

It is interesting to note that during a similar time frame, other fields of study in business were evolving in different directions. The disciplines of marketing, organizational behavior, strategic management, and later, information systems, were patterned more after the tradition of research and learning in social sciences. Knowledge was being built on the basis of empirical evidence that was collected from the field. Their methodologies were centered on case studies, executive surveys, and experimental analysis. Despite several problems that are inherently present in these methodologies, they were intrinsically closer to the source of the real world problems than the discipline of operations management.

As an applied science, we as POM researchers and teachers need to focus our efforts on real-world problems to a greater extent than what we have done in the past. This does not imply that our endeavors should take on the flavor of consulting projects that only look at narrow firm-specific problems with no generalizable content. Instead, our research and teaching must focus on creating and disseminating knowledge that has greater relevance. While there is a considerable degree of agreement within the field regarding this assertion, it is easier said than done.

What are some of the obstacles to achieving greater relevance in POM with respect to the efforts of the academic community? An obvious impediment, and perhaps the greatest one, is our inability to go beyond the confines of what we can do with the limited set of methodologies in which we have been trained. We find it almost impossible to model and neatly structure complex cross-functional problems that invariably occur at higher levels of the organization. Yet solving such problems are at the very core of what executives believe are the most critical and important issues currently facing US manufacturing (Malhotra et al., 1994). It is unfortunate that our functional-area-based view of the business world is different from the cross-functional processes based view that is being adopted by actual firms. We must be cognizant of this reality when attempting to define the direction in which we must progress.

It is obvious that a considerable investment of resources would be needed to shift or re-orient the direction in which we have travelled so far. We would have to

re-examine our methodologies, borrow some from related disciplines, and even create new ones in order to re-tool ourselves for a considerably different research and teaching agenda. In addition, we would have to interact more with actual firms to ensure that our problems are well-anchored in the real world. More uncertainty would be faced by researchers in such a scenario. Payoffs would be less clear, and gestational periods for research projects would be much longer. In addition, pedagogical materials would need to be revised and updated at a considerable cost to ensure that we actually teach our students the skills that are needed by the industry. Such large-scale changes will not take place miraculously, at least not without an appropriately revised set of incentive systems being put into place.

Based on these observations, I have outlined five major teaching and research related initiatives that we collectively need to take as a community of POM scholars. While the ensuing discussion provides my own perspectives, much more debate needs to take place in further defining and resolving the issues and challenges facing us as we collectively journey towards greater relevance.

#### **The development of empirical field data based research needs to accelerate, with a particular focus on higher level strategic decision making.**

This is needed to not only increase the relevance of our research, but also to ensure that it informs business practice even as we learn from it. It can take the form of survey research or well done case studies. Such case studies would be useful for teaching purposes, along with providing initial evidence from which theory building can occur. However, we definitely need to move away from the anecdotal evidence gathering stage and progress rapidly down the learning curve that has already been established by other social science disciplines. It goes without saying that such studies should be done more rigorously, because the methodology-related knowledge that provides the guidelines for conducting such research is already available.

#### **Related to the above issue is what must be done with traditional modeling methodologies.**

We could be in the danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water if a bias towards more field-based empirical research tends to discourage the efforts of those researchers who focus on traditional methods like simulation and mathematical modeling. After all, a significant proportion of our active scholars are still steeped in that tradition. What should be discouraged is a "technique in search of a problem" orientation. Building analytical or simulation models for the purpose of solving actual problems that have generalizability can be invaluable. But the modeling efforts need to be better meshed in with practice than what has traditionally been done. Doing so could provide the POM discipline with a distinct identity of its own, and clearly delineate it from operations research and other related disciplines from which it evolved in the first place.

#### **Internationalization of research agenda and teaching curriculum is in sore need of greater attention.**

We all understand the importance of global operations and formulation of strategies that transcend national boundaries. But what exactly is international POM? We currently do not have the appropriate frameworks or paradigms in the field around which the conventional knowledge and study of POM can be organized. Some work has been done in this direction for both teaching (e.g., Lawrence and Rosenblatt, 1992; Schmenner, 1995) and research (e.g., Klassen and Whybark, 1994). But obviously much more needs to be done. A comprehensive textbook that focuses on international POM issues and contrasts them with traditional POM issues would be a much welcome addition to the existing pedagogical material in the field.