Avoiding common missteps: Writing papers suitable for the *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*

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In my recent editorial articles in the *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, I noted that we receive numerous submissions that fall outside of our aims and scope, which is to publish research that advances the understanding of management and organizational success with emphasis on the Asia Pacific region (Ahlstrom, 2010a, b). In those articles I provided several recommendations for authors with respect to well-argued research papers, publishing in *APJM*, and avoiding a desk rejection. Those interested should look carefully at those articles as well as the journal's aims and scope, which can be found on *APJM*'s website along with other information and instructions for prospective authors (<http://www.springer.com/business+%26+management/business+for+professionals/journal/10490>). In addition, authors should pay particular attention to issues that I have repeated such as being sure to have a clear research question (posed early in the paper), having theory to guide the research, and stating the contributions of the research.¹ Many submissions to our journal lack these three fundamental items making it difficult to evaluate what might otherwise be interesting research.

These problems as well as others continue to hamper submissions to *APJM*; these are problems that plague otherwise good papers. It is not possible to cover all of these problems in-depth, and as noted, several have been covered in some detail in earlier *APJM* articles (e.g., Ahlstrom, 2010a, b; Ahlstrom, Lamond, & Ding, 2009),

¹There are some instances where research may not be theory driven. If so, an author must be clear about why this is and what research approach and research design are being used. For example, a research approach that is phenomenological and uses a case-based design may be most relevant to present the arguments and evidence of the paper (e.g., Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Hambrick, 2007).

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but one of the most commonly recurring problems will be addressed in this paper. This problem is what I call research focus. That is, what is the broad purpose of a given paper? It is important for the author to understand this and address it through the research question and by situating it in the current research on the topic. Some papers fail to do this; hence my emphasis on clear research questions and a cogent literature review (Ahlstrom, 2010b). Others do this adequately, but then fail to address topics that fall within our aims and scope (Ahlstrom, 2010a).

At *APJM*, perhaps reflecting our (earlier) eclectic background in Asian business and management, we still get a significant number of papers that cover very general business themes. These papers often seek to explain a topic such as the steps in total quality control or a case study explaining how to use the Balanced Scorecard. These topics are certainly interesting and often these papers are well written. But currently, *APJM* does not publish “how to” articles directed mainly at managers and supervisors. Rather, we encourage papers that ask (and answer) research questions addressing or improving theory, that is, questions primarily of interest to *management researchers* (Christensen & Raynor, 2003; Peng & Dess, 2010; Sutton & Staw, 1995). Of course a suitable research question can have practical implications as well, in fact it should if possible. But a paper’s primary focus must be on theory: theory building, theory testing, or theory improvement. When an editor or reviewer for *APJM* tells an author that his or her paper “lacks theory,” one common reason may be that the paper’s research focus is only on management practice, and not on theory building or theory improvement (c.f. Christensen & Raynor, 2003; Sutton & Staw, 1995).

What is a good example of a research question or focus that has theoretical import as well as practical implications? One example that I have used before that bears repeating is the research question asked by Peng and Heath (1996): “How do firms grow in a transition economy?” The authors answered that question by addressing the theory and evidence that explains how firms grow while bringing in new theory (institutional theory) to address the particular conditions present in transition economies. At the same time, Peng and Heath (1996) were able to derive some significant implications for practice regarding firm growth, which made for an interesting, valuable, and very well-read and cited paper (also see Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik, & Peng, 2009).

What would have been a much less useful approach for that topic would have been for the authors to focus only on giving specific recommendations on how to grow a firm while ignoring the important theoretical and empirical issues that are bound up in that topic (Ahlstrom, 2010c; Christensen & Raynor, 2003; Peng & Dess, 2010). That might seem very obvious to some, but many authors in their submissions to *APJM* will write up their research like an undergraduate textbook chapter or consultant’s report complete with numerous full color diagrams, authoritative steps, and multiple lists of bullet points. Although this may look scholarly and well ordered, such a paper usually does not address important theoretical issues that require attention. Moreover, bullet points are not conventionally used in a scholarly paper in management, and lists should have some theoretic structure to them, otherwise they are just random lists (or will be perceived as such by reviewers). *APJM* is not the place for numerous lists and weakly supported steps drawn from small numbers of cases or the author’s consulting experience. *APJM* seeks papers that build, utilize, and improve theory and research on management in an Asia Pacific

context. Consultant reports and business magazine-type articles, though rather interesting, do not fall within our aims and scope.

Unfortunately, at *APJM* we are still getting many such “how to” papers chock full of bullet points directed squarely at managers, supervisors, and consultants, as opposed to papers addressing key theory issues that still need a lot of attention, such as firm strategies in emerging economies, or influence tactics in collective cultures, just to name two interesting research areas. It is worth quickly pointing out here that case studies can be valuable in this regard, and *APJM* is certainly willing to publish case study research—even those based on an in-depth case of a single firm.² Indeed Tracey Kidder’s Pulitzer Prize winning book on Data General—*The Soul of a New Machine*—was one such single company case study (Kidder, 1982). But it was not written solely to provide action steps to managers. It had key lessons for theory ranging from strategic management of innovation to research and development. *APJM* does welcome case studies, but not case studies written primarily for classroom discussion. The case study needs to be written with theory and research issues in mind (see Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009).

Authors that would like to learn more about writing research questions and building a research focus more around theory should refer to my editorial articles in issues 1 and 2 of this year (Ahlstrom, 2010a, b) as well as other papers on the definitions and use of theory (and theory building) in the management field (e.g., Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Smith & Hitt, 2005; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Whetten, 1989). Another good place to find examples of useful research questions is in the future research section of scholarly management articles. For example, see the fine work by Edwin Locke and Gary Latham (Locke & Latham, 2005, 2009) on theory and research on goal setting as well as some discussion of additional research needed in that rich area (Latham & Locke, 2009). It is my hope that the ideas and research discussed and cited in this article can give authors additional instruction and resources for writing scholarly papers better suited to the *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*.

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² For more information on using cases in management research, see the work from Kathleen Eisenhardt, Robert Yin, and their colleagues (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Siggelkow, 2007; Yin, 2009).

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