

International Ambidexterity: An Extant Challenge for Business Professors?

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Abstract

Business professors today face multiple challenges and trade-offs which often seem irreconcilable. For instance, they need to balance rigor and relevance in academic research, manage the production and commercialization of outputs, and develop managerial astuteness while training themselves in sophisticated research skills. Doing all of this at the same time has long been considered difficult, if not impossible. Thus, typical academic careers follow the principle of 'temporal ambidexterity' where specific sets of tasks are followed by others. But this pattern often falls short in capturing the full potential of academics, and it is suggested that professors balance conflicting requirements and challenge the presumed incompatibility of divergent tasks. The notion of 'international ambidexterity' is proposed to engage professors in multi-cultural context shifting and frame-breaking exercises that potentially disrupt dominant mindsets and better prepare them for the challenges and opportunities of their profession.

Keywords: *International ambidexterity, context shifting, academic careers*

Business professors today face multiple challenges. They are asked to train future managers and to prepare aspiring young researchers for their respective careers; they are requested to provide valuable advice to multinational companies and governments; they need to embellish the reputation of their institution by engaging in client development, administrative services, public speeches, and the diffusion of their research outputs; concurrently, they are challenged to reinforce their own careers by increasing the number of highly sophisticated publications in dedicated journals. As a matter of fact, business professors also have to be international in scope, speak many languages, and translate their insights to various local audiences. It is almost consensually believed that these activities are difficult, if not impossible to combine, and that professors often tilt to the extreme, i.e., they engage themselves in either more scientific or more commercially oriented activities. However, recent changes in the institutional landscape require that professors combine and balance both skills 'under one hat' and become ambidextrous (Markides, 2007). In addition to their conventional research focus, this requires them to develop managerial astuteness and skills they have not learned in their path-dependent academic careers built on research production to the exclusion of commercialization. Indeed, reality shows mixed results in terms of adequate university structures and policies regarding career tracks, remuneration, and training for individual researchers to become ambidextrous. As a consequence, only a handful of professors today have managed to incorporate the conflicting challenges of the business world into their research approach (Ambos et al., 2008). Gilbert Probst is one of them and this article shows how both his intellectual advancements and his 'scientific management practice' reflect the development of what today is discussed under the label of 'ambidexterity.'

This short essay is structured as follows: *Section two* identifies in more detail the trade-offs that characterize today's academic world and how they impact the role of business professors. *Section three* refers to a nascent stream of research on ambidexterity that could provide some theoretical guidance as to how existing tensions may be better balanced. Reflecting on the changing roles of business professors further advances knowledge about ambidextrous individuals, an area which has so far received only scant attention. *Section four* extends the discussion to professors' 'international ambidexterity' and suggests the use of context shifting to reach a balanced focus. *Section five* finishes

with some suggestions and identifies future avenues for research into challenges of internationally ambidextrous business professors.

Academia as a Palace of Paradoxes?

It is not least the challenges at various national policy levels, such as, increasingly knowledge-dominated industry sectors, research funding, and patent filings which require that educational institutions be regarded as a means of increasing competitiveness (Goldfarb & Henrekson, 2003). This results in various paradoxes at the level of individual institutions and evokes questions as to how they should best be organized and governed in order to improve desired outputs. For instance, should business schools be public or private, accessible or elitist, autonomous or accountable, specialized or interdisciplinary; should they be experiential or traditional, and especially in times of crisis, can they be rational in the face of increasing irrationality and will they maintain their status quo facing hyperturbulent environments? Behind those paradoxes lies the more substantial question of whether business schools sense a chance to drive the corporate agenda by producing relevant research output that provides managers with better guidelines, or creates, via education, managers who can later drive an institution's agenda. In doing so, business schools have to field the demand from the real world to develop research that can actually address the *real* problems of business. This has solicited a discussion on the changing role of academia and the desired profiles of professors who should not only be solid in terms of research and teaching skills, but also be able to interface with top management. While most business school would confirm and underscore these needs, many of them stick to their tradition of hiring freshly minted Ph.D.'s who have been trained in academic rigor but do not want to be too actively involved in producing managerially relevant outputs. This strategy seems to be just fine given the short term view that rigorous top journal publications positively impact rankings, foster individual careers, and that hiring new Ph.D.'s is considerably less expensive than hiring senior researchers. However, in the long run mind, this system of academic rewards also results in a faculty devoted to (mostly positivist) research with little interest in real business life; it risks becoming incestuous and irrelevant. Indeed, many business professors are far too removed from the profession they supposedly serve:

“We cannot imagine a professor of surgery who has never seen a patient, or a piano teacher, who doesn't play the instrument, and yet today's business schools are packed with intelligent, highly skilled faculty with little or no managerial experience. As a result, they can't identify the most important problems facing executives and don't know how to analyze the indirect and long-term implications of complex business decisions. ...” (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005: 103).

For decades now, this divide between business and academia has been debated under the heading of 'rigor versus relevance' (Thomas & Tymon, 1982). The discussion includes different layers of arguments. First, criteria for assessing rigor and relevance are distinguished. Rigor denotes a structured and controlled way of theoretical and conceptual development, methodological design and execution, interpretation of findings, and use of findings in extending theory or developing new theory (Zmud, 1996). Rigor is often believed to be method-driven, suggesting that different methods may have different rigor, such as, ethnographic or econometric studies (Shome et al., 1996). In contrast, managerial relevance of scientific work has been viewed through the lens of instrumental practice, i.e., in how far it examines factors that managers can influence or effects that are of interest to them. While many people appear to be trapped by the folly of viewing rigor and relevance as inherently entailing a trade-off, this wrongly assumes that research *cannot* be both rigorous and relevant. But the two do not need to be conceptualized as a dichotomy as they can be increased simultaneously, for instance by adapting the style and presentation of final reports or by involving practitioners in research projects. Managers may be involved in *cooperative case writing* where they write their own accounts of

projects in which they have taken part. Such reports contain managerially relevant reflections on the project that are mutually reinforced by criteria of methodological rigor (Gibbert et al., 2003); here, both rigor and relevance are found in the jointly formulated research question, as well as in the method to provide answers.

Second, trade-offs between rigor and relevance have often been equated to the conflict between *fragmented* versus *synthetic knowledge*. To be rigorous, so the argument goes, it is important to concentrate on one inch-wide and three miles-deep knowledge, i.e., to investigate, dissect, and focus on micro-details. Do one thing and do it well, it is preached. This approach seems to be more of a contemporary phenomenon as earlier times have spawned various artists and scholars, who pursued multiple fields of study simultaneously. Perhaps the quintessential ‘renaissance man’ was Leonardo DaVinci, who was a master of art, an engineer, and an anatomy expert with some complementary knowledge of other professions. Today, we do not have a DaVinci-esque syndrome in academics and management any more. We specialize and limit ourselves to rather single-minded perspectives of the world pretending that these are sufficient to capture the problems of a multi-dimensional environment. But reality is complex and creates complex problems for organizations and individuals. These require researchers with an interdisciplinary focus to approach them. Gilbert Probst has applied such a holistic perspective since the early days of his career when he chose cybernetics and systems theory as originally interdisciplinary academic domains to be the foundation for his research on organizational design, self-organization, and developmental management (Probst, 1987; Klimecki et al., 1994).

Unfortunately, in the departments of today’s business schools, these ideas are difficult to bring to life. In extreme instances, people who step out of their departmental boundaries are often relegated to nobodies; they become people of no importance. As a consequence, many researchers do not even venture to step out of the confines of their closed-loop perspective; they are “lost before translation” as their work does not intend to address the multi-faceted questions of managers (Shapiro et al., 2007). Interestingly, in fields other than business, there are convincing examples of people who manage the shift between boundaries extremely well. For instance, Brian May, Queen’s lead guitarist originally had degrees in math and physics, and was working on his Ph.D. when Queen finally took off, so he left his astrophysics job to embark on a musical career that would eventually get him named the 39th best guitarist of all time by Rolling Stone’s Magazine. Or look at Eric Lander. A former Rhodes scholar, he is currently a professor of biology at MIT and a co-chair of Barak Obama’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. Before, he was bouncing around between intellectual fields for a while, teaching managerial economics at Harvard and dabbling in neurobiology. Admittedly, these people are not full-time academics but they manage the balance between different disciplines, perhaps supported by favorable institutional contexts, or simply because it has been the very nature of their human mind which may be best expressed by the words of American poet Robert Frost that “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” (Frost, 1914).

Third, several business schools today face enormous pressures from their environment in pushing the financial output of their research. But *academic and commercial demands* differ markedly in terms of time frame, predictability, risk propensity, and intellectual property control. Many researchers simply have not developed the necessary skills to commercialize their academic work (Clarysse & Moray, 2004). Typically, it is late (tenured) or clinical faculty, which enters academia after several years of managerial experience, that is more adept at generating external income. The reasons are obvious. Faculty members entering academia after years of professional practice usually receive lower salaries than people with proven careers of producing high quality theoretical output and face higher pressures of commercializing their work. On the other hand, these people are less or little constrained by the norms of the institutional environment or linear thinking processes. Indeed, balanced mentalities with commercial acumen are more often found among those who have never attended universities or have recovered from their influence through several years of post educational living outside the academic

sphere. This argument is not to be neglected, as communities of scientific peers shape the definition of what constitutes a valuable avenue for research and this makes it risky for a scholar to deviate from the social norms of conducting academically rigorous work to seek commercial accomplishments (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2003; Ambos et al., 2008). Advancing profitability may be a valuable objective in its own right but the shackles of the administrative past often prevent researchers from engaging in transitional paths. However, as commercial output becomes the norm rather than an optional side of academic activity, a tighter balance may soon be required.

Taken collectively, current trends in the environment of business schools require that various trade-offs (rigor vs. relevance, fragmented vs. synthetic knowledge, research vs. commercialization) may be reconsidered. While several of these tensions have recently become more pressing for academia, the management and strategy literature has long reinforced that companies need to balance conflicts in order to succeed. For instance, mixing low-cost and differentiation strategies was formerly believed to result in lock-in or “stuck-in-the-middle” positions (Porter, 1980: 41) while today it is suggested to combine the two and play the spread. Searching for key success factors, Collis and Porras (1994), in their bestselling book *Built to Last*, emphasize that successful companies are able to combine a sense of direction with experimentation. In this line, Gilbert Probst and his colleagues also identify and underscore that balancing conflicting parameters like growth and profit is more likely to yield success than following one-dimensional strategies (Raisch et al., 2007). These suggestions already seem to be well understood by managers, but the academic world has only just started to oppose “the tyranny of the OR” and liberate itself with the “genius of AND” (Collis & Porras, 1994).

Ambidexterity in Academia– Solving Tensions

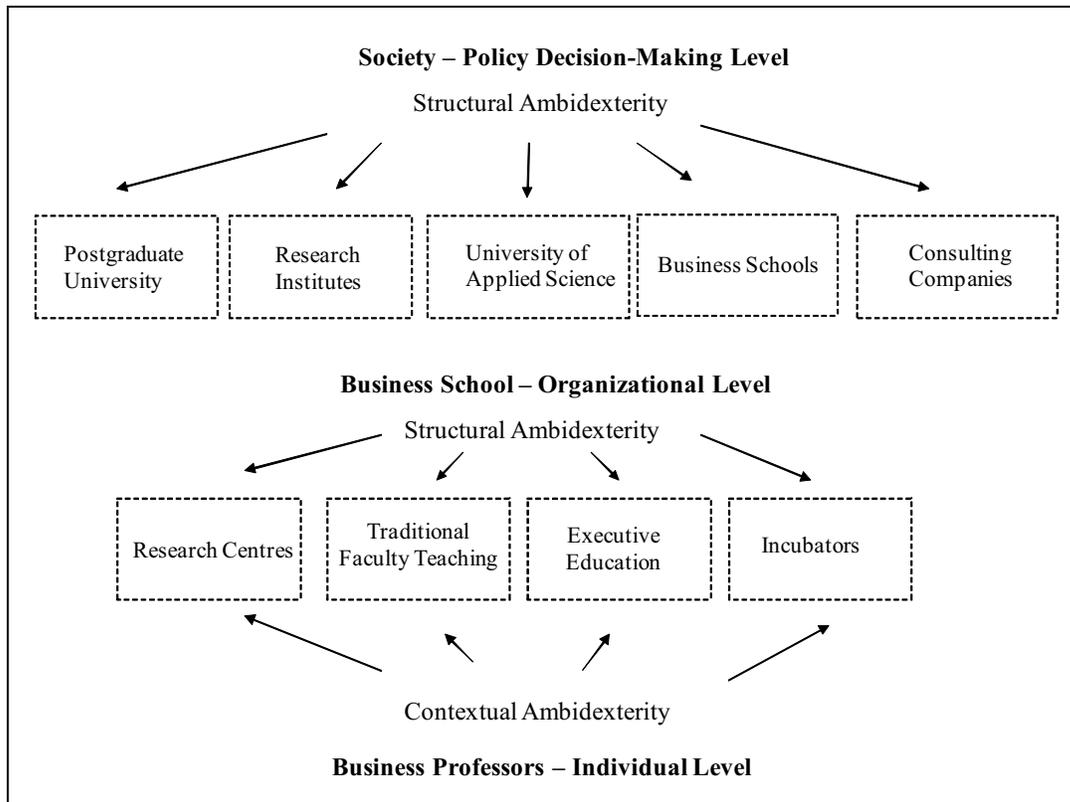
Most business schools are aware of the changes that are demanded from them but solving tensions and pursuing a dual focus is difficult to achieve. Drawing on insights from the recent literature on ambidexterity (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Raisch et al., 2009) offers some promising perspectives to balance conflicting activities both at the level of the business school and the level of the individual professor. Originally, the concept of ‘ambidexterity’ related to “the power of using two hands alike” (Oxford English Dictionary). It is here defined as the ability of complex and adaptive systems to manage and meet conflicting demands by engaging in fundamentally different activities (Gupta et al., 2006). Like many concepts in academic research, the notion of ambidexterity eked out a rather miserable existence in the 1970s (Duncan, 1976) before it was more closely tied to the twin concepts of explorative and exploitative learning (March, 1991), denoting the basic challenge between searching for new alternatives versus consolidating existing competencies. The subsequent literature on ambidexterity has related it to solving tensions in virtually every domain of managerial research and has suggested that organizational entities resolve conflicts at a respectively lower level by separating them into dual structures (structural ambidexterity) or by encouraging individual employees to make their own judgement as to how to divide their time (contextual ambidexterity). In an academic setting, different levels of educational decision-making may be affected by ambidextrous solutions (Figure 1).

Ambidextrous Business Schools – the Dominance of Dual Structures

At a *policy level*, different objectives exist to increase national competitiveness. To this end, a co-existence of various types of institutions has been suggested, some focused on the delivery of postgraduate degrees (postgraduate universities), others on the transfer of applied knowledge and first degrees (universities of applied science), and yet others on the delivery of specific contents, such as managerial knowledge (business schools). These are further set apart from purely commerce-oriented research institutions or consulting firms with little or no focus on educating students. Structural

separation facilitates the integration of different foci on a supra-organization level while applying different laws, recruiting procedures and policies, evaluation criteria, and specialized output objectives to independent units.

Figure 1: Ambidexterity in Academia



At the level of the *business school*, tensions can also be solved by creating dual or multiple structures for executive education, traditional faculty teaching, research, and entrepreneurial activities. McDonough and Leifer (1983) suggested that organizations use several structures simultaneously because the challenges they face are so dramatically different that they cannot be managed within one organizational unit. This seems to hold particularly true for business schools where every one of the above units concentrates on specific tasks and employs professors with the respective skills. For many of them, separation is preferable as some may not even speak the same language, for instance, several among them prefer the language of ‘dependent variables’ while others refer to terms, such as, ‘customer satisfaction’ and ‘balance sheets.’ With respect to implementation, structural separation is not without limits. Innovative ideas developed in one unit may not be transferred to another; standards for remuneration may not be the same for all units, leading to dissatisfaction and inequality; pro-activeness and challenging benchmarks may be lost given isolation and focus. In the long run, a strong separation of activities in different subsystems is likely to create silos with dysfunctional consequences because potential synergies are lost. Thus, separation may lead to inertia and stand-still.

At the *level of the individual*, the organizational literature suggests that ambidexterity also emerges when leaders in a business unit develop a supportive context for individuals to choose between conflicting activities. The resulting type of contextual ambidexterity is seen as the behavioral capacity to reconcile conflicting demands by building a set of processes, systems or contexts that enable and

encourage individual employees to make their own judgement as to how to divide their time (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). In this scenario, people should make active use of conflicts rather than avoiding them, and as a consequence, increase their behavioural complexity to adopt multiple leadership roles and change between them in selective contexts (Lubatkin et al., 2006). As shown in the previous section, there are several institutional constraints that prevent the successful implementation of contextual ambidexterity. One of the solutions may relate to recruiting faculty based on their potential to become thought leaders in society and great educators. This might also include trying to find more faculty with prior business experience and consider this more valuable than today, not least in order to speak about more varied remuneration systems. But should (or can) business schools pre-assess the ability of those people to be ambidextrous before hiring them? Given the challenges that arise from balancing trade-offs contextually, it was quickly suggested to adopt a temporal perspective of ambidexterity where individual professors balance conflicting tasks over the course of their professional life-cycle.

Ambidextrous Professors – the Dominance of Temporal Separation

A temporal perspective of individual ambidexterity has been inspired by looking at organizations from within the *punctuated equilibrium* model of corporate evolution (Adner & Levinthal, 2002). This model describes different interacting modes of change and depicts organizations as evolving through long periods of stability (equilibrium periods) punctuated by relatively short bursts of fundamental change (revolutionary periods). Firms following this pattern are presumed to be more successful because they balance reactions to both inertial and disruptive forces.

At the individual level, rather than permanently reconciling conflicting demands as suggested by contextual ambidexterity, professors (should) follow different objectives and activities when advancing in their career. First, they are typically recommended to pursue an exploitative strategy of strict journal publication which meets the rigor of academic evaluation criteria (see above). Aspiring candidates are even admonished to refrain from publishing in more managerially oriented outlets and not to waste their precious time with engaging in commercial output. Managerial relevance, so says the comforting advice, comes from using research findings in the executive classroom. Second, after tenure, or any other not precisely defined point in their career, professors gradually assume leadership functions, for instance as head of department, dean or research centre leader. For many of them, this is the first time they are required to adjust to and incorporate managerial principles into their academic routine behavior. Given that they are products of their past, most of them may not easily slip into this new role. Indeed, it has been argued, that the higher the degree of embeddedness, for example length of time in their previous academic position, the lower the likelihood that they will be able to produce competencies required for more commercially oriented tasks (Ambos et al., 2008). But conservative reasoning suggests that professors need to accumulate sufficient academic experience and acumen in their respective research fields, before they are deemed capable of acting in commercial functions. In short, it is believed that they can easily shift towards exploration while most of their previous career has been dominated by exploitative consolidation.

The picture of the typical academic career over time, reframed from within the exploration versus exploitation lens, may be painted too black, but reality in many countries illustrates some of its deficits. When professors reach the ‘acceptable’ age of doing business, much of their initial curiosity may be lost. So why squander the resources of young researchers and restrict them to a pre-defined career path where commercial exploration follows academic exploitation? In other institutions like consultancy firms, banks, service companies, etc., responsible human resources managers have long recognized that employees at young ages benefit from multiple challenges and diversified knowledge resources. Strikingly, business schools seem to opt for the contrary. Another major pitfall relates to learning processes. As knowledge structures are built early in childhood, or imprinted in the founding

days of an organization, radical changes at a later age are almost impossible. Those who have not incorporated the propensity for challenging their own mindsets early in life by engaging into higher-order learning processes (Bateson, 1972) may never be able to do so when they grow older. But why should we settle in with professors developing sub-optimal levels of managerial knowledge, only because they have ignored building commercial knowledge structures early in their lives? *That* there are alternatives has been demonstrated by Gilbert Probst in his department of organization and management studies at HEC-Geneva Business School where he pushed young doctoral students into assuming managerial or consulting roles while finishing their dissertations. For most of them, the ambidextrous design of being young, non-tenured, *and* commercially responsible has worked out well. He himself has further shown that duality is possible at all stages of an academic career and his shift towards a managerial position with the World Economic Forum has rendered the final proof for the validity of this strategy. Apart from these illustrative examples, which are rare, there are further theoretical arguments that support a ‘balanced’ academic career, especially when this takes place in an increasingly globalized environment.

The Ambidextrous Professor in a Globalized World

While there has been a long-established consensus that human beings are best off at home - and this is what examples of philosophers like Kant who spent his whole life in Königsberg illustrate - the error of philosophy has been to assume that man, because he is a social animal, should belong to one particular society. For most people, and especially business professors, growing and unlimited flows of knowledge have resulted in intellectual centres spread across many places in the world, including locations like China or India, where the next managerial hype or innovative product is just about to be launched. Almost every business school professor today can more easily than ever tap into this knowledge base and connect to international colleagues. Many of them get on well with adopting some sort of standard behavior that is believed to be non-offensive but concurrently ignores much of their own cultural specificities. One could argue that the more one knows of other cultures, the more inclusive but less distinct will human values become. But how could business school professors strike the balance between culturally idiosyncratic and universally adopted values and best prepare their students to succeed internationally. Even more importantly, what are the consequences of these developments for their own learning processes?

Let us assume that international contexts – and the need to be ambidextrous on a global scale – may also help professors to better balance academic careers at home. Most faculty members today have travelled and worked extensively abroad, mainly in their early or mid-term career. Going abroad at an early career stage often includes being trapped by the turgid promise that this is to consolidate and build threshold knowledge to prepare for future career challenges. Only rarely is it the objective of visiting professorships or sabbaticals to *radically* change existing competence portfolio, i.e., strive for exploration. The objectives of going abroad may intentionally be juxtaposed and may be seen as a chance towards overcoming dominant exploitative designs at home and balancing them with more exploratory challenges. This includes the idea of higher-order learning (Bateson, 1972) through ‘international context shifting,’ which may be more actively used to drive the learning of broader patterns of knowledge. Living in a foreign country can evoke many emotions of novelty, surprise, curiosity, but also anxiety, relief, and frustration. The mix of feelings helps to disrupt the existing state of mind that may already be limited by exploitative and reinforcing activities. Creative testing and experimenting away from what has worked at home before may help to create new learning styles, add value to or even challenge the existing competence portfolio of a business professor. In particular, the creation of ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1973) abroad helps in revisiting taken-for granted assumptions and in engaging in new patterns of thinking. Thus, international ambidexterity at the individual level may be defined as solving tensions and alleviating local rigidities by engaging in international

disruption or systematic contradictions in experience. Balancing individual capability development processes through ambidextrous solutions (knowledge disruption versus knowledge consolidation) may thus become the mantra for success in the academic world.

Conclusions

What is the future of business school professors? Will they spend their lives as isolated geniuses that will survive in a niche-market, or as multi-potent scientific managers deprived of their academic roots? Will business school professors adopt foreign role models or focus on the transmission of their own cultural heritage? In isolation, none of these scenarios is very likely or attractive. But the right mix of ambidextrous designs has not yet been found, neither in the strategic planning papers of business school executive nor in the recruitment policies for new professors. Perhaps, being an insider does not help and further research should focus on role profiles as identified by multiple audiences. Especially when it comes to further researching issues of international ambidexterity, no precocious assumption should be formulated on the uniform perceptions and desired degrees of 'balance' as these may differ across countries and over time. Taken collectively, some of the questions discussed here have not even been (openly) asked in front of a broader audience. Indeed, protagonist in ambidextrous education, Joseph Meeker (1975) formulated a question that, 35 years later has lost nothing of its relevance: "How can universities (business schools) come unskewed and learn to live in the wilderness?" Perhaps an initial step would be to restore wilderness in individual thinking – irrespective of the consequences for tenure!

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