

# Manufacturing strategy: The story of its evolution<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This essay has two stories to tell: first, as promised, the evolution of what is known as “manufacturing strategy” and, also, the parallel story of the value of combining teaching and research through the Harvard Business School’s focus on teaching by the case method. This second tale may be of particular interest in view of recent critiques of business schools and their research practices [Bennis, W.G., O’Toole, J., 2005. How business schools lost their way. *Harvard Business Review* 83 (5), 96–104].

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## 1. From private university to private U.S. Army to private industry

My college years at Yale during World War II were non-stop: universities were teaching year-round. As soon as I had my degree in chemical engineering, I volunteered for immediate induction into the U.S. Army and right away became an infantry private. Days before being shipped to Europe, I was transferred to the Engineer Corps for duty on the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos, New Mexico. I learned some industrial engineering and became fascinated with the valuable insights, which came from measuring and analyzing material and manpower flows. As soon as I left the Army, I headed for the Harvard Business School. In 1946 and 1947, I experienced exciting and demanding analytic breakthroughs three times a day, 5 days a week. In concert with

my classmates in the case method, I was consistently wrong in my pre-class analyses and this was humbling. But the power of in-depth, hard-worked analysis eventually produced confidence and, often, contrarian insights. Contrarian! That role felt somehow natural.

The next 10 years at Honeywell provided tough bosses and unambiguous jobs in production (6 years), marketing and sales (2 years) and 2 years as a divisional finance officer. Honeywell also trained me in the process of leading management development classes which reminded me of my admiration for my Harvard MBA instructors. I became fascinated with why organizations worked and, when they didn’t, what to do about it. In 1958, I resigned from Honeywell and entered the Harvard Business School’s doctoral program.

## 2. From doctoral student to junior member of the faculty

In my first year, in addition to doctoral coursework and exams, case writing took me into 15 companies in 12 industries. My thesis focused on U.S. companies manufacturing abroad. This was followed by an

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invitation to join the HBS faculty in the Production Area.

I was immediately teaching full-time but the signals from senior colleagues were clear: I should be “doing some research” and reporting on it in a faculty seminar. Since I had been away from academia for a decade, I decided that I’d better catch up on what I’d been missing. Harvard’s Baker Library had everything I needed. In October 1960, a doctoral student – Henry B. Eyring – asked me what I was doing so I explained. Henry then kindly asked:

“Why don’t you not only study these new concepts and techniques but at the same time from your Honeywell experience and recent case writing in industry come up with a sense of what is happening in industry and then see whether the new stuff from academia is now or ever will be useful in solving industrial problems?”

His comment changed everything and set me on a track, which I have never left. I took his advice and what I learned was that we had a substantial mismatch between problems in industry and the then-current research and teaching. Unfortunately, I shared this insight with my Production colleagues at an Area faculty research seminar and was blunt in my diagnosis. What I said is on the record:

“The U.S. production manager is attempting to fight big battles with small weapons, and the ‘small weapons’ are being provided by academics.”

In hindsight I wonder how I could have been so arrogant and untactful—indeed, self-defeating, but I really expected them to be excited and intrigued by my new ideas. They were excited all right—excited like hornets whose nest has just been stepped on by a blundering hiker. They swarmed all over me until the hour grew late and the room emptied.

In retrospect it is surprising that I was so sure I was right but neither humbled nor frightened away from my line of reasoning. I was no gutsy hero: this non-tenured lecturer went to earth with his nascent ideas, while overtly concentrating on teaching and course development. The fact was that I had come across early but undeniable signs of industrial deterioration: the fact that it was management-related made me indignant that colleagues at a professional school of management were wasting their research efforts and teaching academic stuff that seemed really silly. I kept up my own research but went “underground” with it. I did not arouse my colleagues again with heresy of any sort for a full 5 years.

### 3. Industry and the academy

The problems in American industry were widespread, serious and hard to miss when one got into the factories. In the late 1950s, while academics were still teaching time and motion study and being titillated by simulation, linear programming and algorithms, industry was awash with problems—quality and productivity, labor morale, the growing loss of markets to foreign competitors, equipment and process technology puzzles, to name only a few. Meanwhile, Operations Management professors were so absorbed in intellectually exciting new techniques that they did not see what was happening in our factories. So since no one was asking why things were going wrong, there was no way for managers to know what to do about it.

I think it was an unusual and slippery time in HBS history, largely in Operations Management but also reflecting an uneasiness throughout the School which had its source in an acceleration of the incorporation of quantitative techniques into the entire curriculum as a response to the criticisms of the Ford and Carnegie Foundations’ reports on the quality of business education in the U.S. (Gordon and Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959) The pressure for change was particularly strong in the Operations Area because many faculty in other areas were concerned that we might be falling behind intellectually. We had been thrown out of executive programs because executives found our content dull and low-level. Colleagues in other areas considered us the weak area at the School. Therefore, several capable new hires had been made from distant doctoral programs devoted to simulation, game theory, etc.: these newcomers were riding high.

After my pummeling at the Area faculty seminar it was obvious that my ideas were politically incorrect. I did manage to get promoted to Associate Professor (a 5-year appointment) probably simply because I was pretty hot in the classroom and a few other “old-fashioned” professors of senior rank backed me. But I was driven by a compulsion to make sense of things and thereby be able to teach and write something important because it was useful. I became a quiet rebel and slunk underground to try to figure out what was really going on in industry and what should be done about it.

### 4. Working out some ideas

My problem was that I was long on criticism but short on remedies. U.S. industry was failing the country on all counts but no one I could find in industry or the academy seemed to be able to analyze what was wrong

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