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# Responsible Research for Better Business

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Creating Useful and  
Credible Knowledge for  
Business and Society

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*Edited by*  
László Zsolnai · Mike J. Thompson

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László Zsolnai · Mike J. Thompson  
Editors

# Responsible Research for Better Business

Creating Useful and Credible  
Knowledge for Business and Society

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# Preface

*What is the role of business and management research in producing credible knowledge to address the dramatic human and environmental challenges of our times?*

Human social and economic activities have dramatically and negatively impacted our natural environment, earth systems, and climate systems. The existential risk presented by the new reality of the Anthropocene era requires a radical rethinking of the purpose of business and its dominant working models. We believe that the main challenge for business and management research is to figure out how to bring our economies and business organizations in better balance with nature and society and how to create new models of socio-ecological well-being.

This book collects a number of responses to the challenges set by the *Responsible Research in Business and Management* (RRBM), initiated by Notre Dame University Professor Anne Tsui. RRBM is an international network of leading scholars and universities to promote responsible research for better business and better world by creating useful and credible knowledge. The growing expressions of concern by business and societal stakeholders on the relevancy and responsibility of business

and management research is essentially a call to reexamine the responsibility of business school research and the role and calling of professorship. Learning and scholarship is a vital societal resource to tackle the immense challenges of business and planetary responsibility.

What are the new paths that are open to scholarship to ensure that knowledge creation is applied to inform and equip managers as well as to further management as both an art and a science? The call of this book is a response to this question by contributors who honor the requirement for high quality business and management research but want to point to new pathways for responsible research and education. The urgent demand from many stakeholders is for responsible research to encourage transformational changes to business and management in response to the challenges of potential climate collapse and ecological breakdown. Our hope is that the chapters in our book can contribute to this difficult and vitally important task.

We should like to thank Professor Anne Tsui for the encouragement and support that we received from her during the completion of our project.

Budapest, Hungary  
London, UK

László Zsolnai  
Mike J. Thompson

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# Introduction



# The Call for Responsible Research in Business and Management

László Zsolnai and Mike J. Thompson

Theories greatly influence business and management practices. In his seminal work the late London Business School professor Sumantra Ghoshal (2005) warned that bad management theories are destroying good management practices. Similarly, good management theories may help to bring forth new and better business practices.

One of the most influential moral philosophers of our time, Hans Jonas (1984) suggested that responsibility should be understood as caring for the beings whose functioning is under one's action and consideration. From Jonas' theory of responsibility it follows that business and management researchers should not be passive observers of the subjects they

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study. Rather, responsible scholars should develop sensitivity and responsiveness toward the fate and well-being of organizations and other social systems they happen to focus on.

In 2017, Notre Dame University professor Anne Tsui initiated the creation of an international network of leading scholars and universities has been formed to promote *Responsible Research in Business and Management* (RRBM). The core vision of RRBM is that

business can be a means for a better world if it is informed by responsible research. (...) Research is the foundation of business education and practice, yet business research has failed to live up to its promise in promoting better policies and best practices. If nothing is done, business research will lose its legitimacy at best; at worst, it will waste money, talent, and opportunity. (RRBM 2019)

The voices of internal and external business school stakeholders (for example, Ghoshal 2005; Segalla 2008; Simons 2013; Cannon 2015; de Bettignies 2018; Elangovan, and Hoffman 2019) have become increasingly strident in their challenges to the business research agenda. Such voices convey a sense that perceived academic elitism, competition, and imperialism has led to a multitude of ever-increasing “cul-de-sacs” of knowledge creation which fail to translate appropriately and relevantly to knowledge dissemination. Despite grand objectives that point toward contemporary management needs, opportunities, and challenges, the internal business academic scholarship system tends to promote self-service (Starbuck 2007, 24), rather than leading *responsibly* as a steward of knowledge creation, applied learning and impactful research.

Brannick and Coghlan’s well-documented survey of the literature on the perceived relevance gap between academics and practitioners painted a disquieting picture in 2006. They noted that the business world appeared to be “generally ignoring the research and consequent knowledge produced by business schools or academia, since it feels it is irrelevant to its purposes” (Brannick and Coghlan 2006, 2). Publications in the field since then have continued to question the nature and relevance of business and management research and many scholars have

shown support for the view expressed by the RRBM that although “research is the foundation of business education and practice, yet business research has failed to live up to its promise in promoting better policies and best practices” (RRBM 2019). Business research questions, methods, predictions, and prescriptions are perceived by practitioners, such as James Wallis in this volume, to reflect a *habitus* that does not reflect the kind of research insights that contemporary management needs. In Wallis’s words, there is “a mismatch between the conventional concepts of business and the demands of sustainable change.” He calls for a future paradigm of research and practice as “the natural and obvious path, as opposed the anomalous and exceptional one” (Chapter 10).

The diagnosis for the flaws in the prevailing business and management research paradigm conditions frequently reference the over-arching demands of the academic journal ranking system in shaping research agendas and in maintaining particular forms of organizational and social scientific methodologies and theories. This has led to a narrowing frame of reference for discursive enquiry within business disciplines rather than toward an integration of business disciplines which align with the trend of companies to pursue agile strategies that integrate business functions (Visée 2015).

Business and management scholarship tends to follow the conventions of other academies in aligning academic career development through journal publication filters. But, like the engineering and technology academies, business schools are expected to create fundamental knowledge that can be applied to practice “in applied domains to address pressing and current issues” (RRBM 2019). Managers require theory, design, concepts, modeling and research insights that help them to develop new markets and improve operational decision-making and processes. They also require more accessible and applied knowledge through business practitioner media.

The business management paradigm creates a tension for business scholars between their vocation to use management science to serve business and society and the business journal ranking system measures that appear as an unbending career master. Research quality and focus is measured by the number of A-level journal publications, h-index, citation

scores, and the like at the risk of “using a language that broader audiences do not understand, publishing in journals that they don’t read, and asking questions for which they have little concern” (Elangovan and Hoffman 2019).

Responsible business research expressed in the seven RRBM Principles outlined below and the “real” research needs of management face obfuscation by the idiosyncratic particularities and limitations of A-level journals which, as Adler and Harzburg point out,

...neither claim to comprehensively include “the best of the best” nor do they inadvertently succeed in such a task. The journals included in the *FT40* and the *UTD* lists, for example, are merely a sample of high-quality journals; they do not even attempt to represent (let alone equitably and comprehensively include) all 13 (AACSB-defined) disciplines associated with business. (Adler and Harzburg 2009, 76)<sup>1</sup>

Adler and Harzburg summarize a commonly expressed complaint by faculty that articles published in new journals remain invisible to most citation indices and to almost all ranking systems. The responsible research agenda requires new methods of scholarly assessment and success that include criteria that measure impact, systemic solutions and practitioner-relevance. One way would be for business school faculty appointment committees in assessing candidates to give equal weight to the impact of their scholarship through the weighting of citations and articles in the practitioner press.

Business and management research can do much more to contribute solutions to the global challenges expressed by the UN Sustainable Development Goals. To this end, the RRBM formulated a Position Paper from April to September 2017 supported by 85 cosigners from over 75 institutions in 21 countries, representing senior scholars, deans, university, and business leaders. The Paper sets a vision for the role of business

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<sup>1</sup>FT40 (now FT50) are the 50 business journals used by the Financial Times in compiling the FT Research rank included in the Global MBA, EMBA and Online MBA rankings. The UTD lists refer to the UT Dallas’ Naveen Jindal School of Management’s database which tracks publications in 24 leading business journals. AACSB provides quality assurance, business education intelligence, and professional development services to over 1600 member organizations and more than 800 accredited business schools worldwide.

schools in contributing to societal well-being and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It also sets out the Principles of Responsible Science that will “guide business and management research to build a sound body of knowledge that serves society” (RRBM 2019). In summary form, the seven RRBM Principles for transforming business and management research are:

1. *Service to Society*: Development of knowledge that benefits business and the broader society, locally and globally, for the ultimate purpose of creating a better world.
2. *Stakeholder Involvement*: Research that engages different stakeholders in the research process, without compromising the independence of inquiry.
3. *Impact on Stakeholders*: Research that has an impact on diverse stakeholders, especially research that contributes to better business and a better world.
4. *Valuing Both Basic and Applied Contributions*: Contributions in both the theoretical domain to create fundamental knowledge and in applied domains to address pressing and current issues.
5. *Valuing Plurality and Multidisciplinary Collaboration*: Diversity in research themes, methods, forms of scholarship, types of inquiry, and interdisciplinary collaboration to reflect the plurality and complexity of business and societal problems.
6. *Sound Methodology*: Research that implements sound scientific methods and processes in both quantitative and qualitative or both theoretical and empirical domains.
7. *Broad Dissemination*: Diverse forms of knowledge dissemination that collectively advance basic knowledge and practice.

Based on the vision of the *Responsible Research in Business and Management* network this edited volume presents original, empirical, and conceptual papers which address the challenges of doing responsible research in the business and management professions. Responsible research is not a specific research method, but is rather an integrative approach to research that emphasizes research outcomes and impacts that target ethical, sustainable, and societal challenges.



Responsible research focuses on practice before discourse (Flyvbjerg 2001) selecting and integrating different kinds of research methodologies. Rooney (2013), for example, has argued for wise research methodology that challenges standard approaches to management and organizational studies research “to do things better” by “being clear about the roles and relevance of one’s dispositions and their recursive relationship with *habitus*, including cultural artifacts like knowledge and values.” Ethnographic and praxeological narratives, discourse analysis, decision-making frameworks, and visual methods that highlight data collection moments (Lehtonen in Chapter 7) can offer alternative or complementary research routes to achieve impact and action. In their chapter, Molina-Azorin et al. show through two research projects how mixed methods action-research approaches that use field experiments and multiple rounds of qualitative interviews produce research outcomes that align with the principles of responsible research. Quantitative studies require wise interpretation for relevancy and applicability; thus Rooney’s cry for “phronology not epistemology” (Rooney 2013, 37), and Golden-Biddle and Bartunek’s conception of relational objectivity grounded in responsibility to all parties involved in the research, which they describe in Chapter 4.

## 1 Issues and Themes

In their chapter *Critical Realism: A Philosophy of Science for Responsible Business and Management Research* Tim Rogers (University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia) and Benito L. Teehankee (De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines) emphasize that a key motivator for the current detached approach to research in business and management is the prevailing positivist philosophy of science. The paper argues that critical realism as a philosophy of science provides an alternative ontology, epistemology, and axiology that can better ground responsible research in business and management.

Critical Realism was founded as a new philosophy of science by the British philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1975, 2016). It has had some traction among British management researchers. Recently, it has been