



Making Management Research Matter. A Dean's Reflection on Translation, Diffusion, Crossover, and ROI

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Every year, our budgeting process reminds me that a substantial portion of any business school's primary asset (faculty time and compensation) is dedicated to scholarship. Globally, thousands of journals publish hundreds of thousands of articles annually. Given this investment (funded largely by student fees and taxpayers), we must answer an uncomfortable question: How do we justify management research and ensure it actually matters?

If we measure management scholarship by natural science standards, the bar is high: physics brought forth semiconductors; molecular biology birthed biotechnology. By contrast, management scholarship rarely creates new sectors from scratch. Instead, it creates impact by altering the trajectories of existing industries, companies, and policies, reshaping dominant logics, structures, and routines as research crosses over into practice. In response, skeptics might argue that without management scholarship, industries would evolve anyway through trial and error and peer learning, or that scholars merely report on shifts already driven by market forces.

This is our challenge: First, we need to justify to ourselves and our stakeholders that management research has in the past and can in the future shape the business world. Second, we need to move beyond justification to enablement: academic leadership (Deans, Accreditors, and Publishers) must provide structures and tools to promote research that crosses over and changes trajectories. In this article, I propose a shared ecosystem framework for research built around three concepts: Translation Readiness, Diffusion Vectors, and Verified Crossover.

1. Translation Readiness: Designing for Diffusion at T0

The concept of translation readiness is grounded in the foundational impact architecture established by Rosemann et al. (2026) and operationalized in SPJIMR's Research Impact Assessment Instrument (Nagaraj, 2026). Translational readiness evaluates the diffusion potential of scholarship across nine dimensions: two internal to the academy (Academic, Educational) and seven external (Regulatory & Policy, Organizational, Technological, Entrepreneurial, Economic, Community & Societal, Environmental).

While the academic dimension acts as the necessary baseline for rigor and novelty, research will have the potential to alter real-world practice only if scholars deliberately focus on one or more of seven external dimensions at T0 on their desks. Too often, management papers target intra-academic dialogue, framing motivations and contributions around esoteric literature gaps rather than pressing operational or societal challenges. This leaves the burden of translation entirely to the practitioner.

Translation Readiness serves as an ex-ante design standard, evaluating whether scholarship moves beyond the "competent practitioner baseline": the existing heuristics and operational knowledge leaders already possess. A translation-ready paper does not stop at conceptual

novelty; it operationalizes insights with sufficient clarity, feasibility, and explicit boundary conditions so executives can act without an academic interpreter.

When scholars embed translation readiness into their work at T0, they create insights primed to travel across into practice. However, enabling scholars to design for translation at T0 requires a shared commitment across the academy: Deans must incentivize it in faculty mentoring and resource allocation, while journal editors must demand explicit operational logic, feasibility, and boundary conditions in published papers.

2. Diffusion Vectors: Reshaping Trajectories

Once an insight achieves translation readiness, it diffuses into corporate reality through distinct diffusion vectors: the functional mechanisms through which academic research reshapes executive thinking, organizational design, and strategic decision-making.

Retrospectively analyzing major historical shifts in industry practice, we can observe several vectors through which scholarly sensemaking can diffuse into the world of practice. I discuss a few of these shifts and observed vectors below merely to illustrate diffusion, making no claim that this list is comprehensive.

Vector 1: Providing an Organizing Vocabulary

Transforming fragmented corporate dialects and localized tactics into a universal management language.

Before 1985, leaders analyzed operations through fragmented accounting terms like "departmental overhead." Michael Porter's "Value Chain" introduced a universal vocabulary dividing the firm into strategically relevant activities. Within a decade, corporate boards, consultants, and software architects at firms like SAP redesigned organizations around this framework, converting isolated tactics into a repeatable strategic standard.

Vector 2: Identifying Boundary Conditions

Establishing operational guardrails and environmental limits to prevent the over-application of a strategy.

In the mid-1980s, strategy favored uniform globalization, assuming total standardization was the ideal path to scale. C.K. Prahalad and Yves Doz disrupted this view with the "Integration-Responsiveness Grid," framing the competing pressures of global integration versus local responsiveness. Establishing these boundary conditions guided firms toward hybrid

"Transnational" models that standardized backend infrastructure while localizing frontend operations.

Vector 3: Reframing the Phenomenon Entirely

Shifting the conceptual lens to help leaders interpret complex operational crises.

In the 1990s, corporate failures at giants like Xerox and Sears were routinely diagnosed as bureaucratic bloat or executive complacency. Clayton Christensen reframed this logic in *The Innovator's Dilemma*, showing that these firms failed precisely because they followed accepted management rules (listening to profitable customers and chasing higher margins) leaving them blind to simpler, lower-margin threats. This reframing legitimized funding autonomous internal competitors and corporate venture arms.

Vector 4: Providing Institutional Legitimacy

Arming internal innovators with empirical evidence to challenge established organizational habits.

For decades, performance management relied on top-down, high-pressure ranking systems. While HR leaders intuitively knew fear silenced feedback, boards dismissed these concerns as unmeasurable soft issues. Amy Edmondson's research on "Psychological Safety" provided empirical proof that high-safety environments report errors faster and innovate rapidly, giving internal advocates the leverage to turn cultural needs into performance metrics.

Vector 5: Exposing Counter-Intuitive Systemic Discoveries

Uncovering structural systemic dynamics that contradict common sense or localized corporate data.

In multi-tiered supply chains, minor fluctuations in consumer demand historically triggered massive, chaotic inventory swings at the manufacturing level (a phenomenon managers blamed on erratic customer behavior). Jay Forrester's systemic modeling exposed the "Bullwhip Effect," demonstrating that localized rational ordering decisions naturally amplify demand volatility across delays in information processing. This counter-intuitive discovery altered global supply chain design, driving the adoption of Vendor-Managed Inventory (VMI) and integrated Point-of-Sale data networks between retailers like Walmart and suppliers like Procter & Gamble.

The skeptic or the cynic would push back against these examples, claiming that correlation is not causation, and questioning whether scholars simply reported on shifts in logics, structures, and practices that were already underway or if they actually influenced these shifts. Therefore, it is necessary to have means to verify whether academic insights actually crossed over into practice.

3. Verified Crossover: Identifying Realized Trajectory Shifts

Higher education relies on citation counts, but citations primarily measure intra-academic

dialogue, not practical crossover. Altmetrics tracks digital attention (downloads and social media mentions), which signals initial curiosity rather than operational adoption. While platforms like Overton measure citations within public policy documents, we lack equivalent empirical tools to systematically verify whether academic insights have crossed over into industry and managerial practice.

To move beyond anecdotal narratives such as those I have presented and establish empirical proof of verified crossover that is reflected in industry's structures, practices, or logics, our field must develop new research methodologies across at least two key units of analysis: the individual seminal paper and cumulative research streams. I suggest three promising approaches that could shed light on the crossover problem, making no claims that this list is comprehensive. Scholars could analyze:

1. **Corporate Disclosures & Filings:** Using text-mining and NLP across SEC filings (10-Ks, earnings transcripts) and patent applications (non-patent citations) to measure time lags between publication (T0) and operational adoption (T1), testing whether research leads or follows industry practice.
2. **Practitioner Influencer Channels:** Tracking semantic diffusion across executive media, industry forums, open publishing platforms, and consultant publications to map how insights travel. This analysis also uncovers "reverse crossover," where field innovations enter academic literature to be formalized into theory.
3. **AI Knowledge Retrieval Engines:** Auditing how Large Language Models retrieve and synthesize peer-reviewed academic constructs versus practitioner sources, evaluating AI's role as an accelerator or inhibitor of crossover.

Developing, refining, and validating these empirical tools is not a task Deans can undertake alone; it represents an urgent call to action for methods scholars and journal editors. The management academy must take ownership of this measurement deficit, specifically through dedicated special issues, method calls, and conference tracks designed to establish standardized, peer-reviewed methodologies for tracking research crossover into practice.

4. A Shared Ecosystem for Research ROI: Deans, Journals, and Accreditors

Connecting Translation Readiness, Diffusion Vectors, and Verified Crossover brings us back to the fundamental question that prompted my reflections: how do we justify our collective financial and intellectual investment in management scholarship?

Calculating the ROI of management research cannot be reduced to a paper-by-paper ledger. Nor can business school leaders justify current levels of research investment by claiming it enriches teaching; seasoned and effective executives-in-residence can teach business school students just as well at a lower cost.

The true justification for research rests on its ability to alter industry trajectories. To realize this value, the academy must move beyond its entrenched "publish-or-perish" mindset and build a shared ecosystem spanning three key institutional actors:

1. The Role of Deans: Mentoring and Recognition

Deans and academic leaders must stop treating publication volume and journal prestige as proxy metrics for real-world relevance. Instead, Deans must align institutional attention with the full research lifecycle. Ex-ante, Deans must mentor faculty to incorporate Translation Readiness (T0) into their working papers using impact frameworks like SPJIMR's. Ex-post, Deans must recognize and reward faculty who demonstrate Verified Crossover (T1) — valuing both rigorous anecdotal trajectory shifts and emerging empirical crossover metrics in promotion and workload allocations.

2. The Role of Journal Editors and Methods Scholars: Gatekeeping and Tools

Journal editors and methodology scholars hold the keys to scholarly legitimacy. To bridge the translation gap, journal editors must insist that accepted papers include expanded, practitioner-accessible sections detailing operational logic, feasibility, and explicit boundary conditions. Simultaneously, methods scholars and editorial boards must step up to solve the crossover measurement deficit by issuing calls for special issues dedicated to developing, testing, and standardizing empirical tools (such as NLP analysis of corporate filings, practitioner channel tracking, and AI retrieval auditing) that track how research alters industry practice.

3. The Role of Accreditation Bodies: From "Why" and "What" to "How"

Accreditation agencies like AACSB and EQUIS have successfully elevated the importance of research impact, persuading business schools why impact matters and what general domains it should touch. The next evolutionary step for accreditors is to lead the conversation on how. AACSB and EQUIS must facilitate international working groups, update evaluation standards, and create shared platforms where business schools can share and benchmark best practices for ex-ante translation design and ex-post crossover verification.

Systemic change cannot occur when individual Deans, isolated researchers, or journal editors act in silos. By building an integrated ecosystem, the management academy can increase the ROI of management research through our genuine and verifiable capacity to shape business and society.