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Why We Do Irrelevant Research

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Smeltzer argues that there are significant differences between research issues business practitioners and business communication researchers view as important. Not surprisingly, these differences result in publications (at least in *JBC*) that appear to have little value to practitioners. Some academics, though, would argue that Smeltzer's concern is unwarranted. They strongly believe a university's job is to discover or produce new knowledge; consequently, the direction or content of academic research should not be heavily influenced by practitioners' needs. Although this idealized depiction of university research has great appeal, I believe this view is politically naive and, more importantly, negates the integrating role between knowledge and practice that professional schools (for example, business, law, and medicine) and academic areas such as business communication play. Like Smeltzer, I too believe we need to better connect the research we produce with practitioners' needs, and I offer three concrete reasons why this disconnect has occurred.

First, we know little about the kind of communication that goes on in organizations. Specifically, we lack basic knowledge about the writing, speaking, and listening tasks that first-level supervisors, mid-level managers, upper-level managers, and professional staff members perform. Furthermore, we have not examined the effects that different organizational structures and their resulting control systems have on these communication tasks. From a communications perspective, we have failed to do the rudimentary research that, say, Mintzberg and Kotter have done to understand the activities and roles of general

managers. Before we can do communication research that is of real value to business people, we need to stop conducting surveys, cut down on the number of empirical studies using students as respondents, and “get into” organizations so we know first-hand what communication tasks managers and staff professionals at various levels and in different structures perform.

Second, many of us know very little about management theory and practice. This lack of knowledge stems from our academic training (literature, composition, speech, or business education), our limited-in-scope consulting experience (primarily management development programs on relatively narrow communication topics such as clear writing or effective presentations), and our own organizational experiences—few of us have actually “managed” people in organizations. This lack of understanding about management often causes us to isolate communication from managerial issues, and, as a result, greatly oversimplifies complex factors that shape how managers think about communication. For example, when managers give associates feedback, their responses and strategies are implicitly linked with the organization’s control system and their own perceptions of motivation and leadership. To better understand the relationship between management and communication, we not only need to read the management literature but also use avenues such as professional internships, long-term consulting relationships, and even volunteer work to experience first-hand the close connection between management and communication.

Finally, a number of us work in academic departments that are uninterested in management issues or even hostile to business. The culture and reward systems of these environments promote research that may be of interest to other academics but is of little value to business practitioners. Unless one has tenure and is marketable, developing a managerial research orientation and producing research useful to practitioners would be professional suicide. Perhaps business communication should not be housed in these inhospitable environments.

I am not advocating that we abandon basic research. But if we do not confront the issues that contribute to our producing research that is of little use to practitioners, we may find ourselves irrelevant.