

Editorial: Journal of Management History Vol 12 Issue 1

MANAGEMENT AND ITS HISTORY: THE WORTHY ENDEAVOUR OF THE SCRIBE

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Paper Type: Conceptual

Purpose: This paper introduces the *Journal of Management History*, relaunched as a stand-alone journal and explores its *raison d'être*.

Approach: The articles that constitute this first issue of the relaunched journal form the launching pad for this discussion, with these ideas and those from previous research used to comment on the theme of “the worthy endeavour of the scribe”.

Research & Practical Implications: In *The Life of Reason*, Santayana (1905/2005) said “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. Managers looking for the ‘next big thing’, without being able to effectively incorporate it into their experience, and the experience of those who are long gone, are condemned to repeat not just the past but also the mistakes of the past. Accordingly, it is also critical for management scholars to both recognise and take advantage of earlier thinking and empirical work to inform their contemporary musings and research if they are to provide meaningful frameworks for practitioners.

Value: Drawing on the themes presented in the articles of this issue, the paper demonstrates the value of knowing accurately the history of management thought to scholars and practitioners alike.

Keywords: Management History

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“A developed bureaucratic system reveals and actively promotes a specific human trait: a deep satisfaction in devising routines for measuring, inspecting, checking, and thus as far as possible controlling other people’s activities”

(Kemp, 1989:111)

INTRODUCTION

Kemp’s (1989) commentary above is not, as some might first think, related to Weber’s (1946) exposition of bureaucracy. Rather, it forms part of Kemp’s introduction to his exploration of the basis for economic success in ancient Egypt which, as he says, serves to “carry the history of bureaucracy back to the third millennium BC”. (Kemp, 1989:112). The person with this aptitude, “as distinctive and important for a society as the genius of its artists and architects, or the bravura of its military” (Kemp, 1989:111) was the scribe. Not just “a writing man”, as Kemp’s (1989:111) translation of the Egyptian word would suggest, but mathematician, logistician, measurer, mobiliser, manager and historian. It is with these latter two tasks that we are particularly concerned.

This paper is an introduction to the re-launch of the *Journal of Management History* (JMH) as a stand-alone journal and, to the extent that all of us involved in the journal (as readers, writers, reviewers and editors), are concerned with management and its history, it is also a tribute to the worthy endeavour of the scribe. In presenting this tribute, I will use the papers that constitute this first issue of the “new” JMH as a touchstone, exploring their worthy endeavours as a platform for the wider exploration of management and history, of which they are a part.

THE VALUE OF A JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT HISTORY

I began my first JMH Editorial two years ago with the following quote from a former Governor General of Australia, on the occasion of his giving the Inaugural Lingiari lecture:

“The past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future. It stays to shape what we are and what we do.”

Sir William Deane (1996)

I have used it on several occasions subsequently, in part at least, to ensure that it is brought to a wider audience and to reaffirm its importance as a principle that informs the core of JMH’s *raison d’être*.

Editorial: Journal of Management History Vol 12 Issue 1

The significance of doing so is given by the fact there are few general management texts today that do not start with homage to the late 19th and early 20th century writers on management and administration – Taylor (1911) and scientific management Weber (1946) and bureaucracy, Fayol (1949) and the classical school of management, and so on – followed by a quick ‘tiptoe through the tulips’ of their (claimed) main ideas, a passing nod to Elton Mayo (1933) and Chester Barnard (1938), and then it’s on to Maslow (1943), Drucker (1954), Mintzberg (1973; 1974), Porter (1980), *et al*, with nary a backward glance. The notion appears to be that these writers, mostly long dead, are only of ‘historical’ interest, quaint in their ideas that more modern minds have evolved beyond in their thinking. Yet, as Sir William Deane so cogently observes, the past is never fully gone – absorbed into the present and future, it stays to shape what we are and what we do. And so we need to consider the past more than merely *en passant*.

There are also writers whose ideas are not widely explored or known, and even ignored (see, for example, Dye, Mills & Weatherbee, *in press*; and Nyland & Heenan, *in press*). Accordingly, the history of management ideas that is proffered in the various management/business tomes (with worthy exceptions such as Wren, 2004) is not only often sparse, but patchy and, ultimately, unbalanced. In consequence, we need to examine more closely the historical development of management concepts and practices, with a view to how they inform the present and ‘shape what we are and what we do’.

And this is the task of the *Journal of Management History* and its scribes. This task includes examination or re-examination of established historical management concepts; the historical and continuing role of the behavioural sciences in the development of management practices; historical analysis of management philosophies; methodologies for dealing with historical management materials; the importance of the historical perspective in understanding contemporary management; and historical aspects of such workplace features as quality control, cultures, and occupational health and safety.

THE ENDEAVOURS OF THE MODERN SCRIBES

The selection of the endeavours of the modern scribes presented here is a wonderfully diverse one. It is constituted by papers with quite different topics, from different parts of the globe and from different points in time. There is also a mixture of methodologies – case studies, quantitative analysis, longitudinal analysis, theoretical analysis – appropriate to their respective subjects of interest, but different nonetheless. They provide a representative sample, a benchmark no less, of the kinds of papers that will find a home in JMH. I begin with the paper by Murphy, Liao and Welsch (2006).

In their introduction, Murphy, *et al* (2006) point out that, from the fall of Rome (circa 476 CE) to the eighteenth century, there was virtually no increase in per capita wealth generation in the West, with per capita wealth generation and income in the West growing exponentially in the 1700s, 1800s, and 1900s. With this in mind they note that throughout history, entrepreneurial thought has evolved by unpredictable turns and profound developments, offering new conceptualizations of what it means for something to be entrepreneurial. Using a broad definition of entrepreneurship, as the discovery, evaluation, and utilization of future goods and services, they seek to interpret and explain the evolution in entrepreneurial thought, and in thinking about entrepreneurship. While Murphy and his colleagues modestly characterise their work as “merely one possible account”, it needs to be acknowledged as the first to trace the conceptual development of entrepreneurship through history.

Editorial: Journal of Management History Vol 12 Issue 1

They describe their methodology as being informed by two complementary tenets: conceptual knowledge (through history) is neither relative nor paradigm-specific, while historical knowledge (across concepts) is relative and paradigm-specific. They define instances of conceptual knowledge as explanatory inventions that have not yet been rejected and distinguish them from instances of historical knowledge, which are more temporal and spatial; relative to a paradigm, descriptive, and based on inductive reasoning from past observation. This two-part approach allows for a methodology of alternating biases. For the primary objective of interpretive and explanatory historical analysis of concepts, it allows for the employment of a logic-based deductive principle of conjecture and refutation in favour of sociological-based descriptions of multiplicities of subjective views. For the secondary objective of framing, organizing, and describing the conceptual history of entrepreneurial thought, their bias is reversed.

Dagnino and Quattrone (2006) observe that the notion of institution is experiencing a revival in a number of social disciplines such as economics, sociology, political science, and management and organizational studies. They seek to better understand why this might be the case and to provide an intercultural theoretical base for adopting and updating “institution”. They begin with the idea of *istituto* as it was developed by Gino Zappa within the Italian research tradition known as *economia aziendale* (in order to make it accessible to an international audience). Drawing on a constructivist epistemology, they then undertake a critical comparison between the institutional approaches developed Zappa and his US contemporary, John R. Commons. Through this approach, they are able to develop and extend our understanding of the epistemological, theoretical, and practical ‘genetic variations’ between the institutional perspectives of Zappa and Commons. Importantly, from a JMH perspective, their work informs a number of present day issues (i.e., the rising debates on corporate social responsibility and the firms’ environmental and social reports), as well as paving the way for additional research via a more holistic view of the concept of institution.

Whiteley’s (2006) report of an exploratory study on unwritten rules carried out in Australia is a work in three parts. The first part reviews the theoretical scholarly writings on rules as social structures, from the early sociology of the 19th.century to the organizational theory of the present day. Theories of structural functionalism and institutionalism are acknowledged as historical influences on rules and the assumptions likely to be made by managers about compliance and implementation. In the second part, she describes the research in which staff members from five organizations were invited to focus groups supported by Group Support Systems (GSS) technology, which allowed anonymous responses to questions about both official rules and unwritten rules. The third part presents the findings – that rules exist, are acted upon, and require a view of the rule-implementer as complex and holistic – which support Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration: the individual rule taker draws on rules and also personal sensibility when involved in social encounters.

At a time when managers are being urged to “just do it!”, on the basis that whatever “works” is good, Whiteley reminds us that there are rules that govern social engagement; that managers bring assumptions to those engagements that influence their appreciation of those rules; and that deep listening is a key social responsibility of managers in those engagements. She then posits a future research agenda for those interested in what really happens in organisations.

Whiteley’s (2006) study provides important insights for the rules of engagement at the micro level in organisations. Operating at the aggregate level, McNaughton and Green (2006) point out that increased specialisation in an enterprise’s core industry over time has implications for

the management skills required to design and manage networks of independent firms (for example, through strategic alliances), the performance expectations and risks taken by shareholders, and the commercial and tax policies set by government. A reduction in diversification also may change the industrial structure of the economy, with sectors less integrated through ownership relationships, and thus potentially more sensitive to patterns of market exchange.

Despite its global significance, much of the literature related to the effect of ownership restructuring on aggregate diversification is focused on the U.S. economy. McNaughton and Green (2006) examined the ownership networks of medium-sized and large Canadian corporations over a 20-year period (1976-1995) in order to test the hypothesis of increased specialisation during the 1980s in the aggregate pattern of intercorporate ownership in the Canadian economy. They found that aggregate diversification declined slightly over the period, at least in terms of the average number of industry groups in which enterprises have subsidiaries. On the other hand, there was an increased likelihood that subsidiaries were outside of the core industry group of the enterprise.

McNaughton and Green's (2006) data provide insights into ownership changes across the economy, and are not sensitive to changes in a few very large firms. There is evidence also that the pattern of inter-corporate ownership is different between manufacturing and service sectors, and so future research should treat these separately. In the JMH context, we have further evidence of the importance of understanding how we arrive in the circumstances we do, not just as a result of short-term market dynamics, but appreciating the long term cycles of change that take place, as a basis responding appropriately to those changes.

When the Columbia space shuttle disintegrated on re-entry in January 2003, many were discomfited by the parallels with the Challenger space shuttle disaster some 17 years earlier, in January 1986. This discomfort became more pronounced as the Columbia Accident Investigation Board inquiry heard extensive testimony suggested that little had been learned from the lessons of two decades earlier (*cf* Columbia Accident Investigation Board, 2003). Govekar and Govekar (2006) undertake a similar exercise, bringing two separate fires some 80 years apart (and identified as the worst and second-worst industrial accidents in the US) into juxtaposition.

Using contemporaneous and more contemporary sources, the Govekars explore the parallels between the two fires, separated by 80 years and hundreds of miles. Sadly, their findings are eerily reminiscent of the findings of both space shuttle disaster investigations – a failure of regulation and regulatory effort were found to be significant contributors to the Triangle (1991) and Hamlet (1991) fires and their consequences (the culture of NASA and the safety regimes were implicated in both sets of findings in relation to the space shuttle “accidents”). It is to be hoped that those who need to learn the lessons of Triangle and Hamlet identified by Govekar and Govekar (2006) are as responsive as NASA has been more recently in relation to the difficulties experienced by space shuttle Discovery in July/August 2005 (*cf* NASA, 2005).

With an intergenerational focus on how the past is absorbed and stays to shape what we are and what we do, Kreiser and his colleagues (2006) have sought to better understand the strategic process that occurs within family firms, by way of an in-depth analysis of the historical development of the growth strategies of four family firms in the United States, Finland, and Sweden. Their results suggest that family firms typically adopt conservative strategies in the early part of their life cycle. During their formative years, family firms often implement financially conservative strategies and place an emphasis on maintaining tight

control of the strategic decision-making process within the family unit. However, the competitive pressures experienced by family firms over time often force these companies to embrace a more entrepreneurial posture during the latter stages of their life cycle.

Notwithstanding that the firms examined in this study were from various cultures, their strategic development over time was very similar. This tentatively suggests that the evolution of the strategic process occurring within family firms may be generalisable across cultures (and across time?). As a microcosm of the broader historical movement, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that the stage in the company life cycle plays an important role in determining the strategic behaviour of family firms. From another perspective, the findings of Kreiser, *et al* (2006) indicate that there may be important distinctions between family firms and other entrepreneurial organizations.

CONCLUSION

And so we offer to our readers this first collection in the next stage of development of JMH – a diverse collection, comprising papers characterised in the main by the differences between them. On the other hand, there is much they share in common. Of course, they are all products of a group of authors interested in utilizing the past (variously defined) to help inform the present and the future. They are works also informed by the sentiments expressed by Sir William Deane and reflected in the more recent comment from Dan Wren (2004:489) that:

... there is a flow of events and ideas that link yesterday, today, and tomorrow in a continuous stream. We occupy but one point in this stream of time: we can see the distant past with a fairly high degree of clarity, but as we approach the present, our perspective becomes less clear. New ideas, subtle shifts in themes, and emerging environmental events will influence evolving management thought.

In bringing these remarks to a close, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge those scribes who have brought us to this important point in the history of the *Journal of Management History*. First, of course, are the authors who toil in their scholarship of discovery to provide us with the carefully crafted words that are the bricks of the journal edifice. They continue work diligently to provide more and more “bricks” each year. Second are the reviewers who constitute our Editorial Advisory Board. They work to refine and shape the bricks so that they fit together so well – they run the academic theodolite over the works so that we can be satisfied they run straight and true. My special thanks go to my Managing Editor, Anna Torrance, who has been the sand and cement of our construction metaphor – she really is the one that holds our edifice together.

I would also like to acknowledge the great relationship between JMH and the Management History Division within the Academy of Management – although wary of singling out individuals, my thanks especially go to Michele and Paul Govekar for their early encouragement, to Julia Teahen for her cooperation and assistance with the review process for the papers submitted to the Division for the Academy meeting, and to Franz Lohrke for his enthusiasm in taking the relationship to a deeper and comprehensive level. Regina Greenwood and Dan Wren have been unstinting in their support for the reinvigoration of the journal. I might note *en passant* in my role as Chair of the Academy’s International Theme Committee, how delighted I am to see the international spread of topics and authors in this issue – US, Canada, Australia, Italy, Sweden, Finland – this is another of my aims toward a genuinely international dialogue.

Editorial: Journal of Management History Vol 12 Issue 1

Enjoy the *Journal of Management History*, not just as a transactional series of articles and papers, but as an ongoing conversation between us scribes, for we are truly engaged in a worthy endeavour.

Editorial: Journal of Management History Vol 12 Issue 1

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Editorial: Journal of Management History Vol 12 Issue 1

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