

From Research to Practice via Consultancy and Back Again: A 14 Year Case Study of Applied Research

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The article will examine an extended case study (over 14 years) of the challenges of operating a mode 2 academic research project (which generated a unique diagnostic tool for use in business to business relationships) and then of converting academic theory into a practical application which has been used successfully in over 150 companies.

The research process will be discussed and the difficulties of managing the operational management agendas along with the need to do rigorous academic work will be examined. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

The case traces the development of a stream of activity that is at the boundary between academic and commercial activity. That the activity is still important says something about the scope of the initial vision and a lot about the determination of a number of key players to pursue that vision and enhance and extend it. What drives those key individuals will be discussed but the perceptions belong to only one of them.

Occupying the hybrid ground is a challenge that will not be for everyone, nor should it be, but this author believes that in an applied area of academic research

such as management, to do otherwise runs the risk of creating output of value in one schema as an intellectual exercise but is largely irrelevant to the practitioner one. It does raise questions about the academic system and in particular its internal measurement processes. It is to provoke debate about these issues that the case is presented.

Beginnings

Certain members of academic staff in management at the University of Glasgow have long been participants in what was once called action research and also in the early days of the Teaching Company Scheme at Glasgow when a number of staff and its then head of Department were deeply involved. Thus it was that during a meeting at IBM in 1986 a chance remark by one of their managers started a train of thought that grew into the case study that will be reported here. IBM, at that time, had been actively pursuing Total Quality Management and Just in Time Manufacture although in typical IBM fashion they called it something different, Continuous Flow Manufacturing (which is actually a better title). It was becoming evident that the problems as seen by IBM were not contained within their organisational boundaries and so the comment was made 'It's costing us an arm and a leg to get our suppliers up to speed with all of this. I wish someone would do something about it!'

From this started an academic literature search, some

conceptual models of enquiry, an initial concept (Macbeth, 1987), the search for industrial collaborators and a research project funded by the Application of Computers to Manufacturing Engineering Directorate of Science & Engineering Research Council into 'Managing Suppliers in an Advanced Manufacturing Technology Environment'. Funding was £152K from SERC and £80K (in kind) from a variety of industrial partners including IBM, Hewlett Packard, Leyland Daf, Cummins and Polaroid. During this study, which also extended to over 40 of the suppliers to these companies, it became clear that the problems and the opportunities were not exclusively the suppliers' responsibility and so the focus moved to the relationship between the customer and the supplier in the Supply Chain.

The team recruited to do the research were chosen to have complementary skills and the ability to operate at senior management level in researcher mode at least. One was a sociology graduate part way through a PhD, the second was an accountant who had come late to his initial degree but had studied the subject matter somewhat and the third was an engineer finishing off a technology and business, Teaching Company Programme in the department.

The major output of the work was the 'Relationship Positioning Tool' (RPT) which performs a third party critical review of activities on both sides of the customer-supplier relationship and produces a comprehensive picture of how both sides are contributing to success or relative failure against over 70 business criteria (Macbeth and Ferguson, 1994). This was followed up by another collaborative project with a seconded manager from the Digital Equipment Company (DEC) working with the team on 'Increasing the potential for local sourcing by OEMs'. That tested the relationship measurement process as a means of selecting appropriate suppliers from outside the focal industrial sector but who were shown to have suitable business capabilities that were worthy of further technical evaluation. Around about the same time a project into best practice in the area of supply management was completed for the UK Government's Department of Trade and Industry that effectively demonstrated that no organisation had an effective process to measure and improve relationships although certain best practice companies were doing a variety of supplier development activities.

Decision Point 1

Academic research council funding had ceased, the team had worked well together, and there appeared to be a market gap between our identified need to measure relationships and the lack of any competing product. One member of the team chose to pursue an academic career but the other three, the author included, were keen to explore the market opportunity and a company was set up.

Immediately there was the issue of Intellectual Property (IP). We knew that the measurement process, while clever in its integration and cross referencing and in the database of responses already gathered in answer to its over 500 questions, was not inherently suitable for patent protection but technically the University owned the rights to the materials developed under the funding agency activity. Rather than set up the company 'across the road' as it were and operate with the researchers who would no longer be University employees, we chose to look for collaboration with the University and started a process of negotiating a loan, recapitalising the company and restructuring it according to the University and its lawyers and licensing the IP from the University. Thus the consultancy company SCMG Ltd was established with the two remaining researchers as MD and director and the author as a director. As a 50 per cent shareholder the University had an appointed director and there were a variety of somewhat restrictive clauses inserted into the agreement that made the University an important if inherently distant player. While the University had a small activity supporting technology transfer at that time it had tended to be more focused on hard technology rather than on a service company as a consultancy. The academic contract allowed for time to be spent on consultancy and the agreement was that the author would do his through the company.

Emergent Growth

Almost immediately the second researcher chose to relocate to Belgium where her company had posted his wife. The decision was made to see if remote working was possible, but eventually it proved not only not to be working in creating paid work or in opening up new markets but it was a significant drain on the fixed costs and he was asked to resign. As a customer contact business we needed to recruit to grow and so another consultant was recruited in 1992 and took over the project in Switzerland that had been the former director's main task. For the next few years the company effectively drifted along without making any significant headway.

Decision Point 2

A later recruitment went badly wrong through the use of an inappropriate i.e. academic, employment contract providing a job for life for someone whose performance did not live up to expectations. Extricating the company from its liabilities cost time, money in legal fees and severance settlement and the forced resignation of the MD along with further investment from two directors to buy the shares of the departing director. (The new consultant having been appointed director shortly before this stage.)

With a new MD in place the clock was reset to year zero and he set about placing the company on a

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