

On business theory and influential scholarship: What makes research interesting?

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Abstract

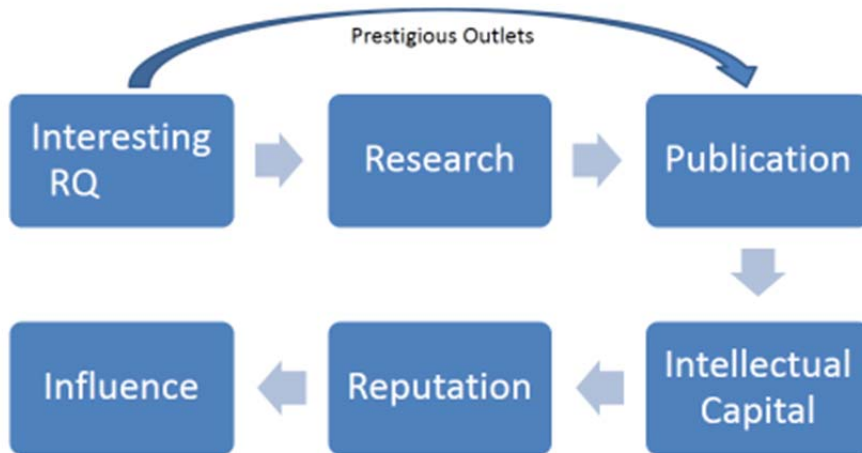
Couched within a theory of business, this paper explores what makes business scholarship influential and probe into mechanisms that make a paper interesting to its audience. It presents a framework to combine several attributes of influential scholarship and presents a model for making research interesting. Examples of interesting scholarship are provided and speculations about why they are interesting and why they might be influential are offered. In addition, suggestions are made as to what individuals and institutions can do to promote and sustain influential scholarship.

It was recently reported that the number of management journals listed by the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) has nearly tripled in over dozen years from 61 to 174 (Davis, 2014). In fact it is standing at 185 at the point of writing. There are about 8000 papers published in management journals every year. It is one thing to publish, and given these numbers, it is quite another thing to be read! Scholarly publication is an arduous process (Cummings & Frost, 1995). A community of scholars have to be convened to constitute various editorial boards, they curate the work of a scholar through a process of reviews and revisions negotiating the value of the scholarly contribution through. At the end of the process, those papers that get past the process are certified as valuable knowledge culminating in their publication (Davis, 2014). The interest of the authors and editors converge in the hope that what gets published gets read (Baba, 2002). Given the vast and rising number of publications, both authors and editors need to strategize to become influential.

As shown in Figure 1, individuals, groups and organizations in the knowledge business like to have influence among their constituencies. This influence is largely gained through reputation that one establishes as a scholar. The primary ingredient that contributes to the building of reputation is intellectual capital. In the business of knowledge production, intellectual capital is largely generated through research and becomes visible through the publication process mentioned earlier. While publication is necessary, it is not sufficient to get noticed. Typically, a scholarly outlet's value is determined by its impact factor (Davis, 2014). Therefore a journal chasing an elevated impact factor has to publish interesting research that has a chance to be read, to be cited, and to influence knowledge production and its use. Interesting research comes from an interesting research question (RQ). It is a simple

pathway of scholarship leading to productivity that results in influence-influence among fellow scholars and for some, influence in the profession. However, negotiating the pathway from scholarship to influence involves both individual and institutional strategies that are focused and sustainable. It begins with an interesting RQ.

Figure 1. Becoming Influential

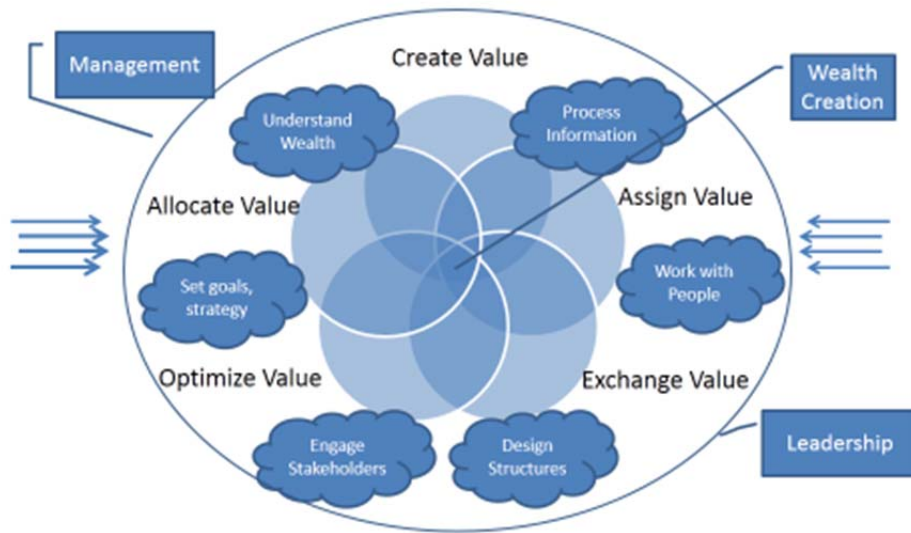


But before we attempt to explore what constitutes an interesting RQ, we have to determine to whom it is interesting and why. Given that the paper is addressing business and management scholars who are involved in research that advances business and management scholarship, it is important to define and develop the domain of our scholarly interest.

The value theory of business shown in Figure 2 views the purpose of business as creating wealth for society (Thurow, 1999). Wealth is created by consolidating value—increasing consolidation leads to increasing wealth creation. Organizations, through processes of production and innovation and through the utilization of resources, create value in goods and services and assign worth. They exchange the goods and services for money in the marketplace in a manner that optimizes value and allocates the proceeds to stakeholders. The value enhancement process is sustained by understanding wealth, processing information,

working with people, designing structures, engaging stakeholders, setting goals, developing strategy, and interacting with the environment. This consolidation is carried out by leadership and management. Management extracts value through adroit deployment of resources while leadership provides the needed organizational direction – a vision of the future. In essence, what good management and leadership do is to exert an inward pressure as shown by the arrows in a manner that ensures that the various value functions cohere together toward value enhancement. In other words, more they fuse together, larger the nexus becomes, and larger the nexus, greater is the potential for wealth creation.

Figure 2. Value theory of business



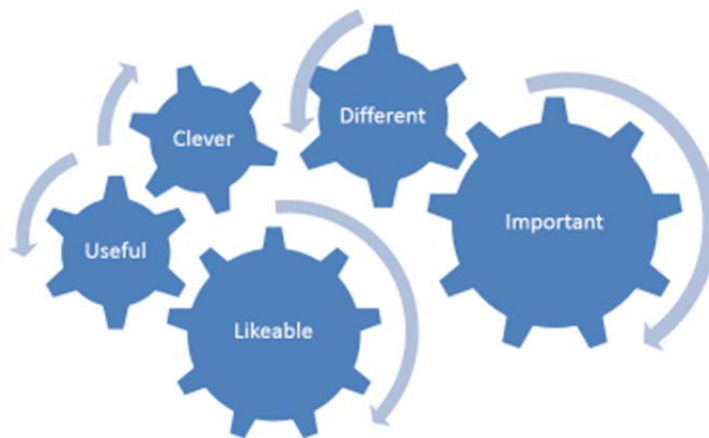
Much of business and management education around the world is guided by this theoretical framework. A variety of courses on production and operations management focus on value creation. Accounting theory and associated courses on various topics in accounting concentrate on the assessment and assignment of value to those goods and services created by the organization. Marketing theory, through its pedagogical articulations, attend to the task of exchanging those goods and services in the market place and emphasizing the product, price, place, and promotion along with the people involved in the process. Once the value exchange takes place in the market place, the proceeds of the exchange need to be allocated. Finance and optimization theories guide the process of value allocation. Strategies

are explored toward value enhancement and making the process efficient and effective. All of these activities are predicated upon a sound understanding of wealth and its role in society. So one is exposed to economic theory. These activities mostly take place in organizations which require designing with attention to size, structure, and technology and are carried out by people who need managing. So one learns organization theory, behavior and human resources management. Value enhancement and wealth creation involves collecting and processing data and managing information. This calls for an understanding of management information systems. These activities also involve engagement with the stakeholders and an understanding of the environment in which they unfold and are embedded. Therefore the links between business and society are explored. As pointed out earlier, activities that contribute value in one form or another have to cohere to create wealth. Conceptually these activities are all independent and it is only through human agency they come together to create wealth for the organization and society. Such human effort is facilitated by the brand paradigm unique to the organization or business school and is expressed through leadership and management. This in essence is what students learn in business school and what they practice in the profession.

The above constitutes the intellectual platform for knowledge creation in management. We still need to address the question of how to create knowledge that is significant and sustainable—knowledge that makes an enduring contribution to business theory and management practice. In order for a field to have scientific and professional influence, the knowledge created has to have requisite variety. In other words, one can position oneself anywhere on the map in Figure 2, pose a RQ that is relevant, and proceed to answer it leading to the publication of the findings. This is how a field develops its theoretical and empirical knowledge base. More research accomplished through posing a variety of RQs and documented for scholarly use, more mature the field becomes, and more confidence people have on its intellectual worth. That said, not all spots on the map in Figure 2 are equal in their capacity to engage the community of scholars in pursuant research. As one moves toward the centre in terms of locating the research question, more interesting and more interdisciplinary it becomes in its attempt to address issues concerning the creation of wealth that is central to business theory.

Not too long ago the Academy of Management Journal addressed the question of what makes a paper interesting and I have tried to put those ideas together in a model of interest, largely influenced by Stephen Barley's (2006) thoughts on the subject as shown in Figure 3. In order for our research to be of interest it has to be different; the subject matter must depart from the main stream. It can be a rogue topic, an unusual data set, or a new theoretical insight - a paper that challenges existing causal assumptions (Price, 1995). The idea has to be imaginative and clever, something out of the ordinary bringing new knowledge to the discipline - a paper with a future orientation, something that makes abstractions meaningful (Price, 1995). The paper has to be likeable and have broad appeal. Such a paper is quite appealing to one's reading sensibilities and brings enjoyment - somewhat akin to reading poetry. Some of it is the way the idea is put forward. Presentation is the key. The idea has to be important, and address an issue needing probity. It should add something unique to existing knowledge or significantly extend the reach of current theory. One is influenced by the force of the idea. It also has to be useful and add value. One learns from it and leverages it for further gains. It is research that significantly advances the state of the art.

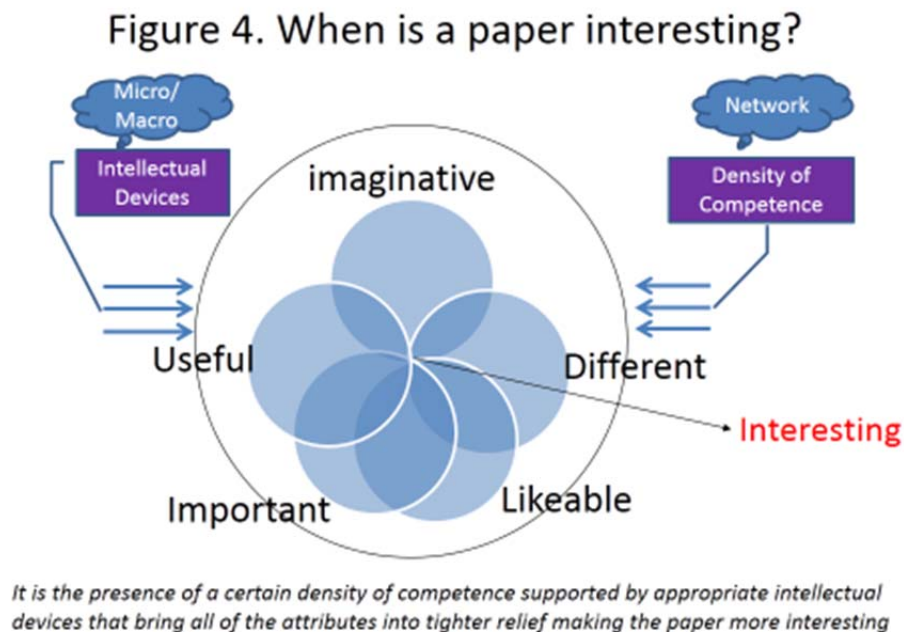
Figure 3. What makes a paper interesting?



These ideas engage and reinforce each other

However, these dimensions of what makes a paper interesting are orthogonal, which means that a paper can be different without being imaginative, likeable without being useful etc.

The challenge is to fuse them together. As shown in Figure 4, it is the nexus that makes the paper interesting. Greater the fusion, or larger the nexus, the more interesting the research is. In other words, one needs to squeeze these dimensions together in order to enhance intellectual appeal as shown by the inward arrows in Figure 4. Editors and reviewers contribute to the process through convening a competent team to curate the work toward greater influence. While these are the proximal factors pertaining to specific pieces of scholarship, others such as the research training of the authors, the intellectual context in which they function, the institutional support they get for their research, all play a vital role in making research interesting.



Learning to pose an interesting RQ begins in graduate school. Strong courses and innovative seminars provide the foundation and the platform to raise challenging issues respectively. Other students in the class facilitate the process, leading eventually to the formation of productive partnerships. These partnerships have the potential to put together a pool of complementary talent that not only leads to interesting research questions but also to rigorous research that produces answers. They often result in a program of joint research that endure beyond graduate school. Socio-intellectual mechanisms where students, faculty and visitors

get together pursuing an intellectual agenda in a social context somewhat akin to the famous *kaffeeklatsch* organized by Kurt Lewin during his tenure at Iowa promote the exchange of ideas. When faculty members are involved in editorial activities either as editors or as members of editorial board, they become intimately familiar with the curatorial activities needed to develop manuscripts and eventually make judgments about their intellectual worth to the academic community. They often transfer such intelligence to the students they supervise and teach through ongoing discussions and conversations they have. While far from being formulaic, when one engages in all of these activities in a systematic way, one learns where exactly the thin edge of the wedge is in driving one's intellectual agenda. It is not uncommon to find a large volume of interesting work emanating from a few institutions. This leads to speculation about the institutional role in creating a climate that spawns and sustains interesting research. Academic institutions use a variety of mechanisms to stimulate intellectual activity and together they contribute to the creation of interesting scholarship. When an institution sponsors an academic conference, symposium or workshop, it promotes intense interaction among the participants resulting in innovative ideation. Even the ubiquitous brown bag seminars play a role in bringing people together to trade ideas and critique them contributing to synergy in making those ideas interesting. Housing of influential journals introduce familiarity among the members of the relevant university community to the expectations of scholarly production and communication. Topical *townhalls* organized by a school or academic department bring a variety of people interested in a particular issue to come and debate resulting in several researchable ideas to be pursued in a collaborative fashion. It also brings visibility to the institution which in turn facilitates the creation of competence. The recent creation of Networks of Centers of Excellence by the Canadian Government is a good example of a mechanism that facilitates the interplay of ideas toward innovative research outcomes. Individual efforts, institutional mechanisms, and networks of excellence create a density of competence (March, 1980) that sustains the production of interesting research.

If we were to pursue the question of what makes a paper interesting, we need to establish that there is convergence among scholars that certain pieces of research are viewed as interesting.

Low paradigm fields like management tend to be more pluralistic in their consideration of ideas, arguably the reason for their low impact compared to more established fields of knowledge in the hard sciences. Nevertheless, there are papers published not only in “high” impact journals listed as such by ISI but they also garner enormous interest among the research community as can be seen from Table 1.

Table 1. Highest Impact Articles in Publications Ranked by Impact Factor

Publication	Article	Authors	Times Cited	Publication Year	Journal Impact Factor
Academy of Management Annals	Social Hierarchy: The Self-Reinforcing Nature of Power and Status	Magee, Joe C.; Galinsky, Adam D.	254	2008	7.709
Academy of Management Review	Building theories from case study research	Disenhardt, KM	7219	1986	7.475
Academy of Management Journal	The impact of human resource management practices on turnover, productivity, and corporate financial performance	Huselid, MA	1941	1995	6.448
Journal of Management	Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage	Barney, J	9015	1991	6.073
Journal of Applied Psychology	Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies	Podsakoff, PM; MacKenzie, SB; Lee, JY; et al.	7975	2003	4.799
Personnel Psychology	The big 5 personality dimensions and job performance - a meta-analysis	Barrick, MR; Mount, MK	2138	1991	4.49
International Journal of Management Reviews	Green supply chain management: A state-of-the-art literature review	Srivastava, Samir K.	493	2007	3.857
Organization Sciences	Exploitation and exploration in organizational learning	March, James G.	4079	1991	3.775
Journal of Management Studies	Identity negotiation as organizational control: Protections the appropriate individual	Alvesson, M; Willmott, H	458	2002	3.763
Journal of International Business Studies	Internationalization process of firm - model knowledge development and increasing foreign market commitments	Johanson, J; Vahlne, JE	2059	1977	3.583

While it is possible to discuss all of these papers in terms of why they were cited by so many, it will be sufficient to pick two papers from the list that have received the largest citation counts since their publication, to make the case. Among the papers published in the top ten high impact journals in business and management, the one with the largest citation was a paper on firm resources and competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). This paper addressed issues that is of central concern to business theory and business research – wealth creation. It anchored competitive advantage as the main driver for wealth creation and offered a theory around its sustainability making the resource based view of the firm very influential. It challenged existing assumptions of competitive advantage, offered new assumptions and

established their theoretical viability in a convincing fashion. That is different. The paper was not only interested in the notion of competitive advantage but also on its sustainability. In so doing it focused on a firm's resources and took an inclusive view of such resources including its physical, human and organizational capitals. However, it argued that not all of them contributed to competitive advantage and even less to its sustainability. It identified crucial characteristics of the resources, value, rarity, imitability and substitutability as conditions that influenced competitive advantage and sustained it. This is imaginative. Barney's theory established the mediating role of the above characteristics on the impact of the heterogeneity and immobility of a firm's resources on its sustained competitive advantage. It was done in a simple, elegant style and the language was persuasive. Readers liked it. Its motivation was strong. Research on competitive advantage until the early 90s was largely driven by SWOT analysis with the emphasis on the opportunities and threats a firm faced, with external analysis dominating strategic management research. This paper was a turning point as researchers shifted their focus on the internal resources of a firm to generate and sustain its competitive advantage. All of a sudden this paper altered the landscape of both management research and practice (Barney, Wright, & Ketchen, Jr, 2001). It was important. This paper also has an inclusive sweep. It took into account many of the existing notions that informed competitive advantage research and created an intellectual space that is conceptually well linked. In addition, it pointed out the research implications of the resource based view of the firm to other areas of business scholarship such as organization theory and behavior, corporate governance, venture capital financing, entrepreneurship, and institutional theory ((Barney, Wright, & Ketchen,Jr, 2001). This is profoundly useful.

Barney's original work (1991) was hugely interesting to its audience because of its integrated implications for value creation, value assignment, value exchange, value allocation, value optimization and value enhancement that are the pillars of business theory as shown in Figure 1. In addition it has influenced our understanding of business economics, the way information is viewed as a valuable resource, the way we design organizational structures and engender organizational behavior, the goals we set and the strategies we make. The RQ it posed and answered positioned itself practically in the nexus shown in Figure 1 thus evincing substantial interest among the scholarly and professional community. It is worth noting that

Jay Barney is routinely consulted by several of the Fortune 500 companies for his insights into strategic management.

The model shown in Figure 4 also mentioned that certain intellectual devices, institutional arrangements and density of competence facilitate the process of a paper becoming interesting and points to the inward arrows representing those processes. Barney (1991) recognizes the density of competence that was present in his network and acknowledge them publicly for making his work that much better. In addition, he documents the role institutional mechanisms play such as the informal discussions he has had with his colleagues at his institution and at the second Annual Wharton Conference where he had the opportunity to present, discuss and develop his ideas. Perhaps more diffused but equally important is Jay Barney's considerable editorial experience in various capacities in some of the leading journals in management including the *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Management*, *Organization Science*, *Strategic Management Journal*, and *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*. The broad point here is that Barney's paper, Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage is an interesting paper that has been very influential.

The paper with the second largest citation despite its relative recency of publication deals with common method bias in behavioral research (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). It offered a critical review of the topic and more importantly it recommended a number of remedies. This was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, clearly not a business journal and therefore not subscribing to the business paradigm of wealth creation shown in Figure 1. However, many management researchers engage in behavioral research and almost all of them confront the issue of method bias in their research. Consequently, any tutorial on method variance will engage their interest. Although there has been a sustained interest in method variance over the past five decades, there never was an answer that was sufficiently comprehensive or substantially satisfactory. Approaches were piecemeal and partial resulting in a large volume of research whose validity can always be challenged by those inclined in that direction, and whose findings were interpreted with certain degree of circumspection even among those who saw value in them.

What Podsakoff and his colleagues (2003) offered in this paper was a framework for evaluating the potential biasing effects of method variance that was applicable to a large variety of research settings. This was clearly different from what we have had in this domain. Much of what was reported in the method bias literature was how to go about minimizing it. It did not always lead to satisfactory outcomes because what worked in one situation did not work in another. What Podsakoff and his associates did was to focus on the underlying cognitive processes to deconstruct biasing so that one understands how it influenced the way one responds to stimuli. This was clever and imaginative. It is worth noting that the substance of this paper is not within easy grasp of many researchers. It calls for a deeper appreciation of psychometrics and statistics and a distinctive intelligence to relate them to the context of one's research. In essence, the task was quite difficult. Yet, the ideas in the paper were expressed very lucidly. Particularly, the tables and figure were presented in such a manner that it was easy to understand at whatever level of sophistication that one wants to understand them. Different people wanted different things from the paper and the tables offered them all. They were brilliantly conceived. It was a very likeable feature in this paper. Up to this point, many researchers were using control strategies that were not really effective in controlling method bias. This paper offered an approach that actually showed researchers how to evaluate the various procedural and statistical techniques in terms of their suitability to their research setting and context. This is important. Finally, it offered a number of recommendations that enabled researchers to choose an approach that effectively controlled method bias in their research thus enhancing the validity of their findings and the value of their research. This is useful.

This is a very technical paper and many readers were less interested in the technical aspects of this paper compared to what it offered in terms of enhancing the value of their research. The paper's strength is that it addressed a very central concern that affected a very broad spectrum of research in the psychology of management in a very effective way. In that sense, it was close to the spot in Figure 4 where there was value coalescence. Philip Podsakoff has been at Ohio State University, the University of Indiana and more recently at the University of Florida. He is also an active member of the Academy of Management and the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology with a large network of colleagues with many of

whom he publishes. He also has enormous editorial experience serving on the boards of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, *Leadership Quarterly*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* and *Personnel Psychology*. They arguably contribute to his skill in bringing the dimensions of interest to cohere and make the paper more interesting and influential.

Although unscientific, there is a reliable consensus that theoretical and review papers attract lot more readers and maintain their influence a lot longer. Both of these papers fitted that observation. Jay Barney's (1991) paper offered a convincing theoretical framework to approach a popular topic in business research. Podsakoff and his associates (2003) presented a comprehensive review pointing to a competent pathway out of a thorny problem that plagued researchers in the psychology of work making them interesting and influential.

Figures 1, 3 and 4 offered a framework on what makes a paper interesting and influential and Table 1 identified what are arguably interesting papers in business and management. The discussion above is to verify the usefulness of the framework toward guiding authors to engage in research that is interesting and influential.

Although the dimensions that make a paper interesting are conceptually independent, there is a progression involved in getting these dimensions to work with each other. Readers like clever, imaginative ideas. They like them more if they are useful. This is shown in Figure 5. They assign importance to what they like. If it is unique and different, it is viewed as even more important. This is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 5. "Interesting" Progression I

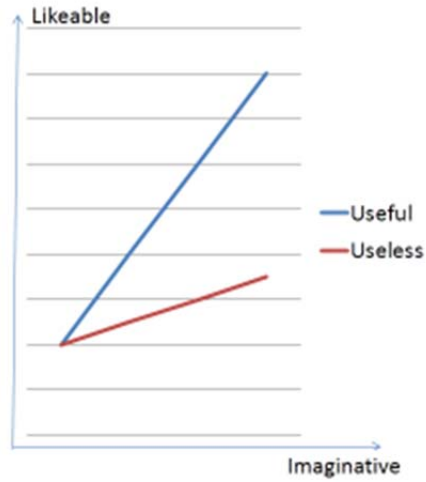
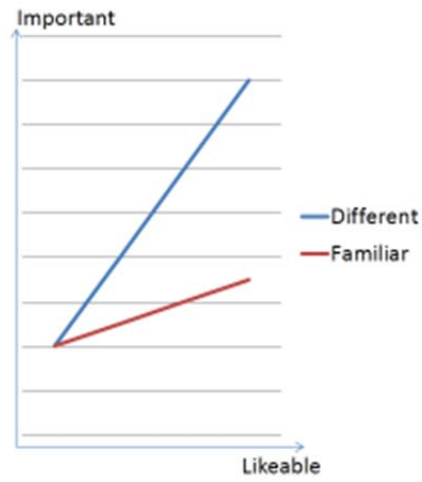
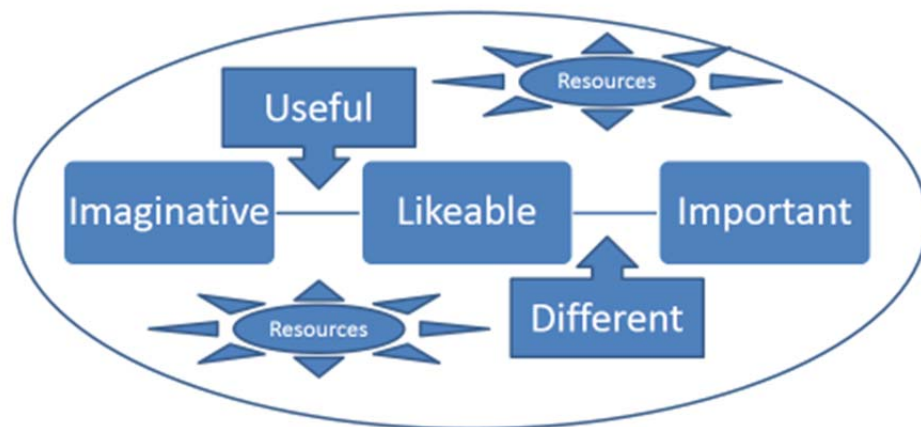


Figure 6. "Interesting" Progression II



It is the dynamics that make an idea interesting. Intellectual and institutional resources mentioned earlier sustain the dynamics shown in Figure 7. Throughout all this, communication is key.

Figure 7. Why is a paper interesting?



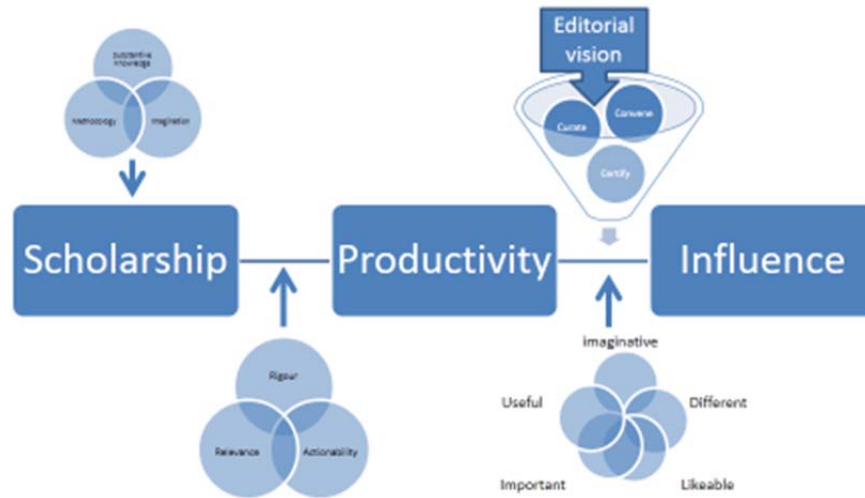
This process is sustained by intellectual and institutional resources

The final step toward influence is to link its antecedents in a dynamic model shown in Figure 8 that ensures ongoing viability. Earlier on, I had mentioned that scholarship leads to productivity which in turn results in influence. Scholarship is not just what you know; it is also about why you know what you know and how you came to know it. The process of acquiring scholarship has a lot to do with the quality of that scholarship. Scholarship comes about through an imaginative combination of substantive and methodological knowledge. It is tempered by the prevailing paradigm that guided the acquisition of scholarship, the perspectives that facilitated, the systematics of the program that structured the acquisition, and one's own curiosity and perseverance that sustains and grows that scholarship. The context plays a major role in both the acquisition and deployment of scholarship. The density of competence prevalent in the context facilitates all of these elements of scholarship to cleave together. Such scholarship results in significant productivity when aided by the fusion of rigor, relevance, and actionability of research. Rigor pertains to the way the research is performed and contributes to the reliability and validity of the findings. Relevance pertains to the research question and its value to the audience. Actionability refers to how one can use the research to make decisions, to solve problems or simply to advance the field further. Barney's research (1991) was conceptually rigorous and relevant to both business research and management practice. His ideas were actionable. Many organizations started creating strategy toward competitive advantage by focusing on internal resources and developing sensitivities toward their value, rarity, imitability and substitutability. Likewise Podsakoff et al (2003) offered an empirically rigorous piece of research that addressed an issue of enormous relevance to the behavioral research community that was immensely actionable as can be seen from its large volume of citation in the literature.

The pathway from productivity to influence is moderated by clever editorial curation of the difference, imagination, likeability, importance, and the usefulness embedded in the knowledge produced. Interesting papers influence. As shown in Figure 8 the processes of review and revision, exercising editorial judgment, and engaging in a developmental dialogue with the author to get the paper up to speed play a significant role in making scholarship influential. The point is when scholarship is pursued with rigor, relevance and

actionability, it acquires value to the community. It gets published! When it is viewed as interesting -clever, imaginative, different, important and useful – it gets cited!

Figure 8. Framework for scholarly influence



This is a conceptual piece of work with many conjectural elements holding it together. The evidence supporting the arguments is observational and anecdotal and not tightly empirical. These are limitations. On the other hand, I have attempted to pose a pertinent research question, what makes a paper interesting, the ultimate answer to which will have to come from empirical studies specifically designed to answer that question. To facilitate, I have offered a framework that could guide future investigations on the topic. I have also attempted to make it relevant to business and management scholars by providing a theoretical backdrop for posing interesting questions. Finally I have made the argument that influential scholarship is a sequential process energized and sustained by many to benefit the community (Figure 8). The overall contribution of this paper is in the articulation of a theory of business, development of a model of interesting work, and the integration of ideas toward a framework for scholarly influence.

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