

# Guest editorial: Breaking an intellectual monopoly: unacknowledged management gurus

In most areas of intellectual endeavour, those at a discipline's cutting edge are disconnected from other mortals. Such individuals live in a bifurcated world wherein they pitch their data and interpretations to an (often vanishingly small) audience of peers. Their medium is principally the serious scholarly literature and their way of communicating is, by everyday standards, turgid, opaque and exclusory. As a result, heroes of technical domains are confined to their disciplinary silos, their proverbial ivory towers. They tend not to attain the status of public intellectuals and typically remain unknown, heroes maybe but only within small circles. Understandably so. After all, the pioneers in say, physics or statistics as well as in more applied areas such as nanotechnology and drug development are, of necessity, dealing with subject matter that, although potentially of widespread benefit, is difficult to understand and esoteric, for practical purposes off-limits to lay audiences. In these kinds of cases, the shadowy experts have specialised formal training, almost always only obtained within universities and research institutions. They are small in number and typically cement themselves in a rigid pecking-order created from the prestige-levels of the journals wherein they publish, their number of citations, the amount of research funding they attract and the image of their institutional affiliations. They mostly reveal nothing of their lives and personal values through their work. Their reticence in this regard expresses an axiom of logical positivism, namely, the fact-value distinction, which, in practice, boils down to the contention that preference and bias are not part of knowledge creation. In other words, claims to truth are to be judged independently of their creator (Joullié and Gould, 2022, 2023a, 2023b).

Thinkers and writers about management, employment and organisational life are in a different category to their peers in most other disciplines. Indeed, theory addressing workplace stewardship, superintendence and relationships more generally is not the exclusive preserve of the academy and conjecture in these areas is engaged in widely wherever there are employers struggling to be successful (Muldoon *et al.*, 2023). In this regard, the consultants, the academics and the practitioners compete in the same space and often with mutual disdain. It is also true that those who formalise ideas about how to do management are more inclined to become celebrities than theorists from other domains. Some write best-selling books, go on the speaking circuit, get lucrative consulting deals and gain popularity through social media. The ones who end-up in the limelight, identified here as the established gurus, tend to be, in various ways, compelling speakers and good self-promoters (Joullié *et al.*, 2021). Such attributes bare little on whether their actual message has substance, a phenomenon which creates a consequential point of difference between the management thinkers and those building bridges or microprocessors. Specifically, the sorting machine for who becomes a management superstar is not the one used for the engineers. Whatever the case, and at least from a historical perspective, the people who have ended up being known as management gurus are not always the ones who have made the most profound theoretical, or even practical, contributions (Muldoon *et al.*, 2023). Herein lies the motivation for the present special issue, *Unacknowledged pioneers in management thought*.



Seemingly without much effort, management gurus often move from academia to industry, mostly into consulting and public speaking roles. Their message is typically generic, accessible and has much to do with ethereal notions of an ideal way to operate. For example, “management by objectives,” an expression coined by Peter Drucker in 1954, became for a generation of executives the go-to blueprint for “getting things done through people” (another Druckerian favourite expression). Similarly, the quest for corporate exceptionalism was a rallying call from the book *In Search of Excellence* (co-written with Robert Waterman), which catapulted overnight Tom Peters from obscurity to worldwide fame. “Business re-engineering”, which transformed corporations (but did not necessarily improve them) throughout the 1990s, was cooked up by Michael Hammer and James Champy. The attractive, if elusive and contested idea of “competitive advantage”, eagerly sought after by executives as the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, was first delineated by Michael Porter in 1980. Porter had a knack for making everything seem easy – or, at least, easy to understand. In the process, he established himself as the most widely quoted management author. As for the eight steps for managing change that consultants apply and recommend worldwide, they were developed and mega-marketed by John Kotter, another thinker with a knack for vulgarisation.

Each of the aforementioned theorists was undoubtedly good at what they did. Each obviously wrote, spoke and generally presented well. However, as anyone who has ever had a boss is aware, somehow management is still not often done very well. Such a letdown is well appreciated with a thought experiment: if, say, airline pilots as a group were as patchy in carrying out their core functions as those who oversee the world’s workplaces, safety-conscious travellers would undoubtedly look for terrestrial means of transportation. The same sobering performance differential also exists for carpenters, dentists and accountants, domains of professional activity that, in aggregate terms, almost never dip below an established universal standard. Managers however are different. Some, in fact quite a few, are (and have always been) subpar. Perhaps this has something to do with who they listen to; which, in turn, of course, has something to do with how who they listen to become imbued with guru status (Gould *et al.*, 2017; Gould, 2020).

It is clear that a small group of management gurus has played a pivotal and monopolistic role in shaping management theory and practice. For better or worse, the ideas, theories and often charismatic personas of the anointed have left indelible marks on working life, a phenomenon that can be indexed through citation counts, downloads and sales. From the early proponents of the classical school (Taylor, Fayol, the Gilbreths, etc.) to controversial CEOs such as Alfred Sloan or Jack Welch and contemporary characters like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Sheryl Sandberg, management gurus have been behind creation of a near homogenous view of organisational best practice (Joullié and Spillane, 2021; Joullié and Gould, 2023a, 2023b). Indeed, the expression “best practice” itself comes from the guru playbook, implicitly conveying the idea that deviation from orthodoxy is pathological or, at least, undesirable. The media for purveying the guru’s prescriptions are business schools and associated consultancies. As is so for the academy, these spheres of commercial life are, of course, industries in themselves, often highly profitable but with a growing list of detractors (Joullié and Gould, 2023a, 2023b and 2022).

The conventional wisdom is that monopolies benefit only those who hold them. This maxim is indisputably true in the economic arena but is also alive and well when it comes to intellectual conglomerates. The present Special Issue of JM showcases contributions from leading scholars making a case that there are consequential thinkers from (specifically) the 20th century who merit a place on the podium alongside those

who dominate the textbooks. In so doing, it spotlights the dysfunctional historical role of strangleholds in the development of management thought. From a selection of submitted manuscripts, five contributions survived a rigorous review protocol and are showcased in the following pages.

The first article in the special issue, authored by Joullié, Sweidan and Desjardins, discusses the extraordinary life of Ichak Adizes, a Holocaust survivor who ultimately immigrated to the USA. Adizes, the only living guru profiled in the special issue, developed and extensively road-tested a generic method for avoiding “destructive conflict” whilst simultaneously cultivating internal “collaborative leadership.” Adizes’ way of working with corporate leaders has been unusually successful when examined on several dimensions. Curiously however, his blueprint has not well made it into the textbooks. If the commentary of mainstream management writers, CEOs and heads of government is to be taken seriously, Adizes and his team have achieved remarkable results across disparate industries and contexts (from banking to food services, from aircraft manufacturing to the performing arts and creative endeavour, in both commercial and not-for-profit sectors) and to the benefit of myriad stakeholders. Moreover, there is an unshakable practical component to Adizes’ theorising, the substance of which is captured in the term *sybergetic*, an expression he coined combining the words *symbiosis* and *synergy*. Adizes argues that employers are at their best when they prioritise measures which cultivate mutual trust and respect amongst all members of an organisation and its stakeholders. He emphasises that there is value in diversity, the raw material for developing, and capitalising on, a broader and thus superior corporate information/knowledge base (*synergy*). The *sybergetic* construct is nested in the larger notion that organisms, even in their aggregate (such as human organisations), regularly need therapy because multidimensional change is ever present and, when not dealt with (adapted to) is inclined to cause disintegration. In this vein, entities effected by change are well conceived of as systems that are composed of subsystems, each of which move at different velocities (for example, marketing moves faster than production, production faster than accounting and accounting faster than human resources).

The special issue’s second contribution from scholars Laurent Antonczak, Antoine Bureth and Thierry Burger-Helmchen is about Keith Pavitt (1937–2002). Pavitt, working for most his life in mainstream academia (specifically the Science Policy Research Unit) at the University of Sussex and interpreting his subject matter through the prism of microeconomics, influenced thinkers, particularly in Europe. In an overall sense, Pavitt made the technical case that investment in research and innovation drives firm, industry and national-level economic growth. He took his cue somewhat from Michael Porter in that he was concerned to ensure that esoteric subject matter was turned into actionable sequences. Although the man himself has something of a low profile, Pavitt’s theorising remains influential, at least when bibliographic metrics are used to assess impact. Indeed, and as will be discussed in Antonczak, Bureth and Burger-Helmchen’s contribution, now more than two decades after his death, his seminal 1984 article which introduced his innovation taxonomy and two others addressing strategic aspects of knowledge management (2001) and the operations of major international firms (1997) continue to be regularly cited.

The third article published in this special issue is by Melike Mermercioglu Denis Tuncalp and concerns the work of Turkish professor, Ibrahim Kavrakoglu (1941–2016). Kavrakoglu, with his professional interests in leadership, organisational change dynamics and strategic adaptability, established a reputation for spanning disciplinary boundaries. He was also concerned about making ideas simultaneously accessible and practical. His development of the “3G” information system which integrates data from the past, present and future, is an

early exemplar of what today is seen as indispensable for large-scale corporate life, namely, management information systems. As will be discussed, Kavrakoglu also ultimately pioneered development of (and as a consultant implemented) other ideas pertaining to how to manage corporate complexity, notions of “asymmetric” knowledge within organisations and organisational knowledge deployment. His notion of “creative informatics” is arguably the first serious attempt at reconciling the, often antagonistic, imperatives of corporate creativity and technical advance.

The fourth guru profiled in the special issue is Canadian American sociologist, Erving Goffman (1922–1982). As Zhongyuan Sun, Yutian Ren and Yilan Li show, the substance of Goffman’s contribution was diverse in the content it addressed (for example, he defended positions about the nature of face-to-face interaction, micro-level sociology, “interaction-order,” strategic interaction à la game theory, linguistics and mental illness. Along the way, he made substantial, and largely unheralded, strides in social science research methodology, particularly, for example, ethnography. As will be argued although Goffman’s contribution was eclectic and, in many quarters, well acknowledged, his influence on management thought, in particular, for being distinctive, has a curiously low profile.

The fifth article in the special issue, *Can gurus wear blue collars?: Samuel Gompers Volunteerism as a Management Strategy*, by Hindy Laura Schachter broadens the idea of the guru concept. This piece was included in the special issue to reveal that it is not just gender, sex and racial and national diversity which has historically been unrepresented in management thought but class diversity. Indeed, this piece well represents a response to the point that certain of the pioneers in the domain, particularly those from the classical era, were “intolerant elitists” (Muldoon *et al.*, 2023).

Even if one accepts that the names associated with advances in management thought have earned their reputations on the back of real accomplishment (as noted, a controversial assumption), it remains hard to deny that the list of these same names is not long enough. Largely for historical reasons, certain theorists, mostly from the 20th century, have acquired an intellectual monopoly on how things get done in workplaces. If this special issue makes progress in breaking this stranglehold, it will have been worthwhile.

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