



From What We Know to How We Use It: Five Principles for Turning Entrepreneurship Research into Practitioner Action Guidelines

**Kevin Hindle, Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship,
Swinburne University of Technology**

**Robert B. Anderson, *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship*,
University of Regina**

Brian Gibson, Small Enterprise Research, University of Newcastle

ABSTRACT. This paper introduces a “third stream” of publication, that will appear in the *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship (JSBE)*, the journal of the Canadian Council for Small Business and Entrepreneurship/Conseil Canadien des PME et de l'entrepreneuriat (CCSBE/CCPME), and in *Small Enterprise Research (SER)*, the journal of the Small Enterprise Association of Australia and New Zealand (SEAANZ).

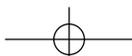
In this stream-founding paper it is argued that entrepreneurship researchers, currently, do not place sufficient emphasis on making their research findings relevant to entrepreneurs and their advisors, educators and those working in government on policy and programs. The paper then presents five general principles for turning entrepreneurship research findings into practical action guidelines for practitioners. The piece ends with a description of a new section to appear in both *JSBE* and *SER* beginning with this issue.

SOMMAIRE. Cet article présente un “troisième courant” de publication, qui va paraître dans le *Journal des petites et moyennes entreprises et de l'entrepreneuriat (JSBE)*, le journal du Conseil canadien des PME et de l'entrepreneuriat/Canadian Council for Small Business and Entrepreneurship, et dans *Small Enterprise Research (SER)*, le journal de l'Association des petites entreprises d'Australie et de Nouvelle-Zélande (SEAANZ).

Dans le but d'établir un nouveau courant, nous raisonnons qu'à l'heure actuelle les chercheurs en entrepreneuriat ne s'emploient pas assez à rendre les résultats de leur recherche pertinents pour les entrepreneurs et leurs conseillers, ainsi que pour les éducateurs et les fonctionnaires impliqués dans les statuts et les programmes. Cet article présente donc cinq principes généraux pour transformer les résultats de la recherche en directives d'action pour les praticiens. Nous concluons avec la description d'une nouvelle section qui, à compter de ce numéro, paraîtra à la fois dans *JSBE* et *SER*.

Introduction

This and the companion paper that follows owe their existence to a paper presented by Kevin Hindle at the AGSE Regional Entrepreneurship and Innovation Research Exchange in February 2004. In his paper, Hindle (2004) argued passionately that entrepreneurship researchers must ensure that the best of their hard-won wisdom does not find its beginning motivation and final resting place in the pages of arcane journals that practitioners never read. He suggested that if every entrepreneurship researcher committed, say once every two years, to write a “how



to" article it would significantly enhance the status of the research community in the eyes of practising entrepreneurs and those who provide support and services to them.

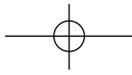
The argument was well-received, particularly by two people in the audience, Robert Anderson, the managing editor of the *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship*, the journal of the Canadian Council for Small Business and Entrepreneurship/Conseil Canadien des PME et de l'entrepreneuriat (CCSBE/CCPME), and Brian Gibson, the editor of *Small Enterprise Research*, the journal of the Small Enterprise Association of Australia and New Zealand (SEAANZ). For both editors, Hindle's argument was a familiar one. The membership of CCSBE/CCPME and SEAANZ consists of academic researchers, educators, government employees in both policy and program areas, and those offering support and services to entrepreneurs and the managers of small enterprises. In both organizations, there is a general consensus that the needs of "academics" are well met, but not so the needs of the non-academic constituents.

We are not alone in holding these views. The year 2004 may come to be remembered in many academic forums as a year characterised by widespread desire to make management research more relevant to practising managers. For instance, the annual meeting of the Academy of Management (taking place in New Orleans in August 2004 and embracing over 2,000 papers accepted for the refereed stream of presentations) has as its theme: "Creating Actionable Knowledge." In supporting the importance of the theme, the Program Chair and Program Coordinator had this to say (Cummings and Jones, 2004, p. 1):

The Academy of Management is dedicated to creating and disseminating knowledge about management and organizations. A key part of this mission requires that our science-based knowledge be relevant, responsible and make a valuable contribution to society and its institutions. To accomplish this, our knowledge must be actionable. It must transcend purely scientific concerns and enable organizational members to make informed choices about important practical problems and to implement solutions to them effectively.

Academy members have done a credible job of creating knowledge that is scientifically sound and rigorous. Indeed, we have generated an impressive body of management/organization theory and findings. We have been far less successful, however, in making sure that our knowledge is applied.

This article is an attempt, by the editors of *JSBE* and *SER*, to heed and lead the clarion call for application. The two journals are thousands of miles apart in geography yet totally of one mind in sharing the Academy of Management's desire to go beyond the rhetoric of relevance and actually commit to the production of material which managers will find assimilable and useful. It is fair to say that both journals have hitherto been seen as outlets for academic research rather than as a source of useful information for practitioners. Both editors and their parent organizations are looking for ways to increase the value of the journals outside the academic segment of their organizations without weakening the academic role of the journals. A section of the journal structured around the argument Hindle made in his challenging conference paper struck both editors as a useful way of accomplishing this need for added value.



It is our view that all theory—even the “purest”—can be made ‘theory for practice’s sake’ because the best current theory in any given field is simply the best explanation of the known facts. And good explanations are intrinsically useful. For this task, we believe that scholars may find it beneficial to have a framework for focusing their efforts. So—as a measure intended to be indicative rather than prescriptive—we offer an initial framework consisting of five principles, which we argue, can be used to facilitate the conversion of established entrepreneurship research findings into action guidelines that practitioners can use. We make no pretence that the framework is either ideal or comprehensive.

Entrepreneurship’s Urgent Need

Someone once described the process of publishing double-blind, refereed, academic journal articles as “the long wait for yesterday’s insights.” When the insights finally arrive, the required method of expressing them often results in publications that non-academics find unreadable. The focus and emphasis in academic work—basically a quest for falsifiable truth—often seems to contrast with the urgencies of a business-oriented audience. Practitioners are interested in output not process, and in utility through being able to apply knowledge presented in a form that contributes to efficiency and profitability. This perspective seems to be a long way from scholastic altruism. However, if the communication gap between scholarly publishing criteria and practitioners’ information needs *could* be transcended, the benefits to both parties would be substantial. For practitioners, the insights from well-conducted research, if presented appropriately, are far more likely to have commercial and operational value than many a “guru” remedy. Populist, under-researched and over-opinionated recommendations tend to be simplistic prescriptions that lack both theoretical rigor and empirical justification. Scholars who are committed to research based on the best traditions of independent scientific inquiry, tend to scorn both the guru’s crudity and the practitioner’s credulity. But we, as management researchers generally and entrepreneurship researchers particularly, often fail to offer anything in its place other than the invitation for lay people to plough laboriously into our arcane journals. This invitation is not attractive and not accepted. The hiatus between researcher and practitioner grows wider.

For scholars there is a crass but urgent motive for redressing this situation. If practitioners in the “real world” completely lose faith with the relevance of our research, it may become impossible to conduct any. There will be no incentives for entrepreneurs and their firms to provide access to data for inquiries that are deemed to have no practical value. It is our view that all theory—even the “purest”—can be made “theory for practice’s sake” because the best current theory in any given field is simply the best explanation of the known facts. And good explanations are intrinsically useful.

In entrepreneurship and small enterprise management, as in most fields of human endeavour, there is a perennial need to try to make research findings readable by and useful to practitioners. Unfortunately, for academics, there is very little incentive to do so because academic journals do not look kindly upon articles seeking to explain or popularise existing research for a lay audience, rather than creating new insights for an academic audience. So, the urgent need is seldom fulfilled. The first result is that research of potentially high utility to practitioners simply does not reach them. The second result is that practitioners come to regard

academic research as irrelevant when it is not. The *JSBE* and *SBE* want to change this and, given the composition of the membership of their respective owners, the journals are well-positioned to do so.

It is our belief that, of all disciplines, it is academic entrepreneurship that ought to be at the forefront of efforts to turn research results into tools that practitioners can use. The more “applied” (as distinct from “pure”) a research field is, the more it behoves its scholars to make their work accessible to and usable by practitioners. There is no field more fundamentally “applied” in its nature than entrepreneurship. It is about people who “make things happen.” Scholars who fail to “help the happening” are failing in their duty. The question is, how? The material that follows answers this by providing principles which can be used to turn a complex body of entrepreneurship research findings into a useful tools for practicing entrepreneurs. An example of the application of these principles follows in the accompanying paper—the first of what we hope will be many attempts to put the principles into practice.

Five General Principles for Converting Research Findings into Action Guidelines

It is our contention that there are five general principles that can be useful in turning entrepreneurship research findings into practical action guidelines for practitioners.

1. Aggregate findings into as few key concepts as possible

As management scholars we should know that many managers have significant pressure on their time and that their work is characterised by “brevity, fragmentation, and oral communication” (Mintzberg, 1989, p. 14). The sometimes complex discussions of interrelationships favoured by academics are not amenable to assimilation in such an environment. The KISS principle of sales management might usefully be invoked—keep it simple scholar.

2. Turn key concepts from words into pictures

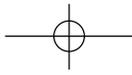
When producing action guidelines for practitioners to follow, a picture really is worth a thousand words. This is a clear extension of the first principle that recognises the importance of brevity without loss of the big picture. Well-constructed graphical representation of key concepts and relationships facilitate this principle.

3. Link key process instructions directly to key concepts

Most action process guidelines are likely to come in the form of specific instructions, but the fundamental point is to tie process instructions directly to key research concepts. This also builds on the first two principles. Key research concepts are the building blocks of good graphical representation. They are not useful if they don’t generate clear linkages to the “what now” and “how to” questions that practitioners ask.

4. Provide application scenarios that are indicative but not prescriptive

Brief contextual scenarios are very helpful in getting recipients to “see the light”: to give that vital “Ah ha! I see!” response indicating that they can envisage just how action recommendations might be made applicable to their particular circumstances. The trick is to sketch as *few* scenarios in as *little* detail as is necessary to convey the *flavour* of application possibilities without trying to provide a full meal



for every palette. You want to stimulate readers' imaginative capacity to fill in the relevant details for themselves.

5. Keep guidelines broad, allowing room for provision of detail dependent upon resources and circumstances

"Guidelines" is a key word. When academics have the temerity to offer practical advice to entrepreneurs and their advisors we should tread warily and not try to cover all of the territory in massive detail. The task is to indicate broad possibilities: not to build detailed consulting tools. Using an analogy from the construction industry, our concept of "guidelines" is closer to the architect's first sketch of a building than to the detailed set of blueprints handed to a builder.

Conclusion

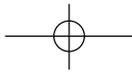
We hope that this paper indicates both the possibility and the value of turning the findings of entrepreneurship research into action guidelines that can help practitioners improve performance. For researchers who "know their stuff" it will not be difficult to apply the five recommended general principles—or a superior regime of their own devising—to the production of a wide range of potentially useful operational tools. The difficulty is not doing it: it is in seeing the merit of doing it.

Both the *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship (JSBE)* and *Small Enterprise Research (SER)* see the merits. Such articles will be of real interest to the members of the Canadian Council for Small Business and Entrepreneurship/Conseil canadien des PME et de l'entrepreneuriat and the Small Enterprise Association of Australia and New Zealand, the respective owners of the journals, as well as to other subscribers and readers. Both journals make the commitment to add a vital 'third stream' to their agendas. We will not lessen our search for and publication of conceptual and empirical research of the highest calibre. We will add a dimension to our journals by seeking out and providing refereed publication to papers whose mission is to convert research findings into material directly useful to practitioners. We urge the scholarly community to provide us with excellent articles for the third stream.

Every profession has duties as well as rewards. Entrepreneurship and small enterprise researchers must ensure that the best of their hard-won wisdom does not find its beginning motivation and final resting place in the pages of arcane journals that practitioners never read. The *JSBE* and *SER* are well-positioned to see that this does not happen. Our readership is not limited to academics; the membership of the parent organizations consists equally of practitioners—people working in government on policy and programs, educators at all levels, those working in entrepreneurship and small business support centres, and so on. We have an opportunity and an obligation to provide these practitioners with *useful* information.

To seize this opportunity the two journals in partnership will begin publishing articles by academics who seek to render practicality from the insights of academic research. To ensure that papers in the new third stream offer sufficient value to readers and reflect best practices and sound insights from theory, in addition to review by a joint editorial board committee from *JSBE* and *SER*, the articles will be subject to double-blind peer review by at least two external reviewers, one a practitioner and the other an academic. Articles that meet the dual test of appropriate academic rigor and practical usefulness will be published simultaneously in the two journals.





This is not a one way street. Practitioners have much to offer academics. Practice can and should inform theory. We will also solicit and publish articles by practitioners intended to inform other practitioners and academics about the best of what is happening "in the field." A third stream of publishing has begun. We cordially invite you to participate.

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Contact Information

For further information on this article, contact Robert B. Anderson, University of Regina, Brian Gibson, University of Newcastle, or Kevin Hindle, Swinburne University of Technology.

Email:

Robert.anderson@uregina.ca

Brian.Gibson@newcastle.edu.au

khindle@swin.edu.au

