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## MANAGEMENT RESEARCH THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE: BROADENING THE MEANING OF IMPACT

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### ABSTRACT

*Management research is increasingly evaluated by its impact — yet the term is often narrowed to academic citations, journal rankings, or short-term economic effects. This paper argues for a broader, pluralistic conception of impact that recognizes multiple pathways through which management scholarship can make a difference: scholarly, practical (managerial), societal, policy, pedagogical, methodological, and ethical. We propose a conceptual framework and typology for classifying impact; outline theoretical foundations that link research aims, design choices and dissemination strategies to different impact types; and present a mixed-methods research agenda and measurement toolkit for assessing broader impact. We illustrate how this framework can reshape research design, incentives, and evaluation at the individual and institutional levels. Finally, we discuss implications for scholars, editors, funders, and universities and identify limitations and future research directions.*

**KEYWORDS:** *research impact, management research, research evaluation, knowledge mobilization, societal relevance, research methodology*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the role and responsibilities of academic research have become the subject of vigorous debate across disciplines. In management studies, as in the broader social sciences, scholars face mounting expectations to demonstrate that their work yields impact beyond the confines of scholarly circles. Governments seek a return on public investment in research; funding agencies prioritize proposals that promise measurable benefits; universities align strategic plans with rankings that increasingly incorporate “engagement” or “societal relevance” metrics. Leading journals have also begun to require impact statements or practical implications sections, further signaling that the contribution of scholarship is not complete until it reaches, and influences, real-world audiences.

While this emphasis reflects a legitimate desire to connect academic inquiry with societal needs, the prevailing understanding of “impact” in management research remains remarkably narrow. In most institutional settings, impact is operationalized in ways that privilege a limited set of indicators: high-impact-factor publications, citation counts, conference invitations, and—on occasion—short-term economic benefits such as spin-off

companies or patents. These measures, though convenient and quantifiable, capture only a fraction of the ways in which research may contribute to knowledge, practice, and society.

This reductionist framing risks distorting scholarly priorities in several ways. First, it can create **methodological conservatism**, incentivizing studies that are likely to yield publishable results in prestigious journals rather than encouraging bold, cross-disciplinary, or problem-driven research. Second, it overlooks **time-lagged and diffuse contributions**, such as the gradual integration of research insights into organizational cultures or public discourse. Third, it undervalues **non-market impacts**—for example, fostering ethical awareness in business leaders, contributing to social justice, or shaping the civic imagination—because such effects are not easily monetized or counted.

Management research, by its very nature, occupies a nexus between theoretical inquiry and applied practice. It has the potential to inform managerial decision-making, shape public policy, enhance educational curricula, improve organizational processes, and contribute to societal well-being. However, realizing and recognizing this potential requires moving beyond a monolithic, citation-based definition of impact toward a **broader, pluralistic conception** that acknowledges the diversity of pathways through which research can make a difference.

The purpose of this paper is to reframe the conversation about impact in management scholarship. We begin by reviewing existing conceptualizations and frameworks, highlighting their strengths and limitations. Building on insights from the sociology of science, knowledge mobilization, and research evaluation, we propose a **typology of impact** that captures the multifaceted nature of influence in management research. We then present a **conceptual model** that links research aims, methodological choices, and dissemination strategies to distinct types of impact. To make this framework actionable, we outline **practical measures** and a **mixed-methods assessment approach** that can operationalize broader impact in research evaluation. The paper concludes with a **research agenda** and **policy recommendations** for scholars, institutions, and funders committed to fostering management research that truly makes a difference.

By broadening the meaning of impact, we aim not only to enhance the relevance of management scholarship but also to safeguard its intellectual vitality—encouraging work that is rigorous, innovative, ethically responsible, and socially engaged.

## 2. WHY BROADEN THE MEANING OF IMPACT?

The call to broaden the meaning of research impact arises not from abstract idealism, but from practical and structural problems inherent in the current, citation-centric approach. While bibliometric indicators such as citation counts, journal impact factors, and h-index scores have utility as proxies for scholarly visibility, their dominance as the primary measure of worth distorts the research ecosystem in ways that limit the true contribution of management scholarship. Three interrelated issues illustrate why a more expansive understanding is necessary.

## 2.1 Signal-to-noise distortion

Quantitative metrics inherently favor outputs that are easily countable and comparable. In the context of management research, this often privileges work aligned with **fashionable topics** or methodological trends likely to generate citations, even if their real-world relevance is minimal. For example, a study on a trending buzzword such as “disruptive innovation” may accumulate significant citations simply due to topical popularity, while rigorous, context-specific research addressing pressing but less glamorous challenges—such as workforce mental health in small enterprises—may receive scant recognition despite offering valuable solutions.

Moreover, the chase for “citable” methods or results can lead researchers to optimize their work for **journal gatekeepers** rather than for stakeholders who might actually apply the findings. In statistical terms, the system amplifies “signal” defined by academic popularity, but not necessarily by societal or managerial usefulness—effectively creating a form of measurement bias in the valuation of scholarship.

## 2.2 Neglect of downstream and diffuse effects

Many of the most important contributions of management research are **indirect, long-term, and difficult to measure**. Insights from organizational behavior studies, for instance, may gradually permeate managerial mindsets over decades, influencing leadership styles and workplace norms without a direct, traceable citation chain. A concept such as “psychological safety” might initially be of interest to scholars, but its transformative impact on organizational culture becomes evident only after years of adoption in leadership training, consulting practices, and internal corporate guidelines.

Similarly, pedagogical impacts—such as the integration of research into MBA curricula or executive education programs—often remain **invisible to bibliometric tracking systems**, despite shaping generations of decision-makers. When assessment frameworks ignore these subtle forms of influence, they systematically undervalue research that catalyzes slow-burn changes in practice, policy, or public awareness.

## 2.3 Perverse incentives

When narrow metrics dominate, they inadvertently create **gameable performance targets** that reward behaviors counterproductive to the long-term health of the discipline. Common manifestations include:

- **Salami-slicing**: dividing research into the smallest publishable units to maximize output counts.
- **Risk aversion**: avoiding interdisciplinary collaborations or novel topics that may be harder to publish in top-tier outlets.
- **Underinvestment in engagement**: deprioritizing stakeholder collaboration, fieldwork, or translational activities that require time but do not directly boost citation scores.

This dynamic particularly disadvantages collaborative, community-engaged, or cross-sectoral research, where timelines are longer, authorship is distributed, and outputs may not fit neatly into high-impact academic journals. As a result, valuable opportunities to co-create knowledge with practitioners, policymakers, or civil society organizations are frequently left unexplored.

## 2.4 Realigning incentives with the mission of management scholarship

Management research—at its best—generates knowledge that is **robust in theory, relevant in application, and responsible in societal consequence**. A broadened conception of impact helps restore alignment between these core values and the systems that govern scholarly behavior. By recognizing and rewarding a wider range of impact types—whether methodological innovations, shifts in public discourse, adoption of practices, or ethical improvements in organizational governance—institutions can encourage scholarship that is both academically rigorous and socially meaningful.

Such a shift does not mean abandoning traditional metrics; rather, it requires situating them within a **pluralistic evaluation framework** that balances scholarly visibility with practical significance, ethical responsibility, and long-term contribution. This is the premise upon which the remainder of this paper builds.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Efforts to broaden the meaning of impact in management research are not occurring in an intellectual vacuum. They draw from a wide array of theoretical traditions in the sociology of science, innovation studies, public policy, and higher education research. These perspectives help explain why certain forms of impact are more visible than others, why uptake varies across contexts, and how different modes of knowledge production lead to different forms of influence. By integrating these foundations, we can build a framework that acknowledges the diversity of pathways through which management research can make a difference.

### 3.1 Mode-1 and Mode-2 knowledge production

A useful starting point is the distinction proposed by Gibbons et al. (1994) between Mode-1 and Mode-2 knowledge production.

- **Mode-1** refers to traditional academic research: discipline-bound, investigator-led, and primarily assessed through peer review and scholarly recognition.
- **Mode-2** is transdisciplinary, application-oriented, and often co-produced with practitioners, policymakers, or other non-academic actors. It emphasizes contextual relevance, reflexivity, and broader accountability.

While Mode-1 research can yield high scholarly impact, Mode-2 approaches are more likely to produce practical, societal, or policy impact—though these may take forms and timelines that conventional evaluation systems struggle to capture. In management research, where theoretical insights are often intertwined with organizational realities, a combination of both modes is frequently necessary.

### 3.2 Knowledge translation and mobilization

The public health literature offers the concept of **knowledge translation (KT)**—the process of synthesizing, disseminating, and applying research evidence to improve practice (Graham et al., 2006). In management, this idea has evolved into **knowledge mobilization**, a broader term that encompasses the active exchange and co-creation of knowledge between researchers and stakeholders.

Key insights from this literature include:

- Impact is rarely the result of one-way dissemination; rather, it emerges from iterative dialogue between producers and users of knowledge.
- The form of communication—policy briefs, workshops, infographics—matters as much as the content of findings.
- Credibility and trust between researchers and stakeholders are often prerequisites for uptake.

By embedding these principles into research design, management scholars can increase the likelihood that their work will influence both thinking and action.

### 3.3 Models of research use and influence

Carole Weiss (1979, 1980) distinguished three models of how research influences decision-making:

1. **Instrumental use** — direct application of findings to solve specific problems.
2. **Conceptual use (enlightenment)** — shaping how people think about an issue, often indirectly and over long periods.
3. **Symbolic or political use** — leveraging research to justify decisions already made.

For management research, **conceptual influence** may be the most common pathway, particularly for ideas like “transformational leadership” or “stakeholder capitalism” that evolve into shared frames of reference. Recognizing these different modes of use helps evaluators appreciate that impact is not always immediate, direct, or linear.

### 3.4 Systems of innovation and boundary-spanning roles

Innovation studies emphasize that knowledge flows occur within **networks of actors**—firms, universities, government agencies, NGOs—often referred to as innovation systems (Lundvall, 1992). Within these systems, certain individuals or organizations serve as **boundary spanners** or **intermediaries**, translating academic insights into forms usable by practitioners or policymakers.

In management research, examples include:

- Professional associations that adapt scholarly work into industry guidelines.
- Consulting firms that embed academic theories into tools and frameworks.
- Media outlets that popularize research findings for a broader audience.

Understanding these network dynamics is crucial for designing research with realistic pathways to broader impact.

### 3.5 Theoretical synthesis — two guiding propositions

Drawing from the above traditions, two propositions underpin our approach:

- **P1 — Plurality:** Impact is multidimensional. No single indicator or pathway adequately represents the diverse ways in which management research can shape knowledge, practice, and society.
- **P2 — Path-dependence:** The type and magnitude of impact achieved depend on the alignment between a project's aims, its methodological and engagement choices, and the receptivity of the context in which the findings are disseminated.

## 4. TYPOLOGY OF IMPACT FOR MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

A broadened conception of impact requires a structured framework for identifying, categorizing, and evaluating the diverse ways in which management research can make a difference. Building on prior work in research evaluation (e.g., Penfield et al., 2014; Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011), we propose a **seven-category typology** tailored to the distinctive contexts and outputs of management scholarship. These categories are not mutually exclusive; a single project may yield multiple forms of impact along different timelines and through different audiences.

### 4.1 Scholarly impact

**Definition:** Influence on academic knowledge production, including the development of new theories, refinement of existing frameworks, and the advancement of research methods.

**Typical indicators:**

- Citations in peer-reviewed articles and monographs.
- Inclusion in literature reviews, meta-analyses, or theoretical syntheses.
- Adoption of novel constructs or models by other scholars.

**Example:** A conceptual model of “dynamic capabilities” that becomes a foundational framework in strategic management research.

**Notes:** While scholarly impact is the most visible under current evaluation regimes, it should be viewed as one component of a broader portfolio, not the sole measure of value.

### 4.2 Managerial or practical impact

**Definition:** Uptake and application of research findings by managers, executives, entrepreneurs, or other organizational decision-makers.

**Typical indicators:**

- Implementation of research-derived tools, decision frameworks, or process innovations in organizations.
- Documented changes in management practices (e.g., HR policies, marketing strategies).
- Practitioner testimonials or case studies evidencing influence.

**Example:** A study on lean process redesign leading to measurable reductions in cycle time at multiple

manufacturing firms.

**Notes:** Practical impact often requires translation into practitioner-friendly formats such as white papers, training programs, or consulting toolkits.

### 4.3 Policy impact

**Definition:** Influence on public policy, regulatory frameworks, or government programs.

**Typical indicators:**

- Citations in government reports, legislation, or regulatory guidelines.
- Invitations to serve on advisory committees or expert panels.
- Evidence of policy changes linked to research findings.

**Example:** Research on corporate tax incentives shaping national legislation on R&D subsidies.

**Notes:** Policy impact may occur at local, regional, national, or supranational levels, and often involves long lead times and sustained engagement with policymakers.

### 4.4 Societal or civic impact

**Definition:** Contribution to social outcomes, public discourse, or community well-being beyond the boundaries of specific organizations or policy arenas.

**Typical indicators:**

- Influence on public debates or media narratives.
- Engagement with community organizations leading to measurable social benefits.
- Evidence of enhanced civic participation or empowerment.

**Example:** Research on ethical supply chains prompting consumer advocacy campaigns and changes in NGO strategies.

**Notes:** Societal impact is often diffuse, requiring qualitative methods (e.g., media analysis, stakeholder interviews) to document.

### 4.5 Pedagogical impact

**Definition:** Integration of research into teaching, training, and educational resources for current and future managers, policymakers, and scholars.

**Typical indicators:**

- Adoption of research-based cases or readings in MBA, executive education, or undergraduate programs.
- Development of online courses, simulations, or teaching tools based on research.
- Influence on curriculum standards or accreditation criteria.

**Example:** A longitudinal case study on sustainable entrepreneurship included in major business school syllabi worldwide.

**Notes:** Pedagogical impact is particularly important in management, where education directly shapes practice through the mindsets of graduates.

#### 4.6 Methodological impact

**Definition:** Advancement of research tools, methods, datasets, or analytic techniques that enable further inquiry across disciplines.

**Typical indicators:**

- Widespread adoption of a new measurement scale or survey instrument.
- Downloads or citations of open-source code, statistical packages, or datasets.
- Methodological replication or extension by other researchers.

**Example:** An open-access database of global supply chain networks used by both academics and industry analysts.

**Notes:** Methodological contributions can have high leverage by enabling multiple future studies and applications.

#### 4.7 Ethical and normative impact

**Definition:** Influence on the ethical standards, norms, and values guiding organizational behavior and governance.

**Typical indicators:**

- Adoption of new ethical guidelines or corporate governance codes informed by research.
- Shifts in industry norms toward more responsible practices.
- Recognition by professional associations or watchdog bodies.

**Example:** Research on workplace harassment leading to revised corporate codes of conduct and training modules.

**Notes:** Ethical impact can intersect with societal and policy impact, but warrants separate recognition due to its normative significance.

#### 4.8 Interactions and overlaps

While the categories above provide analytical clarity, real-world impact often involves **interactions across categories**. For instance, a methodological innovation (4.6) might be adopted in a government program (4.3) that, in turn, produces societal benefits (4.4). Understanding these overlaps is critical for designing research that intentionally targets multiple pathways to influence.

### 5. CONCEPTUAL MODEL: FROM RESEARCH DESIGN TO IMPACT

If we accept that impact is plural and context-dependent, the next task is to understand **how** management research moves from initial conception to meaningful influence. Our model integrates ideas from research evaluation, knowledge mobilization, and implementation science into a four-stage pathway, with feedback loops and contextual moderators. The model is intended both as an analytical lens and as a practical planning tool for scholars aiming to design research with intentional, broader impact.

## 5.1 Stage 1 — Intent and framing

Impact begins with **research intent**: the explicit and implicit goals that shape topic selection, framing, and stakeholder targeting. Here, researchers articulate both the audiences (e.g., academic peers, industry practitioners, policymakers, communities) and the intended outcomes (e.g., policy reform, managerial practice improvement, conceptual reframing).

- **Strategic choices at this stage:**
  - Define the primary and secondary impact types sought, using the typology in Section 4.
  - Align research questions with both theoretical gaps and real-world needs.
  - Identify relevant partners early (e.g., industry liaisons, NGOs, policymakers).

**Example:** A team studying digital transformation in public hospitals decides from the outset that, beyond scholarly impact, their aim is to inform policy guidelines for e-health implementation.

## 5.2 Stage 2 — Design and execution

The **research design** stage determines the credibility, relevance, and accessibility of eventual findings. Design choices influence both the rigor (internal validity, reliability) and the usability (practicality, clarity, contextual fit) of research outputs.

- **Key design levers:**
  - **Method selection:** Experimental designs may yield strong causal claims; qualitative fieldwork may offer rich contextual insights; mixed-methods can balance both.
  - **Stakeholder involvement:** Co-design with intended users increases relevance and buy-in.
  - **Time horizon:** Longitudinal designs may better capture dynamic processes relevant to policy or organizational change.

**Example:** A project on inclusive hiring adopts an action research approach, embedding the research team within HR departments to pilot and refine interventions—boosting the likelihood of managerial adoption.

## 5.3 Stage 3 — Translation and dissemination

The **translation** stage determines whether findings remain in academic silos or travel into decision-making arenas. This requires tailoring outputs to audience needs and formats they can use.

- **Dissemination strategies:**
  - Academic publications for scholarly impact.
  - Executive summaries, toolkits, or workshops for managerial impact.
  - Policy briefs, testimony, or targeted briefings for policy impact.
  - Public talks, media engagement, or educational resources for societal and pedagogical impact.
  - Open-source datasets and code repositories for methodological impact.

**Example:** A study on sustainable supply chains produces three outputs: a journal article, a practitioner-oriented sustainability checklist, and an open dataset of supplier audits—addressing three different impact categories.

### 5.4 Stage 4 — Context and receptivity

Even well-designed, well-disseminated research may have limited uptake if the **receiving context** is not receptive. External factors—political climate, economic conditions, organizational priorities, cultural norms—mediate whether and how research is used.

- **Contextual moderators:**
  - **Policy windows:** Opportunities when decision-makers are actively seeking solutions.
  - **Organizational readiness:** The capacity and willingness of firms or agencies to implement changes.
  - **Cultural alignment:** Resonance between research recommendations and prevailing values or beliefs.

**Example:** A leadership diversity framework gains traction in the wake of publicized corporate scandals, when boards are under pressure to demonstrate reform.

### 5.5 Feedback loops and sustained engagement

Impact is rarely linear. Often, early outputs generate feedback from users, prompting refinement of models, tools, or recommendations. This iterative process can deepen trust, enhance relevance, and extend the lifespan of research contributions. Sustained engagement with stakeholders—through advisory roles, follow-up studies, or collaborative platforms—can turn one-off impacts into **enduring influence**.

### 5.6 Mapping research designs to likely impact types

Research Design	Likely Categories	High-Impact	Example
Longitudinal field study with industry partner	Managerial, scholarly	societal,	Workplace wellness interventions tracked over 5 years, influencing corporate HR strategies and academic debates
Randomized controlled trial in policy context	Policy, scholarly	managerial,	RCT on tax incentives for SME innovation, leading to policy adjustment
Participatory action research with community groups	Societal, ethical/normative, pedagogical		Co-created entrepreneurship programs improving livelihoods and shaping business school curricula
Method development with	Methodological, scholarly,		New supply chain analytics toolkit adopted in research

Research Design	Likely High-Impact Categories	Example
open-source release	pedagogical	and MBA teaching
Cross-national comparative study with public reports	Policy, societal, scholarly	Comparative labor law analysis used in EU policy deliberations

### 5.7 Implications of the model

This conceptual model reframes research impact as a **design problem** rather than a post-hoc measurement exercise. By thinking through impact pathways from the outset—and aligning them with the typology in Section 4—scholars can make intentional choices that increase the probability of achieving influence across multiple domains.

## 6. MEASUREMENT — TOWARDS A MIXED-METHODS TOOLKIT

If a broadened conception of impact is to move beyond rhetoric, it must be supported by robust approaches to **measurement**. Unlike citation counts or journal rankings—which offer simplicity at the expense of nuance—evaluating broader impact demands a **pluralistic, mixed-methods toolkit**. This toolkit should be capable of capturing both tangible outputs and more subtle, diffuse forms of influence, while also addressing the challenge of attribution.

### 6.1 Principles for measuring broader impact

We propose five guiding principles:

1. **Multidimensionality** — Impact measurement must recognize different categories (Section 4) and avoid reducing them to a single score.
2. **Temporal sensitivity** — Some impacts emerge quickly (e.g., media coverage), while others materialize over years or decades (e.g., cultural shifts in management practice).
3. **Contextualization** — Metrics should be interpreted in light of field norms, sector characteristics, and geographic scope.
4. **Triangulation** — Use multiple indicators and methods to strengthen validity and minimize bias.
5. **Proportionality** — Measurement should be feasible and proportionate to the scope and resources of the research project.

### 6.2 Three-tiered assessment framework

We organize measurement into **three tiers**, each focusing on different stages of the research–impact pathway.

**Tier 1: Short-term outputs (process indicators)**

Capture the immediate products of research activity.

- **Quantitative measures:** Number of publications across audiences (academic, practitioner, policy); datasets released; software tools developed; presentations delivered.
- **Qualitative measures:** Narrative descriptions of stakeholder engagement; co-creation activities; partnerships formed.
- **Purpose:** Demonstrates productive capacity and initial dissemination efforts.
- **Example:** An open-access dataset on SME resilience downloaded 500 times within the first six months.

**Tier 2: Medium-term uptake (usage indicators)**

Assess whether research is being used or cited by target audiences.

- **Quantitative measures:**
  - Mentions in policy documents (using tools like Overton or policy citation tracking).
  - Inclusion in organizational guidelines, training manuals, or corporate reports.
  - Downloads/views of practitioner toolkits or online resources.
- **Qualitative measures:**
  - Case studies documenting adoption in specific organizations.
  - Testimonials from practitioners or policymakers on how the research informed decisions.
- **Example:** A sustainability framework integrated into the training program of a multinational retailer.

**Tier 3: Long-term outcomes (impact indicators)**

Capture observable changes in practice, policy, or societal conditions attributable (or plausibly linked) to the research.

- **Quantitative measures:**
  - Changes in performance metrics (e.g., reduced employee turnover, improved environmental compliance rates).
  - Policy reforms enacted.
  - Market adoption rates of new methods or technologies.
- **Qualitative measures:**
  - Stakeholder interviews assessing perceived changes and research contribution.
  - Process tracing to identify causal pathways.
- **Example:** Over five years, organizations applying a new diversity recruitment model show a sustained increase in minority representation at management levels.

### 6.3 Methods for collecting evidence

- **Bibliometrics & altmetrics** — Traditional citation counts plus attention in news, blogs, social media (e.g., via Altmetric.com).
- **Document analysis** — Systematic review of policy papers, corporate reports, and industry guidelines for explicit or implicit references to the research.
- **Surveys of target audiences** — Structured feedback from managers, policymakers, educators, or community leaders on awareness and use.
- **Interviews & focus groups** — Deep insights into how findings are interpreted, adapted, and applied.
- **Case studies** — Rich, contextual narratives demonstrating influence in specific settings.
- **Social network analysis** — Mapping dissemination pathways, collaborations, and influencer networks.
- **Pre/post evaluations** — When research includes interventions, use baseline and follow-up data to assess change.

### 6.4 Dealing with attribution and contribution

A core challenge in measuring broader impact is distinguishing the influence of a specific research project from other contributing factors. Direct attribution is often impossible, particularly for **conceptual and societal impacts**, which are diffuse and mediated by multiple actors.

We recommend:

- **Contribution analysis** — Builds a plausible narrative linking research to observed changes, supported by evidence from multiple sources.
- **Process tracing** — Identifies causal mechanisms through which research influenced decisions or behaviors.
- **Counterfactual reasoning** — Considers what might have happened without the research (using comparator cases when possible).
- **Stakeholder validation** — Solicits confirmation from end users that the research played a meaningful role.

### 6.5 Potential pitfalls and mitigation strategies

Pitfall	Description	Mitigation
Over-measurement	Collecting too many indicators, diluting focus	Select a balanced set aligned with intended impact types
Metric myopia	Relying on a single “headline” number	Use a dashboard of indicators
Self-report bias	Over-reliance on researcher-claimed impact	Include independent or third-party evidence

Pitfall	Description	Mitigation
Short-term bias	Ignoring impacts that emerge over time	Build in longitudinal tracking where feasible

### 6.6 Toward an “impact portfolio” approach

Rather than reducing a project’s value to a single score, we advocate for **impact portfolios**—visual summaries showing evidence across multiple categories and time horizons. This approach:

- Encourages recognition of diverse contributions.
- Makes trade-offs visible (e.g., high pedagogical but low policy impact).
- Supports more nuanced conversations in hiring, promotion, and funding decisions.

## 7. RESEARCH DESIGNS THAT INCREASE LIKELIHOOD OF BROAD IMPACT

If broader impact is to be more than an aspirational ideal, it must be **built into research design choices from the outset**. While no design guarantees influence, certain approaches systematically increase the probability of reaching beyond academic audiences. This section translates the conceptual model (Section 5) into actionable design strategies.

### 7.1 Core design principles for impact

1. **Co-creation with stakeholders** — Engage intended users (e.g., managers, policymakers, communities) early in shaping research questions, methods, and outputs. This fosters relevance and accelerates uptake.
2. **Contextual embedding** — Situate studies in real organizational or societal contexts rather than in purely experimental or hypothetical settings.
3. **Methodological pluralism** — Combine methods that satisfy academic rigor with those that capture practical realities (e.g., mixed-methods).
4. **Output diversification** — Plan for multiple formats: scholarly articles and applied tools, policy briefs, or educational resources.
5. **Iterative feedback loops** — Allow for ongoing refinement based on user feedback during the project, not just after publication.

### 7.2 The design–impact alignment matrix

Research Choice	Design	High-Likelihood Impact Types	Example	Key Trade-Offs
Participatory Research (PAR)	Action	Managerial, societal, ethical/normative, pedagogical	Collaborative redesign of retail shift schedules with employees to improve work–life balance	Time-intensive; may limit generalizability
Longitudinal	Field	Managerial, scholarly,	Tracking leadership	Requires sustained funding

Research Choice	Design	High-Likelihood Impact Types	Example	Key Trade-Offs
Study		societal	interventions in multiple firms over five years	and access
<b>Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) in applied settings</b>		Policy, managerial, scholarly	Testing tax incentives on SME innovation in partnership with government agency	May face ethical or logistical barriers
<b>Cross-national Comparative Study</b>		Policy, scholarly, societal	Analyzing labor law enforcement across 10 countries for EU legislative briefing	Complex coordination; cultural differences in data interpretation
<b>Design Science / Tool Development</b>		Methodological, managerial, pedagogical	Creating open-source supply chain analytics software used in business school curricula	Tool adoption depends on usability and marketing
<b>Embedded Ethnography</b>		Scholarly, ethical/normative, societal	Studying informal leadership in disaster response teams to inform NGO training	Deep context insight but low scalability

### 7.3 Case illustrations

#### Case 1 — Policy alignment through embedded RCT

A research team partnered with a city government to evaluate the effect of flexible licensing rules on small food businesses. By embedding the RCT in the policy-making process, results were integrated into a new municipal policy within six months, achieving **policy** and **managerial** impact, while also producing a high-quality academic article.

#### Case 2 — Societal and pedagogical synergy in sustainability education

A university-led project co-created climate change case studies with high school teachers, linking academic findings to classroom use. Outcomes included adoption by national curricula (**pedagogical impact**) and increased youth climate activism (**societal impact**).

#### Case 3 — Methodological breakthrough with industry uptake

Development of a machine learning model for predicting equipment failure in logistics fleets was released as open-source software. Industry uptake was rapid due to ease of integration, creating **methodological** and **managerial** impact, and later inspiring further academic work (**scholarly impact**).

## 7.4 Designing for cross-category impact

While many projects naturally lean toward one type of impact, designs can be optimized to **span multiple categories**:

- **Combine**: A comparative case study (scholarly) plus a practitioner toolkit (managerial) plus public talks (societal).
- **Sequence**: Start with an exploratory ethnography (scholarly, ethical/normative) → pilot intervention (managerial) → policy recommendation (policy impact).
- **Layer**: Embed student involvement in research projects, turning scholarly work into **pedagogical** impact.

## 7.5 Managing design trade-offs

Every design choice carries trade-offs between rigor, scope, timeliness, and resource demands. For example:

- **RCTs** can yield strong causal claims but require control over variables that may be unrealistic in dynamic organizational settings.
- **Action research** fosters immediate uptake but may be criticized for lack of detachment.
- **Cross-national studies** broaden policy relevance but complicate data comparability.

The goal is not to eliminate trade-offs but to **make them explicit** so they align with the intended mix of impacts.

## 7.6 Institutional and funding implications

Designing for impact often requires:

- **Longer funding cycles** to support longitudinal or iterative projects.
- **Flexible grant structures** that allow budget for engagement, dissemination, and co-production activities.
- **Recognition** in promotion and tenure criteria for outputs beyond top-tier journal articles.

## 8. INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Broadening the meaning of impact requires not only individual researcher initiative but also **system-level changes**. Without institutional and policy alignment, scholars who pursue nontraditional, slower-developing, or cross-sector impacts risk being penalized in hiring, promotion, and funding decisions. This section offers concrete reforms for universities, journals, funding bodies, and professional associations.

### 8.1 Universities: Embedding pluralistic impact in academic culture

1. **Revised promotion and tenure criteria**
  - Include documented **managerial, policy, societal, pedagogical, and methodological** contributions as valid evidence of excellence, alongside scholarly publications.

- Accept diverse outputs—policy briefs, practitioner tools, datasets, multimedia—as legitimate scholarly products.
2. **Impact portfolios in evaluation**
    - Replace single-metric focus with **impact dashboards** that showcase diverse indicators across categories and time horizons (see Section 6.6).
    - Encourage narrative “impact statements” with supporting evidence.
  3. **Infrastructure for engagement**
    - Establish **knowledge exchange offices** or **impact labs** to broker partnerships with industry, policymakers, and civil society.
    - Provide training for faculty and doctoral students on stakeholder engagement, science communication, and translational writing.
  4. **Recognition and rewards**
    - Create **annual awards** for high-impact projects in nontraditional categories (e.g., ethical/normative impact, public pedagogy).
    - Highlight impact stories in institutional communications.

## 8.2 Academic journals: Expanding the publication–impact pathway

1. **Alternative output formats**
  - Offer impact briefs, policy notes, or practice insights sections to translate research findings for nonacademic audiences.
  - Publish **methods toolkits** or **open educational resources** as citable scholarly outputs.
2. **Impact reporting requirements**
  - Invite authors to include an “Impact Pathways” section outlining potential and realized impacts.
  - Encourage post-publication follow-up articles documenting actual uptake.
3. **Editorial diversity**
  - Recruit editors with experience in applied, interdisciplinary, or policy-related work to balance traditional scholarly perspectives.

## 8.3 Funding bodies: Structuring grants for broader outcomes

1. **Dedicated impact funding streams**
  - Provide supplementary grants for dissemination, stakeholder engagement, and long-term tracking of research outcomes.
2. **Impact planning in proposals**
  - Require applicants to identify intended impact categories, relevant stakeholders, and dissemination strategies from the outset.
3. **Flexible timelines**
  - Allow for multi-phase projects that include both research and translation components.
  - Recognize that some impacts (e.g., policy or societal change) may require 5–10 years.
4. **Collaborative grant structures**
  - Incentivize partnerships between academics, industry, NGOs, and government agencies.

- Support **cross-disciplinary teams** capable of addressing complex societal challenges.

#### 8.4 Professional associations: Building field-wide norms

##### 1. Impact literacy training

- Offer workshops, conference tracks, and online modules on designing, measuring, and communicating broad impact.

##### 2. Field-specific impact typologies

- Develop discipline-tailored definitions and indicators (building on Section 4’s framework) to guide consistent assessment.

##### 3. Case study repositories

- Maintain databases of high-impact projects, illustrating diverse pathways from research to influence.

##### 4. Advocacy for policy change

- Engage with national research councils, accreditation bodies, and ranking organizations to broaden recognized impact metrics.

#### 8.5 Shifting incentives: From prestige economy to value economy

Current academic prestige economies are dominated by **symbolic capital** (citations, journal impact factors) rather than **use-value** of research in practice. Shifting toward a **value economy** requires:

- **Aligning reputational rewards** with contributions that demonstrably improve understanding, practice, policy, or public discourse.
- **Normalizing collaboration** with nonacademic stakeholders as a core scholarly activity.
- **Reducing penalties** for slower, high-engagement projects whose impacts cannot be captured within short funding or tenure timelines.

#### 8.6 Policy recommendations summary table

Stake holder	Key Reforms
Universities	Impact-inclusive promotion criteria; engagement infrastructure; narrative impact statements
Journals	Impact-oriented sections; editorial diversity; post-publication follow-ups
Funding Bodies	Impact planning requirements; flexible timelines; dissemination grants
Professional Associations	Impact training; field-specific frameworks; case repositories

Stake holder	Key Reforms
Ranking & Accreditation Bodies	Broaden evaluation metrics beyond bibliometrics

### 8.7 Strategic imperative

Without institutional reform, individual efforts toward broad impact will remain **exceptions** rather than **norms**. By embedding these policies into the governance of research ecosystems, management scholarship can move toward a future where impact is recognized in its full diversity—encouraging intellectual risk-taking, fostering deep engagement, and ensuring that research serves the multiple publics who ultimately justify its existence.

## 9. RESEARCH AGENDA & CONCLUSION

Broadening the meaning of impact in management research is both a conceptual and a practical challenge. This paper has argued that relying primarily on bibliometric indicators not only distorts research priorities but also neglects the rich and varied ways scholarship can shape practice, policy, pedagogy, and society. We have proposed a pluralistic typology of impacts, a conceptual model linking research aims, methods, and dissemination strategies to outcomes, and concrete reforms at the level of research design, institutional practice, and policy.

The next step is to **operationalize** this vision through an integrated research agenda.

### 9.1 Research agenda

#### 1. Conceptual refinement of impact typologies

- Develop field-specific subcategories within the broader impact framework (e.g., distinguishing between “managerial” and “organizational design” impacts).
- Explore relationships among impact types—do certain forms (e.g., pedagogical) act as gateways to others (e.g., societal)?

#### 2. Longitudinal studies of impact pathways

- Track how research ideas move from publication to adoption over years or decades.
- Investigate whether certain design choices (Section 7) correlate with specific impact types and durations.

#### 3. Mixed-methods impact measurement

- Test and refine combined quantitative–qualitative evaluation frameworks, integrating bibliometrics, altmetrics, case narratives, and stakeholder testimonies.
- Develop validated instruments for capturing diffuse or intangible outcomes (e.g., shifts in managerial mindset).

#### 4. Comparative studies across disciplines

- Compare impact definitions, metrics, and incentives in management studies with fields such as public health, engineering, or education to identify transferable best practices.

## 5. Institutional change experiments

- Study the effects of altered promotion criteria, funding models, or journal policies on research behavior and output diversity.
- Assess whether institutional reforms lead to more balanced portfolios of scholarly and societal contributions.

## 6. Ethics and unintended consequences of impact pursuit

- Examine risks of over-instrumentalizing research or overclaiming influence.
- Develop ethical guidelines for representing and pursuing impact without compromising scholarly independence.

## 9.2 Conclusion: From rhetoric to practice

Calls for research that “makes a difference” are not new—but without structural changes, they risk becoming aspirational slogans rather than guiding principles. Narrow, citation-driven conceptions of impact cannot capture the slow, diffuse, and multifaceted ways in which knowledge changes the world.

A **broadened, pluralistic definition of impact** offers a way forward—valuing methodological innovations, changes in practice, policy influence, pedagogical enrichment, societal discourse shifts, and ethical improvements in organizational life. Realizing this vision demands coordinated action: researchers designing for relevance and reach, institutions recognizing diverse contributions, journals opening new pathways for dissemination, and funders enabling sustained engagement.

Management research sits at a pivotal moment. The complexity of today’s organizational and societal challenges—climate change, digital transformation, inequality, governance failures—requires knowledge that is not only rigorous but also **responsive** to the needs of multiple publics. By embracing broader impact as both a scholarly responsibility and an evaluative criterion, the field can reaffirm its social contract: to produce knowledge that is **robust, useful, and ethically grounded**, and to ensure that such knowledge travels beyond the academy to where it can do the most good.

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