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Do We Care about Relevance in the International Business Field? On Major Problems of Transferring Our Research to Management Practice

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Abstract: Since nowadays most firms are doing business across borders, we should assume that managers are (highly) interested in research results from the field of International Business (IB). We should also expect that research findings are appealing and helpful to the world of management practice. The present contribution, however, demonstrates that a very low percentage of (German) managers (as well as German consultants) read publications and almost none of them find publications useful for their business activities. Furthermore, in the current contribution, some of the deficiencies that practitioners perceive in IB research will be specified. One of these deficiencies is that IB research is not corresponding to the needs of managers. Hence, the contribution will also make some suggestions how to bridge the gap between academic rigor and practical relevance of IB research.

Keywords: relevance, relevance gap, IB (International Business) research, practice, rigor

Note: The present contribution is based on a plenary speech given at the 10th Vaasa Conference on International Business in Vaasa/Finland, August 2009. While the paper is very close to the original wording, some changes have been made for publication purposes.

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Do We Care about Relevance in the International Business Field? On Major Problems of Transferring Our Research to Management Practice

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

I am very happy to be in Vaasa again. The major question of my presentation for this plenary session is: "Do we care about relevance in the International Business (IB) field ?"[1] My answer will be: "Well, we do not care very much – at least when it comes to our publications." Some of my statements and some of my conclusions may seem harsh and it is likely that not everybody in the auditorium will agree. However, I would be happy if my presentation could make us reflect and if my presentation could lead to some intense discussion in our academic community – not only here during the days while this conference is held, but even beyond.

How will my presentation be structured? In the introduction, I will show that the question of relevance is itself of relevance – not only to me, but also to other scholars. In the second section, I will provide some evidence for a relevance gap in IB research. Reasons for the relevance gap in IB research will be discussed in section 3 and suggestions how to bridge the relevance gap in IB research will be made in section 4. Finally, in section 5, two conclusions will be drawn: First, I will make a plea that we should combine relevance with rigor. Second, I will advocate that we, as scholars, should actively communicate with practitioners.

1 Introduction

The question of relevance has become a general concern in business and management research (e.g., Gopinath/Hoffman 1995, Baldridge/Floyd/Markóczy 2004, Nicolai 2004, Kieser/Nicolai 2005, McKiernan 2009, Pfeffer 2009). Already 15 years ago, Donald Hambrick, former president of the Academy of Management,

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1 In this contribution, I will use the term "International Business" in a way that comprises also International Management. For a distinction between "International Business" and "International Management" see, for instance, Schmid (1996), pp. 67-71 or Schmid/Oesterle (2009), pp. 10-13.

stated: ”Each August, we (academics) come to talk with each other; during the rest of the year we read each others’ papers in our journals and write our own papers so that we may, in turn, have an audience in the following August: an incestuous, closed loop” (Hambrick 1994, p. 13). Thus, Hambrick expresses that research often is an end in itself; we do research for our own community, i.e., the academic community. Hambrick, by the way, did not refer to the Vaasa conference when he talked about “each August”… He would never characterize Jorma Larimo’s conference this way, since Jorma has been interested in relevance for a long time…!

Other colleagues as well criticize that business research and management research do not reach management practice. For instance, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Christina Fong wrote in an article published in “Academy of Management Learning & Education”: “There is little evidence that business school research is influential on management practice, calling into question the professional relevance of management scholarship” (Pfeffer/Fong 2002, p. 78). And let me briefly add a last quote which appeared in Harvard Business Review by Warren Bennis and James O’Toole: “Many leading business schools have quietly adopted an inappropriate … model of academic excellence. Instead of measuring themselves in terms of the competence of their graduates, or how well their faculties understand important drivers of business performance, they measure themselves almost solely by the rigor of their scientific research … Practitioners who have to make real decisions, however, must meanwhile look elsewhere for guidance, notably to the business press and to the bestseller-list – now home to fewer and fewer books by faculty members” (Bennis/O'Toole 2005, pp. 98-99, see also Kogut 2008, Mau/Mansilya-Kruz 2008). The statement by Bennis/O’Toole (2005) not only questions the missing relevance; it also stresses that our business model and our measurement systems in academia are one-sided.

What about the IB field? Is relevance also a relevant issue for us as IB scholars? 20 years ago, for John Dunning relevance to management practice was important, in addition to the internal acceptance of research in the academic community. Dunning stated in 1989: “… the effectiveness of our scholastic efforts to study and teach international business is entirely dependent on our capability to marshal and organise the necessary human and other assets so as to supply a range of end products which are acceptable to the academic community of which we are part, our paymasters, and the main purchasers of our products, viz, the business community” (Dunning 1989, p. 411). 20 years later, however, it is questionable whether we still have the business community, the management practice in mind, at least when doing and publishing research. Take, for instance, the following statement by Arie Lewin, at that time editor of the Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS) which is for many of us the leading journal of the field.[2] Lewin stated clearly: "… the editorial policy does not require or expect that papers published in JIBS be judged by their relevance to the practice of management … The world of practice has its own processes for determining what management research in general and IB research specifically is of relevance to management" (Lewin 2004, p. 80). At several conferences, for instance at the Annual Conference on Corporate Strategy in Berlin, Lewin repeated his conviction and stressed that relevance to practice is irrelevant to JIBS… Are you shocked by Lewin's statement? Probably not… If you read JIBS you will indeed agree or have to agree that Lewin is right. JIBS articles, published in recent years, have mostly not been written with relevance in mind. This brings me now to the second part of my presentation: Where is further empirical evidence for the relevance gap in IB research?

2 Evidence for the Relevance Gap in International Business Research

My colleague Michael-Jörg Oesterle found some empirical evidence for a relevance gap in IB research. He conducted a study in which he asked managers and consultants about the awareness, frequency of reading and evaluation of IB research. The sample consisted of 124 managers of big German MNCs and 29 German consultants.[3] What are the key messages that are relevant in our context? First, do top managers and consultants know our journals? The journals on which I present data are the Academy of Management Journal (AMJ), Academy of Management Review (AMR), Harvard Business Review (HBR), Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS), Long Range Planning (LRP), Management International Review (MIR), Sloan Management Review (SMR), and Strategic Management Journal (SMJ).[4] The data are depicted in Figure 1.

It is no surprise that most consultants and managers know HBR. 97% of the consultants and 81% of the managers are aware of its existence. However, only 31%

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[2] JIBS is generally ranked very well within the journals in the IB area (see Schrader/Hennig-Thurau 2008, Harzing 2009, Schmid/Oesterle 2009, pp. 6-8).

[3] The detailed results of this study can be found in Oesterle (2006), Oesterle/Laudien (2007), and Oesterle/Schmid (2009).

[4] For a ranking of journals in the field of IB, see the study by DuBois/Reeb (2000).

of the German consultants are familiar with our main IB journal, JIBS. Figures are even worse for the other IB journal included in the survey, MIR. Only 17% of German consultants have heard of MIR before, although MIR is published by Gabler, a well-known German publisher! And when it comes to managers, only 11% or 12% respectively know JIBS or MIR.

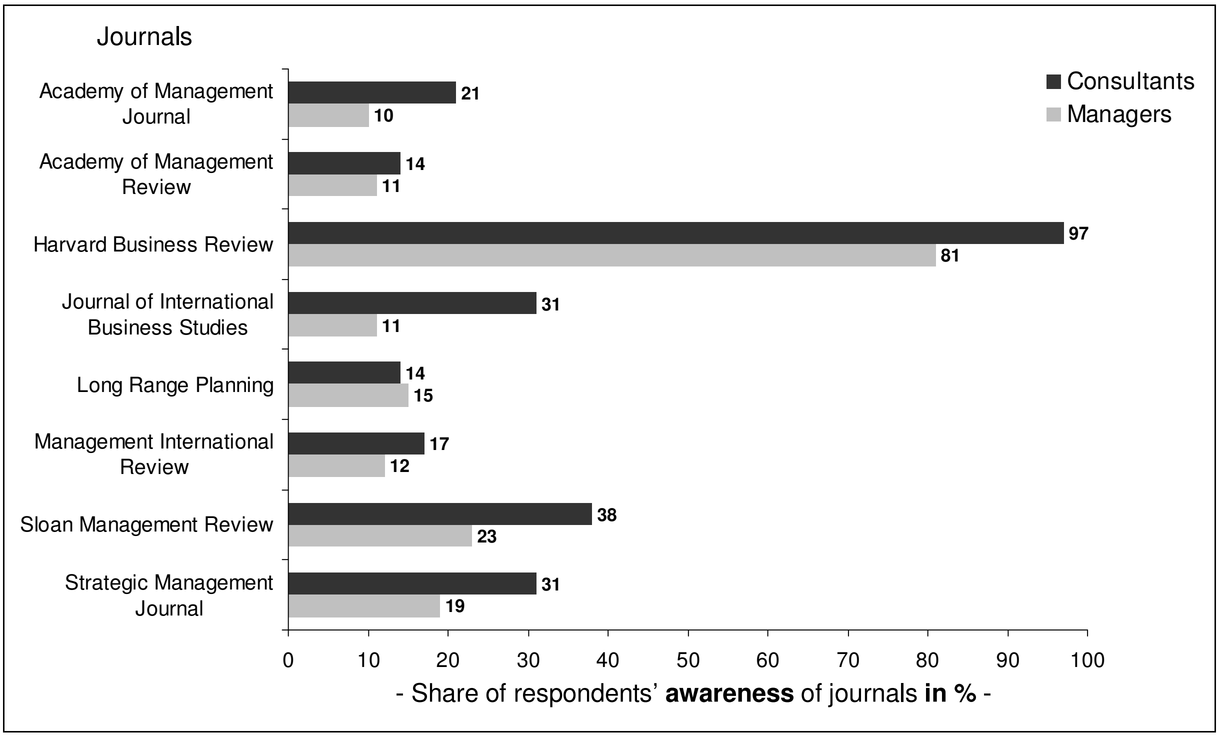

Figure 1: Top managers' and consultants' awareness of journals in the field of International Business

Source: Oesterle (2006), p. 317, Oesterle/Laudien (2007), pp. 48, 50, Oesterle/ Schmid (2009), pp. 187, 189.

Being aware of the existence of a journal is one thing – reading is another. Therefore, consultants and top managers were also asked which journals they read. Thereby, they were invited to specify the frequency of consulting the journals. They indicated whether they never, rarely, occasionally, regularly or always study a particular journal or if they have even subscribed to it. As shown in Figure 2, the results for all journals decrease (compared to the results in Figure 1). Especially managers do not read what we publish – with the exception of HBR. At least 72% of the consultants and 52% of the managers study this journal. However, none of the consultants glances at MIR and only 4% of the German managers do so! Values for other journals are not much more promising either. Apart from HBR, JIBS and SMJ are the journals that are most read by managers and consultants. While both are considered by 17% of the consultants, only 7% of the managers read SMJ and 4% of them read JIBS.

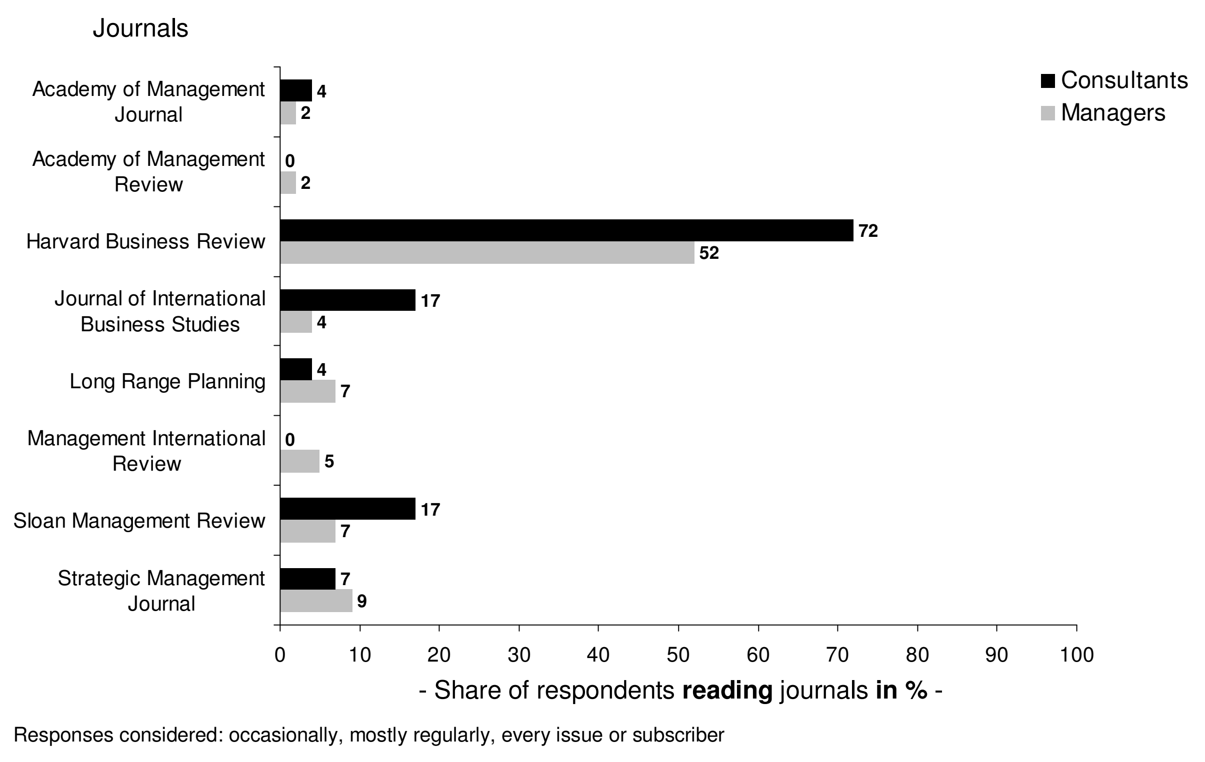

Figure 2: Reading frequency of leading journals by top managers and consultants

Source: Oesterle (2006), p. 318, Oesterle/Laudien (2007), pp. 49, 51, Oesterle/ Schmid (2009), pp. 188, 190.

And there is still another question: do consultants and managers find our publications useful? This question was also answered by the respondents, and the results are displayed in Figure 3. Well, the data clearly shows that consultants and managers do not find our journal publications helpful. HBR is the journal that includes the most utile publications in the opinion of consultants (52%) and managers (42%). For all the other journals that are listed in Figure 3, values are lower than 15%. Publications in AMJ, AMR, and MIR are considered valuable by none of the consultants and by very few managers.

At least in the perception of consultants and managers, our publications are not really useful. I do not want to judge whether consultants and managers are (completely) right with their perceptions, but, when interpreting the results, we have to accept that the respondents are (part of) the business community which Dunning (1989) referred to.

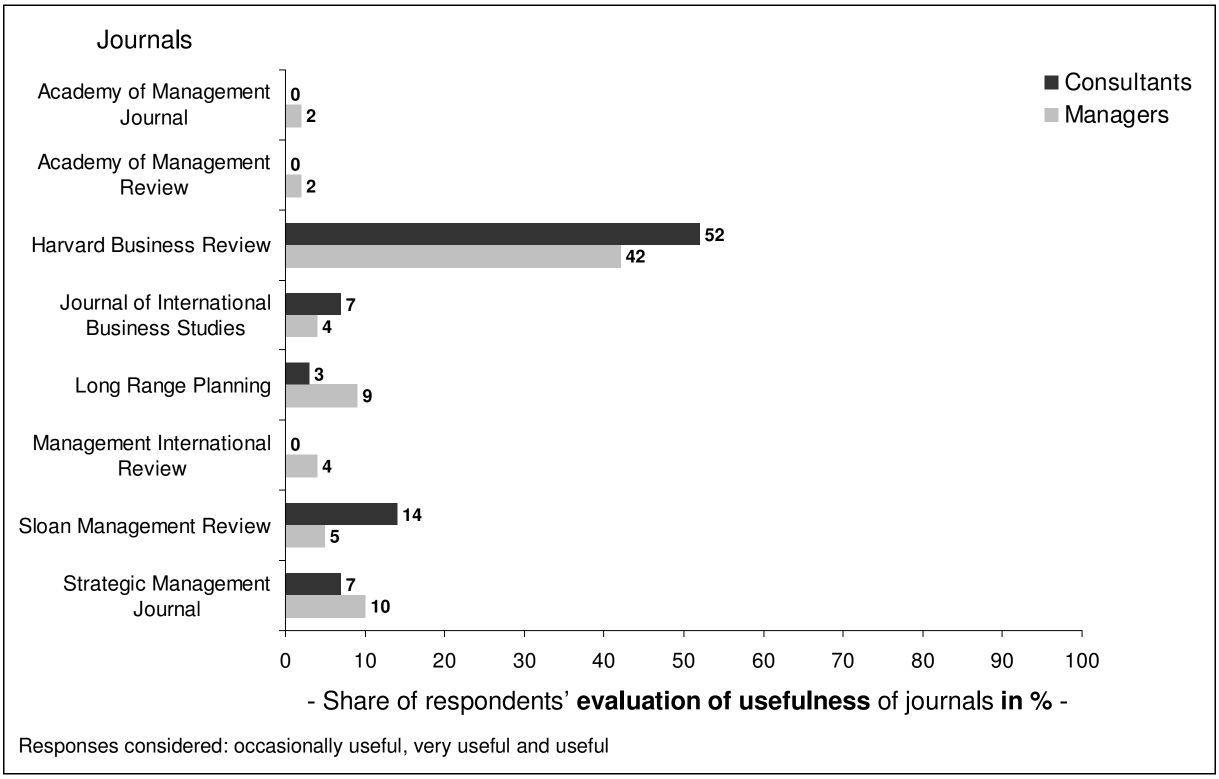

Figure 3: Usefulness of journals as evaluated by top managers and consultants
Source: Oesterle (2006), p. 318, Oesterle/Laudien (2007), pp. 49, 51, Oesterle/ Schmid (2009), pp. 188, 190.

So, what can we conclude when summarizing the findings on JIBS and MIR, the two most important journals in our field? Many managers and consultants do not know our research output outlets. If they know them, they rarely read the articles published in them. And even if they read the articles, they do not find them useful. The results are summarized in Figure 4. In the figure, the non-weighted averages of the values for JIBS and MIR are depicted. The potential reasons for these results will be discussed in the following section.

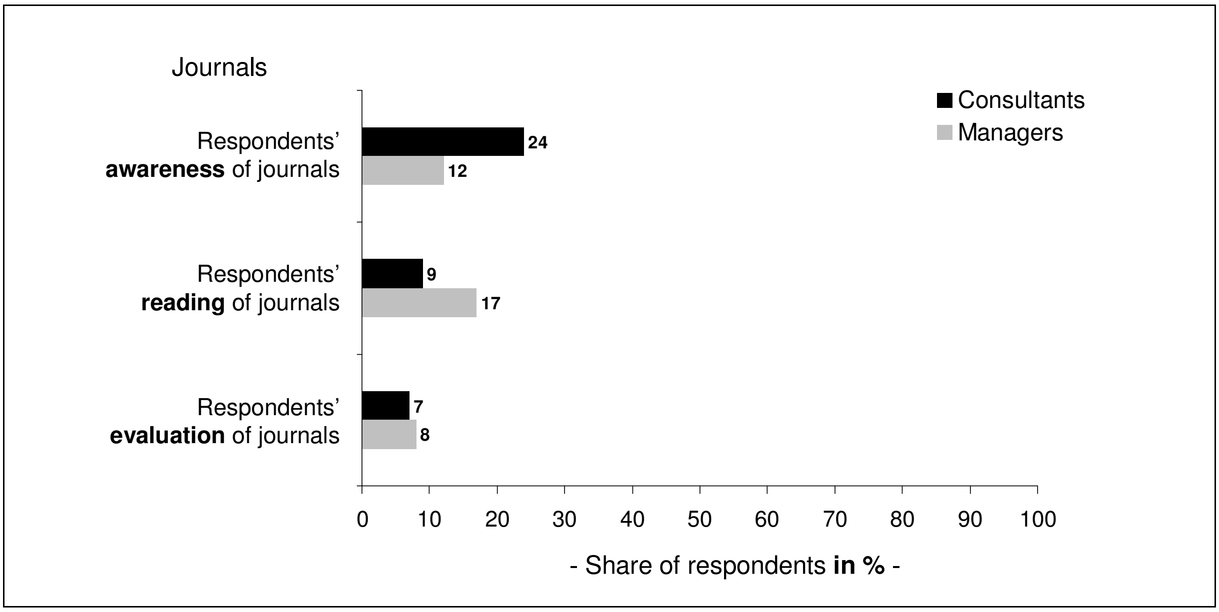

Figure 4: Comparison of managers' and consultants' awareness of, reading, and evaluation of JIBS and MIR

Source: Oesterle (2006), pp. 317-318, Oesterle/Laudien (2007), pp. 48-51, Oesterle/Schmid (2009), pp. 187-188, 190.

3 Reasons for the Relevance Gap in International Business Research

Some of the reasons that will be discussed in this section are the result of statements by practitioners. For a book entitled "Internationales Management – Forschung, Lehre, Praxis" ("International Management – Research, Teaching, Practice"; Oesterle/Schmid 2009, Eds.) Michael Oesterle and myself, we invited managers and consultants to contribute articles. In these articles, managers and consultants could articulate the problems of IB research they identify and could provide us with some suggestions.[5] The following nine issues are partially the outcome of the statements by practitioners, partially the outcome of my own experience and analysis:[6]

- **Content:** We as academics often do not choose topics that are relevant to management practice. Instead, we write about subjects that we are interested in

5 For instance, the articles in the volume include reflections on the development of international business in firms (Mattern/Lehnen/Weigang 2009, Rigaudeau 2009, Schwenker 2009), international business activities of medium-sized enterprises (Harting 2009, Hoedemaker 2009), and consulting firms (Perlitz/Schrank/Amitai 2009).

6 Some of the arguments are also linked to what I labelled "Americanization" in business and management research some time ago (Schmid 2003).

or that might get published in IB journals. We usually do not select topics because these play an important role for practitioners.

- **Timeframe:** In our research we mainly look at the past. We investigate what has already happened in MNCs. However, practitioners are much more concerned about the present and the future of MNCs.
- **Objectives:** In our studies we emphasize descriptions and explanations of MNCs or MNC-related phenomena. Descriptions and explanations are usually not what practitioners are looking for in the end. Practitioners are rather interested in (sound) recommendations.
- **Focus:** Managers often ask for "big pictures". In contrast, we in academia often have a narrow focus. We are interested in very specific questions, indeed in very detailed questions on and about MNCs without, however, putting these questions (and the answers to these questions) in a wider context.[7]
- **Preference for one type of publication:** Many of us focus on purely academic A- and B-journals. However, often these journals – sometimes even deliberately – ignore relevance. This became clear in the quote by Lewin, the former editor of JIBS, which I introduced before (Lewin 2004, p. 80).
- **Ignorance towards various other types of publication:** Contributions in practitioner journals, volumes, newspapers, well-written textbooks etc. would be sought by managers, but they are not (anymore) valued by the academic community. This issue is related to institutional pressure to choose the appropriate publication outlet.[8]
- **Priority on methodology:** Nowadays, many of us often place (or seem or pretend to place) a higher emphasis on methodology than on content. This can also be observed in the papers that are published in IB journals of high reputation. Some of them are (or seem to be) rigorous in terms of methodology (but not in terms of contents).

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7 In this context the problem is not that we choose a narrow focus for single research pieces or that we advise doctoral students to have a narrow focus in their research. The problem rather lies in the fact that all the studies with a narrow focus combined usually do not result in a big picture. In general, our studies cannot be put together like the pieces of a puzzle. The more you do critical literature reviews and meta-analyses, the more you see that various "narrow studies" are not compatible with each other. See, for instance, in the context of IB theories Kutschker/Schmid (2008), pp. 371-374.

8 In yesterday's speech to the doctoral students, Pervez Ghauri reminded us of an old rule: "Publish or perish." But today's pressure often is: "Publish in A-journals – or perhaps B-journals – or perish" (Oesterle/Laudien 2007, p. 44, Schmid/Oesterle 2009, pp. 20-21). However, there will be a problem if, for instance, most or nearly all future textbooks are not written by university researchers anymore, but by teachers or practitioners.

- **Readability:** Many of our IB journal articles are simply not understandable to practitioners. This may have links to ways of presenting our research, but also links to the knowledge of potential readers and their familiarity with concepts and methodology.[9]
- **Link to teaching:** Our IB teaching gets more and more disconnected from research, and hence, we even do not have an indirect transfer via students in undergraduate or in graduate programmes or via managers in executive education programmes.[10]

If we are neither reaching managers and consultants nor using our research for teaching this is and will be highly problematic. So what could be done to bridge the relevance gap?

4 Suggestions for Bridging the Relevance Gap in International Business Research

Caring about relevance has several consequences for research:

- We need to define research questions that are linked to questions which MNCs, their top managers, their subsidiary managers or their stakeholders have and which they like or need to have answered (e.g., Oesterle/Schmid 2009, pp. 191-192).
- We should set research objectives that are oriented towards the current and future management of the MNC. So far, we focus too much on studying past

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[9] First, some practitioners might not be familiar with the conceptual backgrounds that our articles are based on. This may make it difficult for them to fully understand not only conceptual publications but also empirical papers. For instance, managers and consultants might not understand why particular hypotheses were drawn or how constructs were operationalized. Above that, they might not be able to evaluate the importance of empirical results for refining theories. Second, quantitative empirical research has become very sophisticated. In some journals, one of the main criteria for accepting an article for publication is a complex method. If practitioners (and sometimes even we as researchers) do not understand the method that is employed in the empirical study, we cannot evaluate the quality of the empirical study. Third, some of us have a rather difficult way to express ourselves in our publications. While we as researchers may be used to decipher complicated sentences, practitioners might simply not have the time, the patience, and the willingness to do so.

[10] Only 11.9% of IB professors in Germany, Austria and Switzerland are of the opinion that their current IB teaching considers sufficiently IB research. Why do they think so? 57.9% say: Relevance of research is missing (Eckert 2009, pp. 304-306; for a discussion of the (potential) role of IB research in executive education see Ruigrok 2009).

business activities, which does not help us in providing recommendations concerning the future.

- We have to closely interact with practitioners when carrying out research. Thereby, we need to accept the complex nature of the MNC and we need to respect this complexity in our research process and research methodology and methods.[11]
- In addition, we need to negotiate a common language between research and management practice. For instance, it is problematic to carry out and to publish IB research that uses terms which are not known or not used in practice.[12]
- Traditionally, in IB research, like in many other areas of business research, we search mainly for averages, laws and rules. While finding laws and rules is a typical ambition of natural science, it is not the only objective for social sciences.[13] Anyway, we should be careful when it comes to the usefulness of laws and rules. Sometimes, the most successful firms are those that break the laws and rules. Thus, it would be appropriate to look for anomalies instead of laws and rules (e.g., Kutschker/Bäurle/Schmid 1997, pp. 9-10, Andriani/McKelvey 2007).
- Furthermore, we must use research methods which are appropriate to the research questions in IB. This means, first of all, that questions should determine the methodology chosen and not methodologies should determine the questions we ask (see Kutschker/Bäurle/Schmid 1997, pp. 4-5). But appropriateness also means that we should consider the specific challenges of international and intercultural research, such as questions of equivalence (Bauer 1989, Poortinga 1989, Hult et al. 2008).
- Moreover, we should publish our IB research not only in A- or B-journals, but also in other outlets – and in a way that practitioners and students understand our research more easily. Textbooks or articles in journals targeted at pracitioners and students may help to reach this objective (e.g., Oesterle/Schmid 2009, pp. 191-192).

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11 The complexity of MNCs is not reflected by research that is based on aggregate level data. For instance, we cannot understand acquisitions and greenfields by looking at Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) data on an aggregate level. Instead, we have to look at decisions and actions of MNCs leading to FDI if we want to know more about MNCs.

12 For instance, in the field of subsidiary roles, academics often use notions and terms that are not at all known by practice. This is true whether we take the subsidiary roles by Bartlett and Ghoshal (1986, 2002), by Gupta and Govindarajan (1991, 1994) or by many other scholars (Schmid/ Bäurle/Kutschker 1998, Schmid/Kutschker 2003). So if we want to obtain meaningful results, we first have to find a common understanding.

13 It is not necessary to explain in detail why IB (and even more International Management) is part of Social Sciences. See for instance Schmid (1996, pp. 14-15) and Schmid/Oesterle (2009, p. 15).

- In our research, we need to accompany MNCs for some time in order to identify factors that make them more successful. This way we can also evaluate whether our (previous) recommendations to managers were or are helpful. Action research (Greenwook/Levin 2005), for instance, can stimulate the IB field with respect to this challenge (Welch et al. 2002, p. 624).

The list that I presented is certainly not exhaustive, but it definitely has consequences for communication and interaction with management practice. I will further develop questions of communication and interaction with practice in the final section of my presentation, the conclusion.

5 Conclusion

So what do I argue for? We should aim for both high academic rigor and high practical relevance of our research, as depicted in Figure 5. As shown, most managers and consultants would say that our current research in the IB field is “l’art pour l’art” research. They think it is of high rigor but low relevance, at least the research published in major journals. By the way those managers (or other observers) who are experts in mathematics and statistics can sometimes realize that in IB research we are not even as rigorous as we pretend to be… (for a critical discussion of the methodologies applied in A- and B-journal articles see Buckley/Chapman 1996, pp. 240-243, Yang/Wang/Su 2006). In this respect, some practitioners and critical observers could even state that we are an “artificial” science. We pretend to be rigorous, but are in fact far from fulfilling the demand to be in fact rigorous. For this reason – and also for other reasons – we score low on the dimension of practical relevance. Some other practitioners would interpret us to do rather “consulting-type” of research. They see some relevance in our research even if there is no or little rigor. This, however, is certainly also a difficult positioning, because many reasons can be brought why professional consultants have an advantage over academics when providing traditional consulting services. So my point is that we need more IB research which is of both high relevance and high rigor. Well, to be realistic, we sometimes have to find a compromise which means that coupling highest rigor and highest relevance at the same time would rather be a vision (or even a utopia). However, we could at least try to be as high as possible in both dimensions.

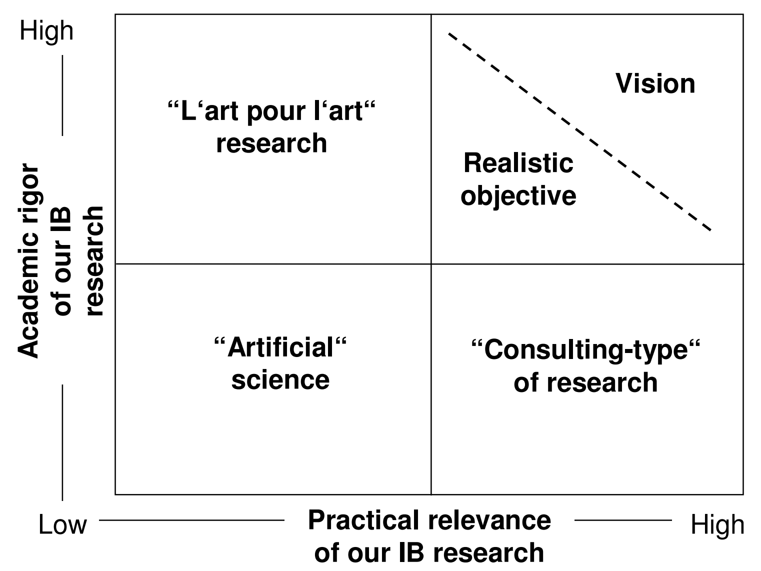

Figure 5: Relevance and rigor in IB research
Source: Adapted from Anderson/Herriot/Hodgkinson (2001), p. 394.

Research in the IB field should not only be rigorous and relevant. Active and direct communication and cooperation between academics and practitioners (Schmid/ Oesterle 2009, p. 23) also seem to be crucial. Regarding communication and cooperation, two dimensions can be discussed as depicted in Figure 6: indirect versus direct communication and coordination and passive versus active communication and cooperation. Not all, but most of our current journal publishing, for instance in JIBS, uses indirect and passive communication and coordination. It is my conviction that we should move in both dimensions and become more active and communicate more directly. For instance, we can be more active by teaching undergraduate and graduate students the results of our research. We should also communicate and cooperate more directly with practitioners and use this as an input for our research, for instance by carefully listening to MNC managers. When combining direct and active communication, not only input from management practice should be focused on. We also need to consider the output of our research in teaching (Holtbrügge/Haussmann 2009, pp. 324-327) so that next time managers and consultants are asked about the usefulness of our publications, we achieve better results than the ones revealed by the above-mentioned study.

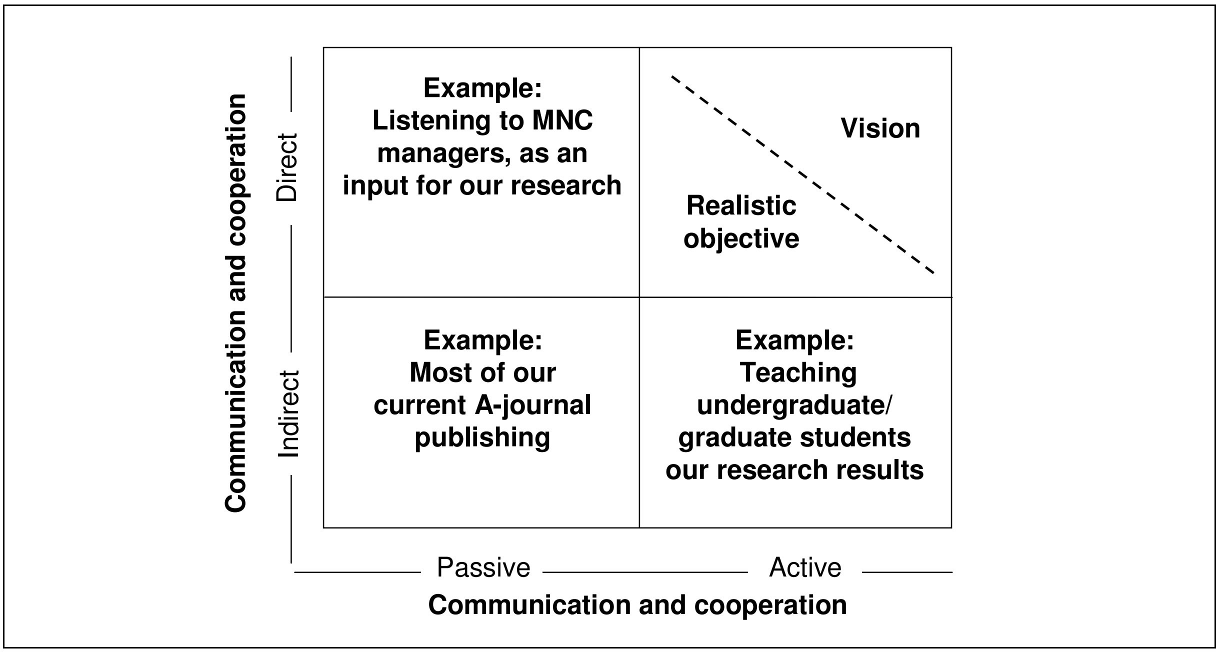

Figure 6: Communication and cooperation between researchers and practitioners in IB research

Source: Adapted from Oesterle/Schmid (2009), p. 181.

Well, communication and cooperation is not one way. We also need the openness of practitioners to work actively with us as academics (Meckl 2009, pp. 381-382). We should contribute our part as academics since not considering relevance could one day be very dangerous.[14]

[14] We might not only have difficulty in getting funding for our research projects and our business schools (Starkey/Madan 2001, p. S6). Practitioners might also be less and less willing to take part in our empirical studies. Generally, it might be questioned whether research in the field of IB has a right to exist without (much) use for management practice. Research should not be an end in itself (Oesterle/Schmid 2009, pp. 182-183).

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