001; Amabile et al 2001). However, there remains the fundamental question, as articulated by Shapiro et al. (2007: 262): “Is creating a more continuous two-way dialogue between researchers and practitioners doable?”

There have been a number of ideas put forward suggesting ways to improve the integration of academics and practitioners. Partnership teams (Cyert and Goodman, 1997); restructuring of academic institutions (Starkey and Madan, 2001, Pfeffer and Fong, 2002); Practitioner participation on interpreting research (Amabile et al. 2001; Morhman et al. 2001); engaged scholarship (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) and evidence based management collaboration (Rousseau, 2007) to name but a few. But the problem is deeply ingrained and how far do we really understand it? As pointed out by Starkey and Madan, (2001) there is knowledge gap, relating to understanding the process of development and exchange of knowledge between the two groups and Rynes (2007) suggests that there is still a need for research to understand the gap better. As Shapiro et al. (2007:249) put it: “we know of no recent systematic effort to understand beliefs regarding the extent and nature of the management research-management practice gap and how to narrow it.”

The research reported in this paper starts to explore this gap by reviewing the different routes through which management academics engage with practitioners and analyses how far and under what conditions knowledge transfer and two-way knowledge exchange is enabled through each route. This leads to a discussion on how to create these conditions relating back to the ideas for improving the situation proposed in the literature so far.

### **Methodology**

The specific objective of the research reported in this paper is to understand better the ways in which academics and practitioners in the management field engage or fail to engage with each other. On the basis of developing a better understanding of the key issues and dimensions our aim is to contribute to the debate with regard to how academics and academic institutions could become better knowledge partners with practitioners. The following two research questions provide the starting point for our research:

1. In what ways do academics and practitioners engage with each other?
2. How effective are the different routes for engagement in enabling knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners?

The research has covered a number of sub-disciplines within the management field and this has involved the first author of this paper collaborating with colleagues in each of the specific discipline areas. The fieldwork started with interviews within the marketing discipline. This also served as a pilot for the rest of the study. Research within the Accountancy and Finance, Organisation Studies and Strategic Management disciplines then followed with these three studies running in parallel. The authors were keen to get a balance of views from different perspectives on the academic/practitioner divide. Hence the 62 interviewees came from three groups:

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academics (20 interviews), practitioners (24 interviews) and consultants/experts (18 interviews). The consultants/experts group needs a little explanation. This consisted of commercial consultants, senior staff from professional bodies and expert commentators not directly falling into either the academic or practitioner groups. The consultants/experts group was included because members of it could give third party perspectives from a position outside of either academia or practice. The interviewees are detailed anonymously in the appendix. The interviews were either conducted face to face (34 out of 62) or over the telephone (28 out of 62).

In undertaking this research we took a critical realist approach. The critical realist perspective allows for pluralism of perspectives in looking at complex phenomena, where different views exist (Van de Venn, 2008). It is well established as one of the major research paradigms (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), taking the point of view that there is a real world to discover, but it is only ever imperfectly understandable (Godfrey and Hill, 1995; Tsoukas, 1989). Critical realism allows for the independent existence of the social world made up of abstract ideas (Magee, 1985). Within this paradigm, in-depth interviewing, as used in our study, is considered to be a very suitable method for probing into a complex social phenomenon (Healy, and Perry, 2000). The interviewees were chosen because of their involvement in some form of academic practitioner engagement. Selecting interviewees on the basis of their credibility and expertise in the area of research is a well-established practice (Marshall and Rossman, 1989) that puts an emphasis on the validity of the research through getting close access to the phenomenon under study (Gummesson, 2002).

In managing the team of researchers across different disciplines it was crucial to put in place research protocols and processes to ensure dependability and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The first named author of this paper provided continuity across all the sub-projects. There was careful control of the way the data was collected, coded, sorted and analysed (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The interviews were semi-structured, based around a framework designed to ensure that the interviews covered common areas, while also allowing interviewees to go into as much depth as necessary in areas of particular interest. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The Nvivo software package was used to facilitate the analysis and this proved valuable in handling a large amount of data.

We took the approach of analysing the data throughout the research programme in an iterative process building our understanding progressively from the interview data as it become available (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The authors believe that the project benefited by following this process and assessing the significance of what was said by the research participants as the research evolved. The authors' collective experience of the politics of practice and academia was found to be invaluable in this.

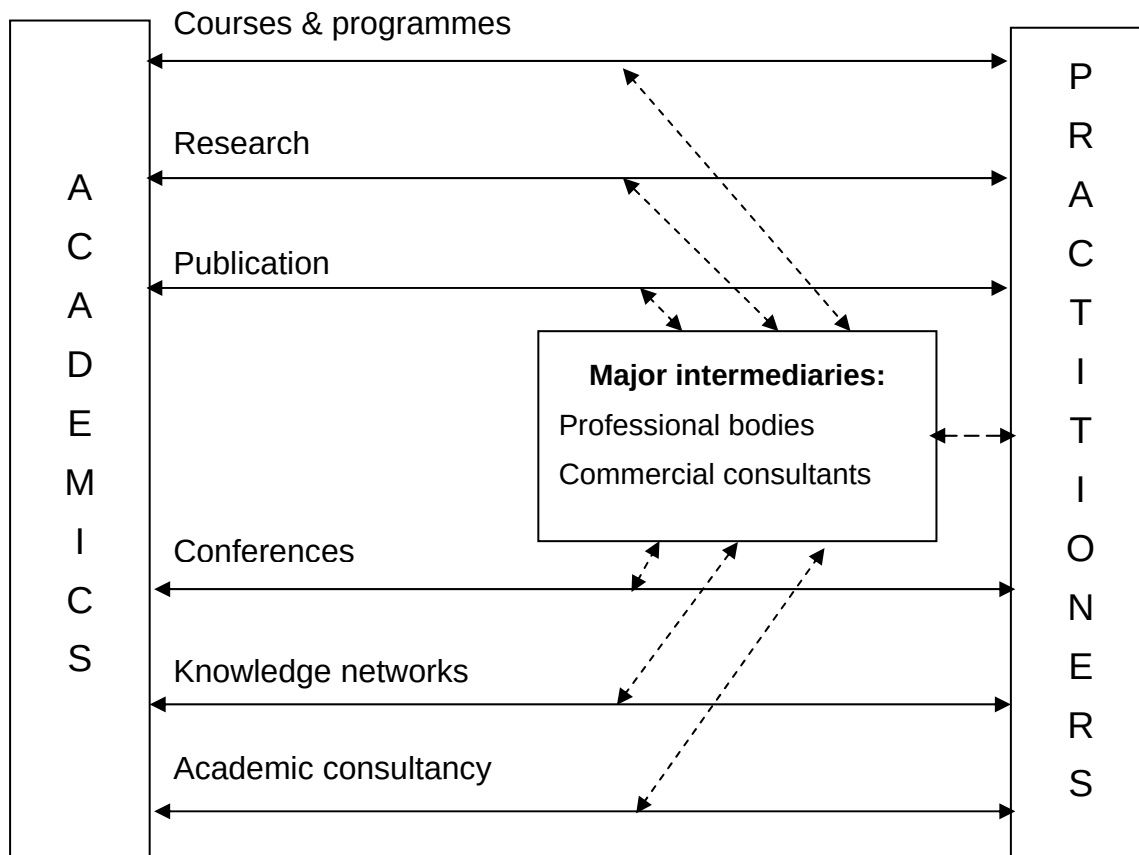
## **Findings**

### ***1. In what ways do academics and practitioners engage with each other?***

Figure 1 summarises our findings mapping out the “routes” through which engagement can occur:

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Figure 1 Routes to academic/practitioner engagement



Source: Derived by the authors from the research data

Most of the routes through which engagement can take place are self-explanatory. Some, such as “courses and programmes”, will tend to predominantly involve face-to-face engagement while others, such as “publication”, offer the potential for remote engagement. One route that perhaps does require a little explanation is that of “knowledge networks”. We found a number of examples of formal and informal networks that had been set up expressly to provide a means for engagement. One of the most successful has been running for over 13 years providing an industry forum within a particular sector. It involves major organisations from the sector, academics working in the area, and policy makers and regulators. Aca3 puts its continuing success down to very active management and a willingness to evolve in order to provide continuing value to its members:

I am just about to start a programme of spending three or four months visiting all of our members ... I act as the primary catalyst for change but we do make it our business to get a lot of feedback from our supporters (Aca3).

The network mentioned is quite formal, involving a significant level of funding from its members; other examples from our research were less formally structured. Aca1 has been running his own knowledge network for many years relating to information technology and customer management providing a range of opportunities for academics to present ideas and gain up to date insight into the challenges faced by

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practitioners. Like the previous example, Aca1 makes the point that running a successful network takes considerable effort and the skills to liaise with a number of different parties.

Figure 1 also features two major intermediaries (commercial consultants and professional bodies) identified in our research. These intermediaries can be seen to act in conjunction with the main routes to engagement to a greater or lesser extent within different management disciplines. For example within the accountancy discipline where the professional bodies are particularly powerful they often play a “bridging role” setting relevant agendas for teaching and research:

But I think it's probably more difficult for the academic sort of starting with blank sheet of paper to say I want to do something that's relevant to practitioner ..... It needs an intermediary and I think we can do that because you know we are talking to the academics and we're sort of thinking about issues like Measurement, like Reporting Models for Business, where we know that practitioners are interested, we know that there are also academics who are doing relevant work and so we can bring the two sides together (Con8).

Professional bodies often play an important role in commissioning research, allocating funds for research by academics and in setting up joint research committees where academics and practitioners can work together. From an academic's point of view as well as funding for research a professional body can provide a number of opportunities for practical research. Potentially providing access to members; outlets for dissemination; and personal links, as illustrated by the following quote:

They may want to access our members we'd allow them to do that ..... And my experience is that they get conference papers, academic conferences, they get journal papers, they get the opportunity to present to a practitioner/policy maker audience and they get the opportunity to write an article for our member journal (Con10).

The other major intermediary route to engagement is commercial consultancy. Con2 considers his training consultancy's link with a leading UK business school to have been very important in setting the business up, enabling the consultancy to keep abreast of academic developments. An academic from the business school supplies the body of knowledge and the consultancy concentrates on the application part. Equally, the training consultancy in interacting with its clients sometimes picks up on the development of new problems and issues before the academic community. Other consultants that we interviewed also acknowledged the benefit of having access to the latest academic research, in one case through taking an MBA and in another case through taking a DBA. In these cases the consultants concerned can be seen to be playing an important translation role of making relevant academic theory usable in the context of their clients' particular problems.

### ***2. How effective are the different routes for engagement in enabling knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners?***

It is when we consider the ways in which each route can be said to effectively enable knowledge transfer or exchange that the results become most interesting in starting to point to areas for improvement. Table 1 summarises our findings in this regard.

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**Table 1 Effectiveness of routes for engagement in enabling knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange**

| Routes to engagement | Knowledge transfer                                                                                                                                                                                            | Knowledge exchange                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Courses & programmes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Great variability in application into practice</li> <li>• Indirect through undergraduates</li> <li>• More direct through post grads and executive courses</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be a “touch-point” with practice, but not a systematic source of knowledge</li> </ul>                                          |
| Research             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certain research approaches such as action research can be effective, but this is not the case with the majority of types of research</li> </ul>                     |                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Publication          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic publications very limited direct dissemination to practice</li> </ul>                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Few examples of publications where there are contributions from both academics and practitioners</li> </ul>                        |
| Conferences          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited number of conference forums that crossover between the two communities</li> </ul>                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Knowledge networks   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where active can be effective way to disseminate relevant theory and models to interested parties</li> <li>• Easily broken up</li> </ul>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where active can provide a forum for dialogue and a source of support for relevant research</li> <li>• Easily broken up</li> </ul> |
| Academic consultancy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact depends on type of consultancy and overcoming practical and ethical barriers</li> </ul>                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be very limited because of commercial confidentiality and because agenda largely set by requirements of the client</li> </ul>  |

Source: Derived by the authors from the research data

### *The “Courses and programmes” route*

Our research found a number of examples of knowledge transfer from courses and programmes. At the undergraduate level the recruitment of recent graduates can be seen as an important source of bringing up to date theory into practitioner organisations, as illustrated by this quote from a partner in an accountancy firm:

I think you will see it coming in through the bottom .... partners tend to be dinosaurs and our job is to understand the commercial drivers of our clients, not necessarily the latest theory or the finest points of financial reporting. That actually comes in from the machine behind us and I think we’ll see that coming in, it sort of feeds in at the more junior levels and goes up into the firm that way (Pra11).

At the post-graduate level the knowledge transfer link will tend to be more direct. Pra1 found that a part-time MBA provided him with models that helped him simplify

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real business problems and solve them. Many of these were simple models that people within his organisation (one of the largest global blue-chips) were not aware of. For Con3, a recently completed MBA served to remind him of the basics and refresh his thinking. However, embedding the learning from courses and programmes in organisational practice is often not that effective:

It needed the organisation to actually understand that knowledge was critical to its future and it needed the university to understand that working together with the business was critical to its future and it didn't quite work that out (Con5).

Courses tend to be one-off events and therefore the link with academia is usually not long term. As for the degree of two-way knowledge exchange, while there are opportunities for "touch-points" with practice, such as bringing in practitioners as speakers and in some areas involving professional bodies in specifying course content, in general this is limited.

### *The "Research" route*

Research can be seen to be a route to engagement in itself where it involves the researcher as an agent of change rather than as purely an observer, as is the case with participative types of research such as action research:

I think it is a epistemological question, actually.....There is a kind of, a sense of an underlying value which revisits from time to time and one is conscious of beneficial change, social benefit, making a difference, making a positive difference that I do see action research as a kind of direction which is a collaborative one (Aca16).

Participative and collaborative research is particularly encouraged in some management disciplines. For example, action research within the organisation studies field. Where this is the case this type of research has the potential to offer both knowledge transfer and exchange within specific contexts of application. However, this type of research is not encouraged in many fields of management and indeed is discouraged by lack of inclusion in top ranked journals and in turn by audits of research quality. The aim of much research is to produce generalisable theory rather than in trying to understand the operation of management theory in the specific contexts in which it is applied. A move towards pluralism in embracing more research that is towards the interpretive end of the spectrum would start to encourage the co-production of knowledge that is vital in Mode 2 research approaches.

### *The "Publication" route*

Across all the management fields one of the most consistent findings was that practitioners seldom read academic journals and when they do they are put off by the language, content and style:

Academics tend to write for themselves in arcane journals and even if an MD is given one, he/she would not want to read past the first page. The articles are often shown to demonstrate what the academic knows rather than what is useful to someone doing the job (Con16).

I think a lot of it is about language ... it is written in a language that is inaccessible and published in journals that practitioners never come across in a lifetime (Aca4).

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Few small business managers read academic journals – perhaps when it filters down through trade publications – maybe. Most firms are much too busy to bother with what they see as high-level theory and are more content to attend trade conferences and exchange information between themselves (Con18).

A summary of the views expressed in the interviews is that academic journals are inaccessible to practitioners because of their language, style and readability and there is a need for translation to distil the information into a meaningful and relevant framework. While popular business publications disseminate information much more widely, they have a limited role in disseminating academic research often being seen to be the domain of journalists and containing few articles from academics. We did speak to editors concerned with hybrid journals established to try and appeal to both practitioner and academic audiences, but in these cases the practitioner component had proved difficult to sustain. As a result there are few common publication arenas where academics and practitioners debate or share knowledge.

### *The “Conference” route*

This problem of lack of common areas where academics and practitioners might maintain a dialogue was also evident in the interviewees’ comments on the conference arena. The majority of conferences mentioned by our interviewees catered almost exclusively for one audience. It can be difficult to get practitioners involved because of other priorities, while academics may find professional conferences to be over expensive. While we did find examples of conferences set up by academics for both communities it can be difficult to attract large numbers of practitioners. In particular, the input from academic speakers needs to be credible and relevant if attendees are to feel that they have gained value:

You have to know that what you are providing is something they will find of value and if you haven’t done your homework you really aren’t up to speed with what is going on in professional practice they will crucify you (Aca4).

Conferences do have the potential to facilitate both knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange, but in reality there are few that truly attract both parties. Achieving the presence of both parties at conferences is problematic. Crucially the subject matter needs to be of mutual interest, raising the issue of how much the interests of the two parties do converge on any kind of middle ground.

### *The “Knowledge networks” route*

Formal or informal knowledge networks exist in order to share information between members. In the accountancy field where there are strong professional bodies we found little evidence of networks involving both academics and practitioners outside of those provided by the professional bodies. This contrasts with the marketing field where the professional bodies are weaker and less formal networks can play an important role in academic/ practitioner engagement. Demonstrating value to practice was also found to be a key factor in determining the success of a network. Focussing on a particular sector or area of interest playing the role of knowledge broker and a forum for communication between members a successful network provides opportunities for both knowledge transfer and exchange. However, successful and long-term networks are few and far between and they can easily disappear requiring great effort to maintain.

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### *The “Consultancy” route*

At their best, academic consultants were seen to be capable of making a very real contribution to practice through widening the intellectual resource available to the client, bringing an objective expertise and acting as a knowledgeable facilitator. In order to get in this position the individual academic needs to have the track record and ability to undertake direct consultancy. For this reason academics invited into the company / organisation will tend to have significant industry knowledge rather than simply theoretical knowledge. The academic’s ability to apply theory is seen to require an understanding of the company or industry context. However, the idea of the academic as an “expert” runs the risk of putting him or her on a pedestal and treating them in an unquestioning manner as a kind of guru. Aca1, an academic who has had a long and successful consultancy practice stressed the importance of engaging with practitioners on an equal footing. He believes academics should take part in:

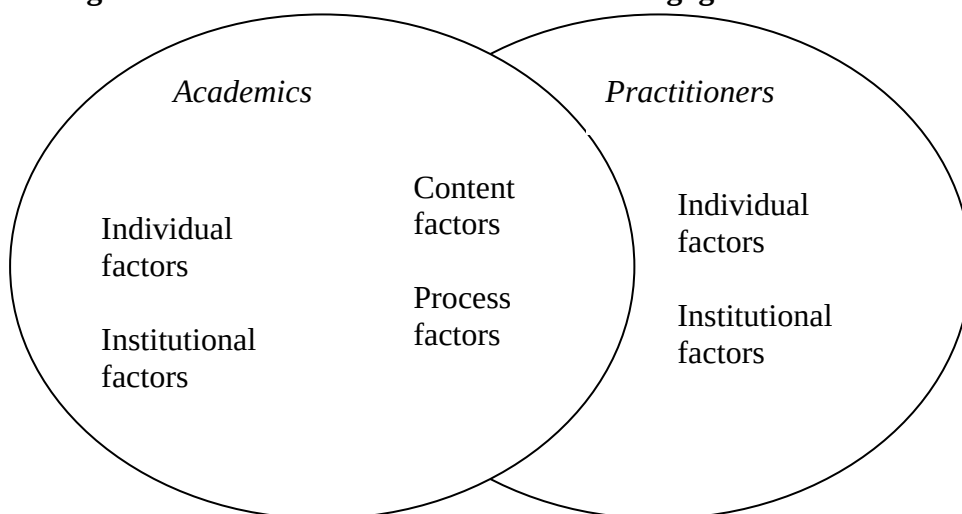
Frequent in depth consulting, in which you are looking at the issues and arguing the toss and not behaving like a guru, but as a peer amongst senior people where you are open to be questioned. (Aca1)

Conducted in this way consultancy carries the potential for knowledge exchange and sometimes provides opportunities for joint publication and conference presentations with practitioners. However, the consultancy route posed the most ethical dilemmas for academics in relation to their own independence and the motives of the client for using them. Furthermore, commercial confidentiality may pose restrictions on wider dissemination of knowledge gained through this route.

### **Implications: How to create the conditions for more effective engagement**

The review of the effectiveness of knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange across the different routes demonstrates many of the reasons for the lack of effective academic/practitioner engagement. Within the critical realist approach the aim of research is to provide deep explanations relating to events and actions in the real world. Therefore the next stage of this paper is to analyse the research data to consider the underlying factors involved in effective engagement. Figure 2 provides an overview of our analysis:

**Figure 2 Preconditions and conditions for engagement**



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Source: Derived by the authors from the research data

### *Preconditions for more effective engagement: Individual factors*

Two issues arise with regard to academics at the individual level. The first relates to the question of values and beliefs. Many of our interviewees mentioned individual academics that do not wish to engage with practice and who often believe that this should not be part of their role. The second issue relates to the ability and credibility of individual academics in engaging with practice. In many cases academics are not equipped for this. A theme that emerges from our interviews is of the importance of the credibility of the academic if he or she is to be effective in engaging with practice. While credibility relating to the prestige of an academic institution can be a relevant factor, of equal importance is the need for an understanding of the context for implementation. Bennis and O'Toole's (2005) concerns would seem to be particularly relevant here. If there is little exchange going on between the academic and practitioners communities, how are academics meant to keep in touch with the reality of business practice? Even academics with practical experience are likely to lose credibility pretty quickly from a lack of field exposure. Younger or less experienced academics may lack the experience to operate effectively at this level, but how are they to develop this experience and expertise? We would suggest that there are three different segments of academics within the management field: The first group of those who have no wish to engage with practice; the second group of those who would like to engage more, but lack the credibility and experience and a third group who currently do work with practice having both the experience and the motivation. Arguably it is the second group where the most effort needs to be made in order to support them in working with practice.

On the practitioner side we found a strong perception that many practitioners are not inclined to engage with academics or academic ideas. The reason for this relates both to individual attitudes and motivations and secondly to the time pressured context of business life. In terms of attitude and motivation practitioners can also be seen to fall within distinct groups. There are a few practitioners who embrace links with academia and are sometimes proactive in developing these links. There is another group who are sympathetic to academic work, but do not maintain these links on an ongoing basis. Finally, our research identified a group of managers who are highly cynical about academic work in the management area and highly resistant to approaches from academics. There would seem to be a very strong argument for conducting further research to quantify the size and characteristics of these groups and to test the link between education experience (such as having taken an MBA) and attitude towards links with academia. The practical implication of identifying different segments of the practitioner population would be that it would help the academic community in selecting those potentially most responsive to working more closely.

### *Preconditions for more effective engagement: Institutional factors*

Closely related to the motivation of individual academics lies the question of the culture of the academic communities within which they operate. Individual universities encourage or discourage academic activity through recruitment policies, promotion criteria, and support given for research activities. In turn government policy impacts on individual institutions in controlling research funds. Within the UK

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the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) can be seen to be a major influence on institutional and individual priorities. As currently conceived the RAE encourages publication in academic journals to the exclusion of more practice-orientated activities. We would argue that this narrow measure of academic endeavour does little to encourage applied work and little to encourage knowledge dissemination, exchange and debate outside the academic community. Similarly in the US Business Schools are largely assessed for research quality through academic publication (Pfeffer, 2007). The RAE is just one institutional mechanism for directing funds for research and the various institutions awarding research grants have considerable power in deciding what types and areas of research to support. In setting agendas, funding bodies have the power to put greater emphasis on research that is supported by practitioner organisations both in the private and public sector. They can also specify research outputs that require the researcher to disseminate findings more widely and incorporate practitioner interpretation of the implications. However, our research suggests that there are cultural issues relating to beliefs about the nature of knowledge and who is involved in its generation and development that permeate institutions and needs to change if more effective engagement is to take place.

Mode 2 approaches to knowledge generation recognise that knowledge development takes place iteratively with a series of interactive exchanges between the parties involved. It implies the idea of an equality of status between researcher and those being researched. In contrast Mode 1 can be seen to implicitly imply a more traditional one-way process. This traditional knowledge transfer approach can be seen to be unbalanced in implying that academics have a monopoly of knowledge and practitioners simply make up the research field. This can have a significant impact on the relationship between the parties involved and the expectations of the roles played. Where this engagement is on an unequal basis it is perhaps not surprising that practitioners might feel that they are not getting sufficient value out of the process and may be unwilling to engage with academic researchers in the future. Others (Huff, 2000; Starkey and Madan, 2001) have noted the continued dominance of Mode 1 approaches permeating the way many of the institutions within management academia operate and our research supports the argument that if engagement with practice is really to be effective conditions need to be established for a much more balanced and two-way interaction that provides demonstrable value to both sides. Analysis of our research findings suggests the conditions that would facilitate this.

### *Conditions for more effective engagement: Content factors*

Our research suggests that practitioners tend to find the content of academic management research to be inappropriate and inapplicable to their needs. This confirms the findings of others (for example Bailey and Ford, 1996; Guest, 2007) of the importance of the relevance of subject matter to practitioners' immediate needs. Therefore a useful starting point would be to consider the process of setting the agenda for research. In this it would seem to be very important for academic and practitioner communities to develop joint agendas in order to provide value to both sides. Often the academic needs to be proactive in this. Asking the following fundamental question might provide a useful starting point: How far is the subject matter of concern or importance to the wider community? Answering this requires academics to pursue activities relating to stimulating debate outside purely the academic community. Cross-community working in deciding what subjects to research is recommended by Van de Venn and Johnson, (2006: 803): "by leveraging

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their distinct competencies, groups composed of researchers and practitioners have the potential to ground and understand complex problems in ways that are more penetrating and insightful than they would be were either scholars or practitioners to study them alone.” While a number of authors have supported the idea of cross-community working (for example: Cyert and Goodman, 1997; Starkey et al. 2004; Rousseau, 2007; Pfeffer, 2007) making it happen in practice is challenging. In our research we found a number of successful knowledge networks where a common feature was that academics had taken the lead in working with a range of practitioners and policy makers in developing common agendas for future research. These networks can also provide a means to access research subjects amongst network members and a forum for disseminating and discussing the implications of the research results. Another potential way of establishing a knowledge network identified by our interviewees from certain fields is that of professional bodies. Where there are strong professional bodies these certainly have great potential as intermediaries in providing a platform for setting research agendas.

A move to placing greater emphasis on practice in setting research agendas may also have implications for the type of research that is conducted. The emphasis within the dominant positivist paradigm is on producing generalisable theory that practitioners often criticise as being irrelevant to their circumstances. Developing understanding in context requires a more pluralistic view of acceptable research approaches incorporating more inductive and interpretive methods such as case studies, action research and grounded methods. This does not necessarily have to be at the expense of academic rigour. The quality of research can be enhanced by practitioner participation rather than harmed by it (Amabile et al. 2001).

### *Conditions for more effective engagement: Process factors*

In addition there are a number factors relating to effective engagement that we broadly define as relating to the process rather than the content. Practitioners point to lack of accessibility to information as being a major barrier to knowledge exchange. This takes a number of forms: academic articles are written in a language that is difficult for practitioners to understand and getting hold of relevant articles is problematical. Therefore there is a need for a process of translation, synthesis, interpretation and delivery if academic research is to be more effectively shared outside the academic community. One suggestion emerging from our research is that the academic can provide a valuable knowledge broking role. This is more than teaching and research, requiring institutions to understand the knowledge needs of its communities and to support academics in serving the needs on an ongoing basis. This again relates back to the role that the higher educational institution plays within the community. Our research suggests that more firms would contact and liaise with academia if they had a better understanding on what is available from universities and also if they believed that universities could relate to their “real world” problems.

## **Conclusions**

The generally poor level of engagement between academics and practitioners, highlighted in our research, suggests that the development of relationships between academics and practitioners do not in the main emerge automatically. The process of collaboration needs to be proactively developed and managed. This raises questions about ways in which business schools, subject schools and individual academics define which communities they serve and how they reach out to those communities.

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There is a requirement to understand the knowledge needs of its communities and to provide frameworks for collaboration, particularly identifying cross-disciplinary opportunities leveraging the wide knowledge base that exists in the university environment. The review of routes to academic/practitioner engagement outlined earlier in this paper highlights the limitations of thinking too narrowly about the different ways in which engagement can take place and defining too narrowly what is a worthwhile activity for a management academics. The map of routes to engagement (Figure 1) could provide a starting point for Business Schools to develop strategic plans and put in place the processes for better engagement. In this commercial consultants should not be ignored as potential bridge in terms of translating academic knowledge into business language.

Academics and practitioners have been said to inhabit essentially separate worlds (Shrivastava and Mitroff, 1984). This is at the heart of the problem for the management discipline. The absence of sufficient direct interaction between the communities means that there is a lack of dialogue and debate that is essential for the effective development of the discipline. The development of Mode 2 knowledge comes through the parties involved working together with an ongoing dialogue supporting the development of common insights and understandings.

The development of more productive relationships between members of the two communities emerges from the research as something that needs to be encouraged. This raises the point about ways in which business schools and their academic staff can be most effective in reaching out to the various communities that they serve. While we found some individual academics that had intricate webs of practitioner and policy maker relationships there would seem to be the potential for business schools to be more proactive in broadening and deepening the links and involving many more academic staff in this. This will require significant investment of time and resources on the part of individuals and institutions. Again the will to make this investment will depend on individual and institutional priorities in relation to the perceived importance of crossing the academic/practitioner divide.

However, our research also suggests it is not as simple as putting effort into reaching out into the practitioner community in an attempt to create relationships and communities. We found many examples where considerable effort had been put into these types of initiatives with disappointing results. If attention is not given to the preconditions and conditions of engagement, outlined above, the danger is that initiatives will not provide practitioners with sufficient value and will simply reinforce negative beliefs about academia. Addressing both the “lost before translation” and “lost in translation” problems as Shapiro et al. (2007) term knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer requires fundamental change on a number of levels.

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### **Appendix: Details of interviewees**

|                  | <b>Role and experience</b>                                            |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Academics</b> |                                                                       |
| Aca1             | Professor; company director; runs academic/practitioner network       |
| Aca2             | MBA director; trustee of professional body                            |
| Aca3             | Visiting professor; chief executive of an academic/practitioner forum |
| Aca4             | Professor; runs an academic/practitioner network                      |
| Aca5             | Programme director; academic consultant                               |
| Aca6             | Professor; extensive research and consultancy experience              |
| Aca7             | Senior lecturer                                                       |
| Aca8             | Associate Dean at a business school                                   |
| Aca9             | Lecturer at a business school                                         |
| Aca10            | Lecturer and journal editor                                           |

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|                             |                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aca11                       | Director of Admissions at a business school                                                                                     |
| Aca12                       | Academic with extensive consultancy experience                                                                                  |
| Aca13                       | Academic with extensive consultancy experience                                                                                  |
| Aca14                       | Professor with extensive consultancy experience                                                                                 |
| Aca15                       | Academic with business development role for a business school                                                                   |
| Aca16                       | Academic with extensive consultancy experience                                                                                  |
| Aca17                       | Professor with extensive consultancy experience.                                                                                |
| Aca18                       | Dean of highly rated international management college                                                                           |
| Aca19                       | Professor and Head of Centre for Regional Competitiveness [research and consultancy]                                            |
| Aca20                       | Senior lecturer with international experience                                                                                   |
| <b>Practitioners</b>        |                                                                                                                                 |
| Pra1                        | Executive within international company; completed MBA around 15 years ago; co-author of a number of business articles and books |
| Pra2                        | Executive with varied experience of working with academics in various capacities                                                |
| Pra3                        | Senior copywriter and creative in direct marketing agency                                                                       |
| Pra4                        | Executive within major insurance company                                                                                        |
| Pra5                        | Executive with international company with experience of taking part in company sponsored university executive course            |
| Pra6                        | Executive within the food industry who has recently completed a part-time masters degree in a marketing related area            |
| Pra7                        | Executive with extensive experience of working in direct marketing across a number of sectors                                   |
| Pra8                        | Audit partner for international accountancy practice                                                                            |
| Pra9                        | Technical Director of a national accountancy practice                                                                           |
| Pra10                       | Business services partner at a national accountancy practice                                                                    |
| Pra11                       | Corporate finance partner at a national accountancy practice                                                                    |
| Pra12                       | Finance Director for major building firm                                                                                        |
| Pra13                       | Finance director for international company                                                                                      |
| Pra14                       | Experienced manager in public sector (Customs and Excise)                                                                       |
| Pra15                       | Experienced manager in public sector (Defence)                                                                                  |
| Pra16                       | Senior manager with extensive experience in IT industry                                                                         |
| Pra17                       | Experienced manager in public sector (Health)                                                                                   |
| Pra18                       | Experienced manager in Finance sector.                                                                                          |
| Pra19                       | Public sector manager (Local Government)                                                                                        |
| Pra20                       | Strategic planning manager of major aerospace company                                                                           |
| Pra21                       | Chief Executive of engineering company                                                                                          |
| Pra22                       | Strategy director of NHS Primary Care Trust                                                                                     |
| Pra23                       | International Director of engineering company                                                                                   |
| Pra24                       | Strategy Director public service organisation                                                                                   |
| <b>Consultants /experts</b> |                                                                                                                                 |
| Con1                        | Partner in consultancy; recently completed a DBA                                                                                |
| Con2                        | Partner in training consultancy; previously executive in international blue chip company; author of a number of business books  |
| Con3                        | Freelance consultant; recently completed an MBA; previously executive in a number of companies                                  |
| Con4                        | Founder and director of professional body within the marketing                                                                  |

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|       |                                                                                                             |
|-------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|       | field; leading authority in his field; published author                                                     |
| Con5  | Partner in training consultancy; previously executive in large blue chip company; completed MBA 5 years ago |
| Con6  | Head of independent research group; business author                                                         |
| Con7  | Leading journalist specialising in the marketing field with regular column in the marketing press           |
| Con8  | Technical manager in financial reporting for a professional body                                            |
| Con9  | Deputy editor of major professional publication                                                             |
| Con10 | Part of research committee of international accountancy body                                                |
| Con11 | Head of education for professional body                                                                     |
| Con12 | Ex-Director of University Faculty, now a private consultant                                                 |
| Con13 | Former academic now a commercial consultant                                                                 |
| Con14 | Experienced commercial consultant and visiting lecturer                                                     |
| Con15 | Experienced public sector manager then commercial consultant and visiting lecturer                          |
| Con16 | Experienced commercial consultant                                                                           |
| Con17 | Head of employers representative body                                                                       |
| Con18 | Experienced commercial consultant                                                                           |