

The Managerial Experience of Management Professors: Are The Blind Leading the Blind?

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Managers and students have frequently criticized management professors, accusing them of having little practical experience outside their academic "ivory towers." This research challenges these assertions. The typical management professor has 12 years of managerial experience and 7 years of nonmanagerial experience. However, most of this experience was obtained prior to 1970. This research also investigates other factors pertaining to the managerial experience of management professors.

Management education at the university level has been questioned by students, practicing managers, and teachers regarding the relevance of management theory to the "real-world" of organizational practice. The critics claim that to teach management one must not only know the theory, but also understand managerial reality. They believe teachers of management should have been managers or should have been exposed to modern management practices through real-world organizational experiences. For example, Livingston's "myth" of management education holds that highly educated persons fail to achieve success in management because "they do not learn from their formal education what they need to know to perform their jobs effectively" (1971, p. 82). McGuire (1972) also notes a move away from practice to theory; and Ference and Ritti (1970) found little "reality training" in MBA programs. George F. Baker, former Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, is quoted as saying that undergraduate business school students "don't know from nothing about business—neither do some of their teachers" (cited in Gore, 1968, p. 164). Hekimian states that,

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compared to earlier periods, “today’s business faculties have the least first-hand knowledge of business” (1969, p. 116). Grayson further charges that professors have had “low contact with real business experience” (1973, p. 13).

Two explanations have been offered for this lack of experience. One deals with the drive for “academic respectability” through research and theory rather than applications and practice. Hekimian (1969) notes that early business schools emphasized practice but, to achieve “academic respectability,” began to emphasize research rather than business world involvement. Berry (cited in “*Goodbye, America,*” 1972) further charges that the problem is most serious in America’s “elite” business schools and says, “American management education is dying because it is being sucked into academic respectability” (p. 70).

The second explanation for the lack of experience on the part of management professors is related to their academic training. Grayson (1973) points to the influx of Ph.D.’s from “non-business-oriented” disciplines (psychology, sociology, mathematics, statistics, physics, and econometrics) in the 1960’s in the post-Carnegie and Ford Foundation reports era. He contends that these persons know little and think less of business and that business school professors chose an academic life because they preferred it to an “action-oriented” one where they would have to implement their ideas. Miner (1973; 1974) has found a low motivation to manage in business school professors and the students they teach. Mintzberg, in full agreement, states “the fact is that in general we know very little about teaching and the managerial roles . . . much of this [management] theory deals, not in the job of managing *per se*, but with the underlying disciplines—economics, psychology, and mathematics” (1973, p. 186). Mintzberg (1975; 1976) further charges that business schools do a poor job of training managers because professors are little interested in “the reality of organizational life” and teach “theories of mathematics, economics, and psychology as ends in themselves” (1976, p. 58).

As a result of these criticisms, we expected our research to establish that (1) most professors of management have little experience as managers; (2) most professors of management have little experience in organizations other than academic ones; (3) universities that have achieved academic respectability are less likely to have a faculty with managerial experience; and (4) the influx of professors from nonbusiness disciplines has contributed to an increased emphasis on theory and a decreased emphasis on applications and managerial practices.

Method

Population

The population selected for study was the Academy of Management membership on the assumption that it was the most representative group

of those who teach and do research in management at the university level. The survey instrument was pretested on a group of management teachers, revised, and mailed first-class to 2,775 United States and Canadian Academy of Management members who were listed in the 1975-1976 membership directory. A postage paid preaddressed return envelope was provided. While anonymity was promised, the questionnaires were numbered so that a follow-up could be made on the nonrespondents 60 days after the original mail-out. The total number of usable responses received from both mailings was 1,243 for a 44.8% rate of return.

The mean age of the respondents was 43.5, and the median age was 41.5 years. The highest degrees obtained were Ph.D., 82%; Masters, 16%; and Bachelors, 2%. With respect to recency of degrees, 38% were received in the past 5 years and 67% within the past 10 years. The mean for the year of the degree was 1967, and the median was 1970. As to rank, 33% were full professors, 29% were associate professors, 26% were assistant professors, 6% were instructors, and 6% were graduate assistants. Ninety-five percent were male; 5% were female.

To determine whether there was any nonresponse bias (perhaps only those with significant experience responded), random samples of 100 were drawn from the respondents and from nonrespondents. Information on rank, degree level, year of degree, degree field, type of institution (public or private university or college), sex, and total years of managerial experience were then taken for each from the 1975 AACSB Faculty Directory. When the data for each group were analyzed, the only significant difference found was a slight tendency for more nonrespondents to be associated with private universities and colleges.¹ No significant differences were found on the other factors, leading the researchers to conclude that the nonrespondents did not vary greatly from those who did respond, with the slight reservation that the findings are somewhat more heavily influenced by responses from members of public institutions than is typical of the Academy of Management membership.

Procedures

The number of years of managerial experience of Academy members in various kinds of organizations was determined by asking respondents to list their experience in business, military, public sector, academic, and other organizations. In addition, respondents were asked to distinguish between their experience before 1970 and 1970 to date. On the assumption that experience in a non-managerial role might be a proxy for

¹Actual differences for the AACSB sample groups were:

	Respondents	Non-Respondents
Public institutions	87	70
Private institutions	13	30
Total AACSB	100	100

managerial experience, data were also gathered on the amount, kind, and recency of nonmanagerial experience.

The experiences of those in the most academically respectable business schools were determined by gathering data from the 61 respondents who were faculty members at the nation's best schools as rated by *MBA* and *Change*.² The ratings overlapped, and a total of 21 schools were identified as the best nationally.³ Data from this group on managerial and nonmanagerial experience were then compared to our respondents as a whole.

The academic training, background, and interests of our respondents were determined by gathering data on their highest academic degree field, age, rank, and size of the institution at which they were employed. The 51 degree fields were then categorized by the researchers into business, "middleground" (i.e., the degree could have been granted in a business school or in another segment of a university), and nonbusiness.⁴ Size of institution data were gathered in 5,000 student intervals, based on respondents' classifications; size ranged from "under 5,000" upward to "25,000 and over." Experience was then computed and analyzed by degree field, age, rank, and size of institution.

Results and Discussion

Amount, Kind, and Recency of Managerial Experience

The findings show that most Academy of Management respondents (64%) have more than 5 years of managerial experience (see Table 1), with a mean of almost 12 years (see Table 2). Table 2 shows the kind of organizations in which managerial experience has been acquired and the recency of this experience.

²*Change* (February, 1977, pp. 44-48) sampled both deans and professors; while *MBA* (December, 1977, pp. 19-22) queried deans only.

³The combined list of "best" schools were, in alphabetical order: U. of California—Berkeley, U. of California—Los Angeles, Carnegie-Mellon, U. of Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth (Tuck), Harvard, U. of Illinois, Indiana, M.I.T. (Sloan), U. of Michigan, New York U., U. of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, Northwestern, U. of Pennsylvania (Wharton), Purdue, Stanford, U. of Texas—Austin, U. of Washington, and U. of Wisconsin—Madison.

⁴Business school degree fields were Marketing, Business Administration, Personnel, Management, Finance, Organizational Behavior, Organization Theory, Information Systems, Industrial Management, Operations Management, Policy, Logistics, Manpower, Administrative Science, Business and Society, Production, and Accounting.

In a "middle-ground" between business and other fields were Industrial Relations, Economics, Labor Economics, Business Education, Public Administration, Organizational Communication, Decision Theory, and Communications.

Nonbusiness degree fields were Educational Psychology, Organizational Psychology, Social Psychology, Psychology, Industrial Psychology, Political Science, Metallurgy, Industrial Engineering, Social Science, Industrial Sociology, Educational Administration, Computer Systems, History, Higher Education, Physics, Genetics, Speech Communication, Law, Education, and Philosophy.

Table 1
Amounts of Managerial Experience

Years	N	%
0	131	10.5
1-5	314	25.3
6-10	260	20.9
11-15	176	14.2
16-20	100	8.0
21-25	95	7.6
26-30	87	7.0
31+	80	6.4

Table 2
Managerial Experience by Type of Organization and Time Periods in Mean Years

Type of Organization	Before 1970	1970-1977	Total
Business	3.9	.8	4.7
Military	2.8	.3	3.1
Public sector6	.2	.8
Academic.....	1.4	1.3	2.7
Other2	.2	.4
Total.....	8.9	2.8	11.7

These data suggest that the typical management professor has the experience and background to relate theory and practice. However, most of this experience (60%) has been in nonbusiness organizations, lending credence to the claims of Baker (cited in Gore, 1968), Hekimian (1969), and Grayson (1973). The data also suggest that most of the managerial experience of professors has been in the public, "not-for-profit" sector. Further, over three-fourths of this experience (77%) was obtained prior to 1970, suggesting that the experiences may be dated or less relevant than they once were.

Amount, Kind, and Recency of Nonmanagerial Experience

Experience in nonmanagerial positions may also be a source of understanding the practice of management. Excluding academic teaching and research experience, Table 3 shows the distribution of

Table 3
Nonmanagerial Experience Distribution (excluding academic experience)

Years	N	%
0	163	13.1
1-5	486	39.1
6-10	321	25.8
11-15	156	12.6
16-20	49	3.9
21-25	27	2.2
26-30	20	1.6
31+	21	1.7

nonmanagerial experience. Less than one-half (47.8%) of the respondents have more than 5 years of nonmanagerial experience with a mean of approximately 7 years (Table 4). Table 4 shows the distribution of nonmanagerial experience in non-academic settings.

Table 4
Nonmanagerial Experience in Mean Years (excluding academic)

Type of organization	Before 1970	1970-1977	Total
Business	2.6	.2	2.8
Military	1.0	.1	1.1
Public sector4	.3	.7
Consulting	1.3	1.3	2.6
Total	5.3	1.9	7.2

These findings show that the typical respondent has about seven years of nonmanagerial experience that can be used to supplement or to supplant their managerial experiences. However, 61% of this experience has been in nonbusiness organizations, and about three-fourths of this experience (74%) was obtained prior to 1970. Further, more than one-third (36%) was obtained as consultants where there is less opportunity for implementation and follow-through.

Experience by the Top Ranked Schools

Data for managerial and nonmanagerial experience are shown in Table 5. The mean years of managerial experience for those in the top ranked schools is almost one-third (30%) lower than the average for the total respondents; further, a much larger percentage of those in the top ranked schools reported no managerial experience when compared with the other respondents.

Table 5
Comparison of Top Ranked Schools' Respondents with Total Respondents

	Top ranked school respondents	Total respondents
Number	61	1,243
Mean age	41.9	43.5
Mean years of total managerial experience	8.1	11.7
Percent reporting no managerial experience	15.0%	10.5%
Mean years of nonmanagerial non-academic experience	6.4	7.2
Percent reporting no nonmanagerial, non-academic experience	10.0%	13.1%

These data indicate substantial differences in experience between those in the top ranked schools and the respondents as a whole. Those professors employed by schools that have achieved academic respectability have significantly less managerial and nonmanagerial experience. Hekimian (1969) and Berry (cited in "Goodbye, America," 1972) appear to be correct in their positions that the drive for academic respectability has led to more of a research orientation and less of an involvement in managerial practice.

Experience by Academic Degree Field

Means for managerial experience and age for respondents with business, middle-ground, and nonbusiness degree fields are shown in Table 6. An *F*-test showed statistically significant differences between the average level of managerial experience for the three groups. The highest level of experience was in the middle-ground category, with business and nonbusiness being almost equal.

Table 6
Managerial Experience by Academic Degree Field

<i>Academic degree Field</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean Age</i>	<i>Mean Years of managerial exp.</i>
Business	908	42.4	11.6*
Middle-ground	154	47.4	13.0*
Nonbusiness	148	45.2	11.5*

* $p < .01$

These data suggest that Grayson's (1973) charge that the influx of nonbusiness oriented persons has led to the theory-practice gap may be inaccurate. Those with nonbusiness school degrees have on the average as much managerial experience as those with business school degrees. However, those in the middle ground category (see Footnote 5) have more managerial experience. Age, which correlates significantly with managerial experience ($r = .72, p < .01$), explains some of the difference. The middle ground group is older (mean age = 47.4), which would explain a higher experience level. The nonbusiness group is also older (mean age = 45.2) but has about the same mean experience level as the business group. This would indicate that experience should be higher, but is not. The influx of professors from nonbusiness disciplines does not appear to materially contribute to any lack of managerial experience or lack of exposure to managerial applications and practices.

Experience Related to Other Variables

Age was positively correlated with managerial experience ($r = .72, p < .01$). There are two plausible explanations for this correlation: (1) that older respondents obtained their managerial experience prior to embarking on an academic career, while younger respondents were less likely to do this; or (2) that older respondents have had more

opportunities to gain managerial experience because of their greater longevity. Intuition favors the first explanation since teaching is a career choice, and one is not likely to leave it for a managerial post only to return to academics later.

Rank was positively correlated with managerial experience ($r = .20, p < .01$). This relationship was not as strong, however, as the relationship that was reported between experience and age.

Size of Institution was *negatively* correlated with managerial experience ($r = -.10, p < .01$). This means that larger institutions are less likely to have professors with managerial experience than are smaller institutions. Two possible explanations are apparent: (1) the larger schools attract less experienced, more research oriented academicians because of their ability to support research, while smaller schools are less attractive to this type of professor; or (2) smaller schools are more likely to attract "second career" people who have retired from industry, the military, or governmental service. Either explanation is plausible, and the data do not permit further analysis. The correlations are low, but significant.

Summary and Conclusions

The data suggest that managerial experience among professors of management averages about 12 years. This is quite the opposite of the assertion made by critics of management education. The data also indicate that nonmanagerial experience, which could also provide an understanding of managerial practices, is about 7 years. This also is quite the opposite of claims made by critics of management education. The data suggest that universities that have achieved academic respectability (at least those rated by *MBA* and *Change*) have faculties with less managerial experience. This agrees with the claims made by management education critics. The data suggest that the influx of professors from nonbusiness disciplines has not affected the emphasis on theory at the expense of applications or because of any lack of experience in managerial practices. This finding was also contradictory to expectations. Thus, any gap that has developed between theory and practice cannot be explained by the critics assertions about lack of experience as managers, lack of knowledge about actual management practices, or toward theory over practice resulting from an influx of nonbusiness academic disciplines. The only assertion that was supported was that the drive for academic respectability does appear to have had an impact on some highly ranked schools that appear to place greater emphasis on theory and research rather than on managerial applications and practices.

When demographic factors were considered, size of the institution and age of the respondents provided some additional insights. Larger institutions seemed to be more likely to employ faculty having less managerial experience. This could reflect a research and theory bias in

larger schools, or it could be that smaller schools attract more experienced second career people. The average respondent was 43.5 years old, but 30% of the respondents were 35 and under. Since 67% had received their highest degree in the past 10 years, the critics claims might not be correct right now, but certainly might become so in the not too distant future.

The one finding that does appear to lend itself to improvement is that most of the experiences are prior to 1970. If management professors wish to be informed about relevant, current managerial applications and practices and to be able to present them, they will need exposure to modern business practices. This might be done through consulting, summer internships, and/or reading in the applied, professional management literature.

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