It remains a mystery to me how answering a question for the unit digits of n in the expression $n=5^{x}+7^{y+3}$ in less than 100 seconds relates to a doctorate in management

The 16th century marked the end of medieval castles. The power of gunpowder turned their walls into paperboard and the rise of cities as the vibrant centres of society made rural castles irrelevant.

So, are we now seeing similar changes with regard to one of the last remaining medieval institutions: the universities?

The internet has fundamentally changed the ways we create and spread knowledge and has brought down former icons of academia such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Society as well as business needs constant innovation and learning, but will universities and academic research be the places to provide them? Or will people, and in particular managers, look for different ways to acquire knowledge and create new ideas – perhaps via the web – thereby bypassing universities?

After 12 years in management consulting and with many open and unsolved questions that I wanted to explore more deeply, I decided to return to academia for a PhD in management at a North American university.

My experiences so far have confirmed my decision. However, the deeper insights I have gained into how future professors are shaped have only posed another question: does this training add to additional knowledge needed in a modern society and business world or is it rather intended for medieval castles?

I began to realise that the divide between the world of research and the world of practitioners is greater than I thought – and the reasons why can be found on both sides.

First, let us take a look at the selection of PhD candidates.

One of the best-known entry hurdles is the GMAT, an academic aptitude test. The internet is full of advice and training materials on how to achieve high scores.

Castles in the sky
or more reality?

Wolfgang Lassl offers some thoughts on the relationship between business academia and managers

Yet, it still remains a mystery to me how answering a question for the unit digits of n in the expression $n=5^x + 7^{y+3}$ in less than 100 seconds relates to a doctorate in management.

Will someone who solves this question have a good understanding of management issues and the governance of organisations? Perhaps; perhaps not. Although business programmes choose candidates not exclusively on the basis of this test, they yet place great emphasis on it.

Most PhD candidates are young, in their late 20s or early 30s. Candidates with a few years professional experience seem to be a minority; candidates with more than ten years work experience are the exception.

PhD programme administrators tend to be cautious *vis-à-vis* professionals because they fear that professionals, after having tasted the sweetness of "real life", may find it hard to stand the rigor and academic solitude of a PhD. Worse, they may be unsuccessful dropouts who, in the absence of other choices, want to try the quieter academic life.

As a result, the majority of future professors of management (or one of its functions) may rarely have been significantly exposed to their object of inquiry.

A third-year PhD student in organisational studies confided to me that she has never seen an organisation from the inside. A lack of sense in his research was simply a logical consequence. And how he will teach and understand organisations successfully will remain difficult to understand.

This is not intended to question the capabilities of young PhD students – on the contrary. The issue here is rather the right balance: do we not need more people in research that have acquired

> **""**
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that specific knowledge that can only be acquired through time and experience, in particular for a practical science such as management? Are we not foregoing valuable resources for inspirations and new perspectives?

Furthermore: interdisciplinary research, the source of many innovations, seems to be more often a myth than reality. Instead, we see fragmentation and ever-increasing specialisation in research – contrary to the reality of practitioners' experiences, which are commonly interdisciplinary and multifaceted. This is further intensified by the fact that professors are assessed by the frequency with which they publish in top journals.

Since it is impossible for an individual to acquire knowledge in several different academic areas, remain updated and publish a significant amount of papers at the same time, the current system of rewarding academics necessarily leads to research silos.

For a PhD applicant this also implies that, apart from formal hurdles, in order to be successful it is highly critical to target very precisely the specific interests of the faculty overseeing the PhD programme. Candidates who have a topic in mind that is different from the current faculty's research interests are "not the norm" and face an "uphill battle" as one admissions officer phrased it.

We are creating intellectual monocultures where we should have a vibrant academic discussion between different and conflicting perspectives. Only this way can there be a stimulating environment for new ideas and innovation.

But, as indicated, the divide is also due to practitioners' attitudes. Researchers often run into resistance from organisations when they ask to carry out research within them. This is less due to business secrets than practitioners' unwillingness to undergo what many regard as an "inspection".

Many fear being told uncomfortable truths by someone who does not depend on them and cannot therefore be controlled (this distinguishes an academic from a consultant who has to secure his or her next project).

Yet, truly scientific advice might be very helpful; many organisations are still governed more by wishful thinking than by evidence. Research on what makes organisations function effectively is greatly needed.

We instead see managers turning to unsafe sources of advice.

These include:
- consultants selling their subjective experiences of a very limited number of similar projects (mostly with competitors) as "expertise" and who have seldom tried out their advice on themselves

- the huge mass of management literature published every year of the type "the 100 most important factors for success" (but can anyone really control the "100 important factors for success"?)

- anecdotal advice from retired managers (but do they really understand why they have been successful?) or from fellow top managers of other organisations (but who knows whether their advice really suits one's own organisation)
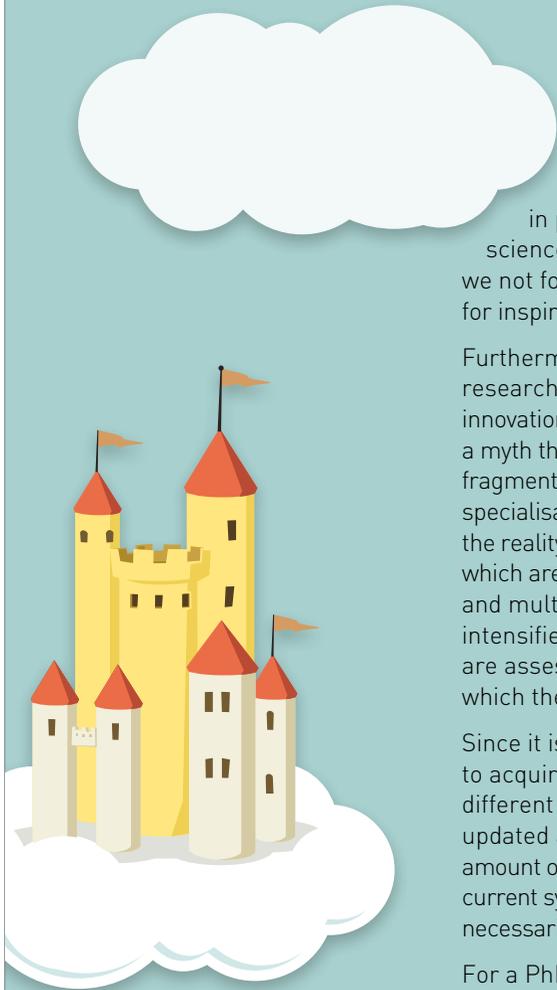
Summing up, the sources of independent, well-founded advice are limited and we still tend to manage organisations on the basis of (personal) faith and beliefs instead of knowledge and facts.

Research has tremendous value for practice. Our behaviour and decisions are governed by our views of the world or, in academic language, by our theories. To have a sound and tested theory on the management of organisations is therefore vital and decisive for success and failure.

"Nothing is more practical than a good theory". Good management theory provides guidance and spells out the otherwise hidden assumptions and interdependencies in daily management life. Furthermore, it helps to reflect on oneself, to adopt different perspectives and to see the blind spots. It makes sure that we have captured the essential questions in our decisions; it provides us with the map necessary for orientation.

We have to accept that both worlds have their own purposes and consequently their own way of functioning. Academia is embedded within the context of universities and as such has the obligation to address more fundamental questions and issues reaching beyond daily operational life. It must think about the "bigger picture".

Business research is also competing with other sciences in terms of methodology. It therefore needs the ability and freedom to address problems in a more formal, less accessible language.

However, we also have to incorporate the demand by practitioners to have their questions addressed and solved in reality (and not just in sometimes reductionist and abstract models). Research would gain a lot in credibility and acceptance if it provided more of this kind of solution.

What needs to be done to close the gap between academia and real life?

We have to bear in mind that changes will only happen if the system behind the individuals is changed.

So, on the side of the researchers we have to rethink how research agendas are defined. It seems that these are mostly set by researchers themselves. It would be worthwhile to involve practitioners more.

Practitioners should also be able to determine, together with academics, what topics are relevant for research from their perspective and they should also be integrated in the review of articles for publication.

This may also require a "cleansing" of academic language. Sometimes one is tempted to think that academic language is used as a tool to increase rather than to reduce the complexity (or simplicity?) of issues.

Another systemic factor that should be reviewed is the performance indicator of academics such as the number of publications. Do these indicators not lead to too much incremental research rather than ground-breaking new insights?

On the other hand, practitioners should be more willing to let researchers into their own organisations and engage and involve them more with their real "burning issues". The boundaries between academia and practitioners have to become more transparent.

Finally, we should devote more funds explicitly to interdisciplinary research. A multifaceted world requires interdisciplinary solutions as we see in the current financial crisis. This way, we could ensure that we will live in modern villas instead of old castles. **gf**

" What needs to be done to close the gap between academia and real life?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Wolfgang Lassl has worked for 12 years as a management consultant, university lecturer and top executive coach in the fields of strategy, organisation and leadership. He has worked for organisations in the private, public and non-profit sector. He has earned two master degrees from his studies in theology and philosophy in Vienna and Paris, and in international relations at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, USA, as a Fulbright scholar. He is currently preparing for his PhD in management on the design of organisations.