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## Core issues in German strategic management research

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**Abstract.** This study attempts to identify core issues of German strategic management research. Departing from an analysis of core issues of the last decade, the authors identify future directions of research into strategic management and provide suggestions and recommendations for a possible research agenda. In order to accomplish these objectives, the following methods were used. First, a content analysis of seven leading German journals was conducted for the years 1990 to 2000; over 400 articles were categorized according to their central issues as well as to their methodology. Then, a Delphi-study among leading German researchers in strategic management was conducted to identify current and future research directions, challenges and developments in the field. Finally, the authors present the results of an empirical study among 149 researchers in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, which identifies the problems, weaknesses and challenges of German research in business administration in general. Suggestions are made related to how these problems can be overcome.

**Key Words:** scientific research, strategic management, empirical method, conceptual method, business administration.

### Introduction

Hermann Simon, in an article published in 1993, accused German business research of suffering from a "black hole-syndrome" (Simon, 1993): It received substantial information from outside, but did not communicate to the outside. Simon believed that German research output was largely unknown to the international academic community and called for a dramatic change towards more international integration.

In their article, "Making and Measuring Reputations", Baden-Fuller, Ravazzolo and Schweizer (2000) presented a ranking of European business schools and university departments on the basis of their published work in top quality international management journals. As for the German-speaking countries, the results are rather disappointing: None of the business schools or university departments made it to the top thirty-eight.

The number of publications in leading international journals is not worth mentioning. Consequently, the international scientific community is practically unaware of what is done in the German speaking countries. Thus the objectives of this paper are: (a) to provide an insight into the German research priorities in Strategic Management, (b) to discuss the main issues and deficits within this area and (c) to recommend on how to overcome the lack of international integration.

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## German Research Priorities in Strategic Management

In order to identify German research priorities in Strategic Management (SM) two studies were undertaken. First, a content analysis of seven leading German journals on business administration for the years 1990 to 2000 (Matzler et al., 2001) was conducted. More than 400 articles were categorized with respect to their topics and the empirical or conceptual nature. This study focused on the past and did not provide any conclusions on future developments. We, therefore, conducted a Delphi-study trying to identify those issues and challenges in strategic management research that might be of high priority in the next five years.

### German Research in Strategic Management Published from 1990 to 2000

For the content analysis we selected seven leading German journals on Business Administration on the basis of their reputation. Objective measures of journal quality such as citation counts were not available because the Social Citation Index contains only one single German journal. Therefore, the journals were taken from a ranking based on a study measuring quality and reputation as perceived by scholars (Matzler et al., 2001).

The seven journals were, in order of their reputation as follows:

- Zeitschrift für Betriebswirtschaft (ZfB),
- Zeitschrift für betriebswirtschaftliche Forschung (ZfbF),
- Die Betriebswirtschaft (DBW),
- Betriebswirtschaftliche Forschung und Praxis (BFuP),
- Harvard Business Manager,
- Zeitschrift für Organisation (zfo) and
- Die Unternehmung.

Categorization was carried out in two steps. First, the journals were screened for topics in Strategic Management. Second, the relevant articles were put into the relevant category. Instead of using existing categorization schemes (e.g. Lyles, 1990; Schendel and Cool, 1988) we developed our own categories for two reasons. On the one hand, we found the existing categories to be rather out of date as they did not reflect new developments in Strategic Management. On the other hand, and more important, a customised categorisation scheme seemed more adequate to cover the idiosyncrasies of German Strategic Management research. The categorisation scheme was developed gradually during the process. A preliminary scheme was set up using the content analysis of the first volume of each journal. Then, the categorisation process started and the preliminary scheme was refined and completed. In order to render the categorisation as consistently as possible, each of the four authors was involved in the process. The classification is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Categorization Scheme for SM topics

SM Categories	Examples of relevant topics
Corporate philosophy and business ethics	Vision, mission, culture, social auditing
Paradigms, concepts, models	Industrial organization, resource-based view, strategy processes
Strategic planning & control	Competitor analysis, planning techniques
Objectives, goals, targets	Individual vs. group processes
Strategy implementation	Planned vs. incremental
Strategy evaluation	Criteria, evaluation methods
Success	Measuring success, identifying success factors, shareholder vs. stakeholder value

Table 1 (continuous)

Internationalisation	Intercultural management, globalisation
Competition	Hyper competition, competitive forces, strategic groups
Business development	Risks and success factors, start-ups
Strategy consulting	Role of consultants, trends and myths
Diversification	Rationale, successes, failures
Mergers, acquisitions, divestment	Core competencies, economies of scale and scope
<i>Organizational issues</i>	Networks, virtual organizations, organizational capabilities
Structures & processes	Reengineering, business processes, change management
Leadership, entrepreneurship, incentives	Decision making, management of complexity, attributes, roles, compensation schemes
Methodology	Quantitative vs. qualitative, activity research
Comparative research	Types of organizations, management styles, cultures, historic developments

There were, of course, a number of articles which could be allocated to more than one (the maximum was three) Strategic Management category. In these cases we allowed up to three multiple entries. In total we arrived at 422 articles with 661 categorisation counts (see Table 2).

Table 2

## Key issues in German Strategic Management of 1990 to 2000

Issues	Number	Percentage
Paradigms, concepts, models	109	16.5
Corporate philosophy and business ethics	82	12.4
Leadership, entrepreneurship, incentives	77	11.6
Success and success factors	69	10.4
Structures & processes	58	8.8
Mergers, acquisitions, divestment	48	7.3
Methodology	47	7.1
Internationalisation	42	6.4
Organizational issues	36	5.5
Comparative research	21	3.2
Strategic planning and control	18	2.7
Competition	12	1.8
Business development in general	11	1.7
Strategy implementation	9	1.4
Strategy evaluation	8	1.2
Diversification	7	1.1
Strategy Consulting	5	0.8
Goal setting	2	0.3
Total	661	100

The greatest number of articles dealt with broad issues such as strategy concepts, models or strategy processes (16.5 %). It seems that the *how*, *who* and *when* of strategy formulation constitute an area of primary interest. As one would expect, the majority of articles are of a theoretical nature without empirical research. Topics related to purpose, vision and mission, to business ethics and social responsibility form another important stream in German research (12.3 %). This fact is not surprising as deductive reasoning, i.e. from the general to the specific, has a long tradition in the German-speaking world. The role of the managers and entrepreneurs, their decision-making processes, leadership etc. as well as analyses of success factors can be identified as a further main area of interest (11.6 and 10.4 %, respectively).

Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the research of strategy content. According to DeWit and Meyer (1998, p. 6) strategy content is concerned “with the *what* of strategy – what is, and should be, the strategy for the company and each of its constituent units”. Typical strategy content research issues such as m & a, diversification, etc. have attracted only few researchers.

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Table 3a shows the share of articles based on empirical studies in leading international journals, and Table 3b contains the share of empirical articles in German journals.

Table 3a

Share of empirical articles in international journals (Year 2000)

International Journals	% of empirical research articles
Administrative Science Quarterly	100
Academy of Management Review	0
Academy of Management Journal	100
Strategic Management Journal	81
O Science	71
Journal of Management Studies	64

Table 3b

Share of empirical articles in German journals (1990-2000)

German Journals	% of empirical research articles	% of all German articles in SM
Zeitschrift für betriebswirtschaftliche Forschung	44	16
Zeitschrift für Betriebswirtschaft	30	14
Die Betriebswirtschaft	27	17
Die Unternehmung	25	22
Betriebswirtschaftliche Forschung u. Praxis	23	5
Harvard Business Manager	15	9
Zeitschrift für Organization	9	17

Most articles in leading international management journals are based on empirical research. One notable exception is the *Academy of Management Review* which publishes only conceptual work: all in all, only twenty five percent of the German articles make an empirical contribution which proves that German researchers prefer conceptual work to number crunching. This

observation is consistent with the European research tradition (Collin et al., 1996 and Bengtsson, 2001) which focuses on theory development rather than on narrow theory testing based on large scale empirical studies. As, however, most leading international journals require an empirical content it becomes evident that German researchers' share of publications must necessarily be small and their standing within the international academic community weak.

As a result, it seems that the two key characteristics of German research in strategic management are: preference of broad issues such as strategy concepts, models, strategy formulation processes and issues related to corporate purpose, ethics, social responsibility; and preference of conceptual work.

### ***Future issues in German strategic management research***

In order to identify future issues in German strategic management research a Delphi-study was undertaken. Experts in strategic management were asked to pinpoint those areas that in their opinion would have a strong impact on strategy research over the next five years. The experts were selected based on their track record in publishing within the area of strategic management. Eleven experts participated in the study. In the first round, respondents had to answer various open-response questions. The results of the completed questionnaires were compiled and the topics ranked on a scale from 1 (unimportant) to 5 (very important). In the second and third rounds, the ranking was reviewed and commented on by the experts. The final ranking is presented in Table 4.

### ***Knowledge management***

There is considerable agreement among experts that in the coming years knowledge will constitute a primary source of competitive advantages. Consequently, knowledge management is considered one of the most important issues affecting strategic management. The pertinence of knowledge and its management can be attributed to two developments. First, during the past years and at least in developed countries, capital and labour-intensive industries have been continuously declining with information-intensive industries having become a main generator of wealth. As a result, intangible assets can no longer be treated as an interesting side issue. For example, the market-to-book-ratio of the companies in the Dow Jones Index was 1:1 in 1970 and rose to 4:1 in 1999. Hence 80% of the market value is currently generated by intangible assets (Business Week, 1999). These market-based assets have two forms: relational and intellectual (Srivastava, Shervani and Fahey, 1998). The spread of new information technologies enables companies to generate, disseminate and use intellectual resources more effectively.

Table 4

Most important issues for strategic management research

Rank	Core issues	Mean
1.	Knowledge management	4.8
2.	E-Business, Internet, Information Age	4.0
2.	Global networks, strategic alliances	4.0
4.	Innovations, acceleration of innovations	3.8
5.	Human Resource Management	3.4
6.	Entrepreneurship	3.2
7.	Linking the resource-based and market-based view	3.2
8.	Change management	3.0
8.	Customer orientation & satisfaction	3.0
8.	Global Management	3.0

The second reason for the rising interest in knowledge management is the growing theoretical acceptance of the resource-based-view (e.g. Amit and Schoemaker, 1993). This perspective shifts attention toward the intangible assets of a firm as its primary source of competitive advantage.

### ***E-Business & Internet***

Notwithstanding the current hype around new information technologies in general and the Internet in particular, both will undoubtedly impact upon industry and company structures and consumer behaviour.

Porter (2001) argues that industry structure and competitive advantages will dramatically change as a result of reduced information asymmetries, higher bargaining power of both channel members and consumers; lower market entry barriers; easier access to new suppliers, channels and customers; altered cost structures; etc. According to Porter, the bargaining power of suppliers will change, too, with novel procurement methods reducing the importance of intermediaries. Porter also insists that these developments will in most industries induce fiercer rivalry among a growing number of competitors.

Regarding influences on company structure we can refer to transaction cost theory (Coase 1937, Williamson 1975) which argues that the boundary of the firm is the function of transaction costs. Because one major effect of the Internet is the change of costs associated with business transactions it will severely affect firm structures.

Finally, the Internet will also alter consumer behaviour. For example, easier access to price and product information and lower transaction costs will reduce switching costs, thus leading to higher price sensitivity and hence lower loyalty. Overall there seems to be a considerable need for researching the ramifications of information technologies in the management of businesses of any size.

### ***Networks & strategic alliances***

There are two main reasons for the rising research interest in networks and strategic alliances. First, firms have been increasingly engaged in networks, alliances and all kinds of relationships. This trend, already evident in the digital economy, will be reinforced by further internationalisation and deregulation. Second, the high failure rate of alliances in the past leaves several unanswered questions. Three streams of current research (Kale, Singh and Perlmutter, 2000) are trying to find the appropriate answers to such questions as: (1) What are the motivators for networks & alliances, e.g. are they triggered by strategy, transaction costs or a need for learning? (2) what are the most efficient and effective governance structures? (3) How do networks & alliances affect performance, in particular against the critical area of knowledge generation and protection? Only the first question seems to be well understood at this time (Gulati, Nohria and Zaheer, 2000).

### ***Innovation & time-to-market***

The role of innovation as a source of economic growth was stressed by Schumpeter (1934). Meanwhile, however, competition in most industries has become much more information-based. If information is considered a prerequisite for innovation, then the new technologies must have an impact on it. The fundamental shift in the ability to capture, manipulate, store, and transfer information obviously causes "(...) a dramatic increase in the amount of this resource and the ease with which this resource can be moved" (Sampler, 1998, p. 345). As a result, the scope for innovation has widened far beyond products or services, with speed playing a major role.

Dan Schendel (1999) thinks that not only product and process innovations have to be considered but also the question of how well an economic system as a whole can adapt to change and competition. Prahalad (1999) states that "(...) the focus of innovation has to shift toward innova-

tion in business models.” The fundamental question is whether innovation theory is developed well enough to shed light on innovation processes in turbulent environments.

### ***Human Resource Management***

According to Peter Drucker (1997, p. 22), “(...) the only comparative advantage of the developed countries is in the supply of knowledge workers.” Knowledge is a highly mobile resource, stored in the heads of individuals. “Knowledge workers” can easily take it with them. The way these people will have to be managed will change considerably. Knowledge workers act more and more as contractors, experts, consultants, part-timers, joint-venture partners, etc. This new mobility of critical resources poses new challenges to HRM in general and the development and retention of knowledge workers in particular. Lepak and Snell (1999) call for a new human resource architecture. In this context, the valuation of human capital, the investigation into various combinations of employment modes, and the management of employee relationships are of primary interest.

### ***Entrepreneurship***

Peter Drucker (1984) describes three different types of opportunities for innovation: (1) creation of new information through new technologies, (2) exploitation of information asymmetries that arise from market inefficiencies, and (3) reactions to differences in the relative costs and benefits of alternative resource deployment. Economies, says Schumpeter (1934), operate in a constant disequilibrium due to technological, political, social, and other types of changes. Information on these changes is imperfectly distributed to economic actors and therefore form the basis for innovation opportunities. Existence, discovery, and exploitation of such opportunities fall into the field of entrepreneurship research which does not limit itself to the processes of setting up new os but also deals with the behavioural aspects of entrepreneurship. In increasingly turbulent environments, which continuously create new opportunities and shorter life cycles, entrepreneurial features have become vital for the competitiveness of whole nations and the survival of businesses.

### ***Combining resource-based and market-based view***

Research in Strategic Management has been dominated by the resource-based-view for more than a decade. It is argued, that market inefficiencies lead to bundles of firm specific resources and capabilities which in turn represent a source of sustainable economic rents (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993, Wernerfelt, 1984). This position is at odds with the industrial organization tradition which views industry structure as a central determinant of firm performance (e.g. Porter, 1980). Critics point to the lack of research concerning relative influence on performance of both firm-specific resources and industry structure. They see difficulties in the availability of data and the use of statistical methods (McGahan and Porter, 1997). In an empirical study, McGahan and Porter (1997) demonstrated that industry structure, the corporate parent, and business-specific effects are related in complex ways. As a consequence, they should not be viewed separately. The relationship between the resource-based and the market-based view seems to be a perfect perspective for future research.

### ***Change Management***

There are a number of factors creating pressure on businesses to change and renew themselves. Among these factors are industry deregulation (e.g. airlines, telecommunication, utilities), global competition (from emerging markets as well as from upstarts in richer countries), the internet revolution, and shareholders that are better informed, hence more demanding. These changes require a learning culture and a high degree of entrepreneurship, with the CEO acting as the firm's first assistant taking initiatives and mobilizing people (Doz and Thanheiser, 1999). However, resistance to change comes from several sources, e.g. the rigidity of established structures, the lock-in

effect of technologies and resources, the mental models of managers and employees, closed (i.e. tightly knit) cultures, competing change projects within the same firm etc. (Strebel, 1994). Given the vast amount of literature on change management, it is surprising that this field appears in the rank of future research topics at all. It seems that practitioners, academicians and consultants have grossly underestimated the complexity of change management. The high number of and the obvious frustration with failures of planned change underpin this argument.

## **Customer orientation & satisfaction**

This area seems to have lost some of its relevance as a research topic. However, it would be wrong to conclude that most questions have been answered and problems solved. Customer orientation is still too vague a concept and service industries pose nagging question on the roots of customer satisfaction. Besides, some recent work have related customer satisfaction to creation of shareholder value (Matzler and Stahl, 2000, Ittner and Larcker, 1998). Questions such as the nature and strength of the relationship and the moderating variables between customer satisfaction and the shareholder need to be referred to in future research.

## **Global management**

Globalisation, the buzzword of the nineties, has nevertheless urged many firms to rethink their strategies and view their organizations in a more global perspective. No doubt, the process of globalisation will continue and become even more intensive in some industries. Thinkers in strategy argue that the distinction between global and local responsiveness and the appropriate reaction to the influences and standards of global players will become increasingly important not only for large firms but also for small and medium-sized businesses (Prahalad, 1999).

## **German Research in Business Administration: Problems and Challenges**

Within the German research community it is generally felt that its research output has not been receiving the international attention it deserves (e.g. Simon, 1993, Macharzina, 1993, Steinmann, Olbrich, Riedl, 1998, Meffert, 1998, Homburg, 1999). In this section of the article we try to identify the key problems and deficits of German research in business administration. For that purpose an empirical study was undertaken. The results of it will serve for recommendations on how to overcome the obvious lack of international integration.

## **Study**

In order to probe into the problems and challenges of management research in the German speaking countries, we conducted an empirical study among academicians. A questionnaire was developed to identify weaknesses and opportunities. The following questions were addressed: What are the biggest challenges for German management research in the future? How do German researchers rate the influence of their research output on the international scientific community? How do they rate the impact of international research on German research? The questionnaire was sent to 380 randomly selected academicians in Germany, Austria and Switzerland who are reputedly active in management sciences. 149 usable questionnaires were returned.

## **Results**

In an open-response question the participants were asked to name the key challenges for German research in management sciences. Overall, 155 answers were given, which could be clustered into five categories. Table V reports the results.



Table 5

Key challenges in German research in Business Administration

Rank	Key challenges	Number of answers
1.	Higher reputation and recognition in the international research community	52
2.	Better connection with the international research community	48
3.	Improved transfer of research output into practice	22
4.	Publications in English	18
5.	Higher international competitiveness	15

With the exception of one category (improved transfer of research output into practice) all answers are related to international issues. This should be viewed in connection with the answers to the next two questions. Respondents were asked to rate the impact of German research output on the international research community and the output of international research output on the German research community according to a seven-point rating scale (1 = very low, 7 = very high). The results are presented in Figure 1.

Approximately 70 percent of the respondents regard the impact of German research on the international research community to be low, whereas roughly 65 percent state a high impact of the international research output on German research. These results not only apply to German business administration in general but also to SM in particular.

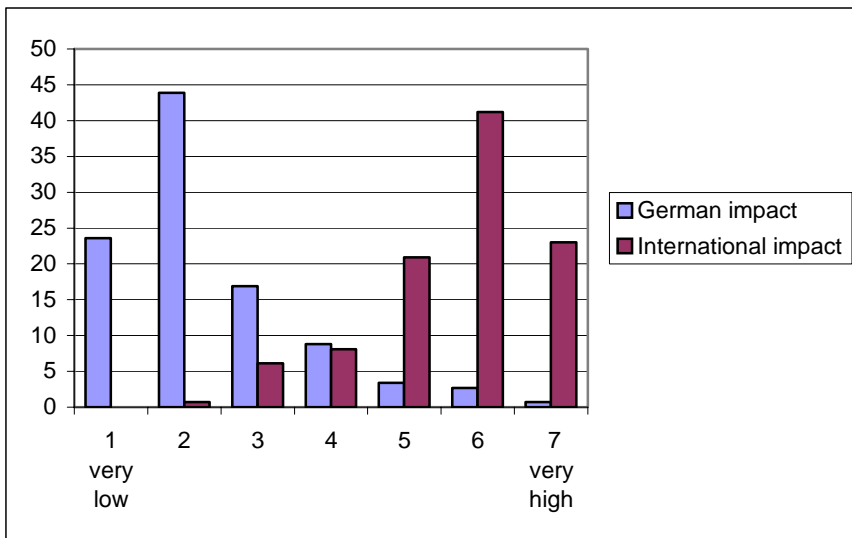


Fig. 1. International impact of German research in Business Administration

These subjectively perceived ratings are supported by more objective measures such as citation counts in strategy research. Steinmann, Olbrich and Riedl (1998) present a study that investigates the impact of publications from leading German-speaking strategy researchers on the international scene on the basis of citation counts. In the first step they identified leading German researchers through a questionnaire. Then, they counted citations related to these authors in the SSCI from 1994 through 1997, which amounted to less than fifteen to each of them within this period. In the same time period citations of leading international researchers in strategy amount to more than a hundred.

Undoubtedly, communication within the academic community is a prerequisite of effective and efficient scientific work. In the case of German-speaking countries, communication seems to follow only one direction, i.e. from the international to the German community, and only to a lesser extent vice versa. How far the German community is excluded from the international scientific community can also be inferred from the composition of editorial boards of international management journals (Table 6).

As far as Strategic Management is concerned, German research is represented by only one member of the editorial board of the Strategic Management Journal and seven members of the editorial board in Organization Science. This may be attributed to differences in research traditions. American journals, as noted by Collin et al. (1996) and Bengtsson (2001) are paradigmatically rigid and have a strong nomothetic orientation. On the contrary, German researchers have preference for theory development and conceptual work. In other words, both the inflexibility of American journals and the rigidity of German researchers seem to be an important cause for their international separation.

Table 6

Number of German members of the editorial board of leading management journals

Title	Impact factor SSCI (1999)	Number of German members of editorial board
Academy of Management Review	4.39	0
Administrative Science Quarterly	3.59	0
Academy of Management Journal	2.55	0
Strategic Management Journal	2.15	1
Organization Science	1.29	7
Journal of Management Studies	0.69	0

In addition, several authors claim that German researchers are not sufficiently engaged in international networks and rarely attend international conferences (e.g. Simon, 1993, Steinmann, Olbrich, Riedl, 1998). Combining the results of our first study which revealed that only 25 percent of the articles published in the field of strategy are of an empirical nature and the results of this study, we conclude that German research in Strategic Management has two options to follow (see Figure 2). Both strategies require a higher integration in the international scientific community and publications in English. Option one means maintaining research tradition but publishing in the leading international journals. However, since most leading journals require an empirical contribution, German researchers might have a competitive disadvantage. If this option is pursued, the foundation of a European journal focusing on conceptual research would be a requirement. This, for example, could be achieved by the European Academy of Management.

The second option would mean a shift towards more empirical research published in English. This, however, requires a change in the research tradition. Several authors argue, that there are great differences in research traditions between countries (e.g. Bengtsson, 2001, Collin et al., 1996, Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991) and it seems that they are difficult to overcome. The fundamental question is, whether German researchers should comply with the American empirical, quantitative research tradition or whether they should follow their own way.

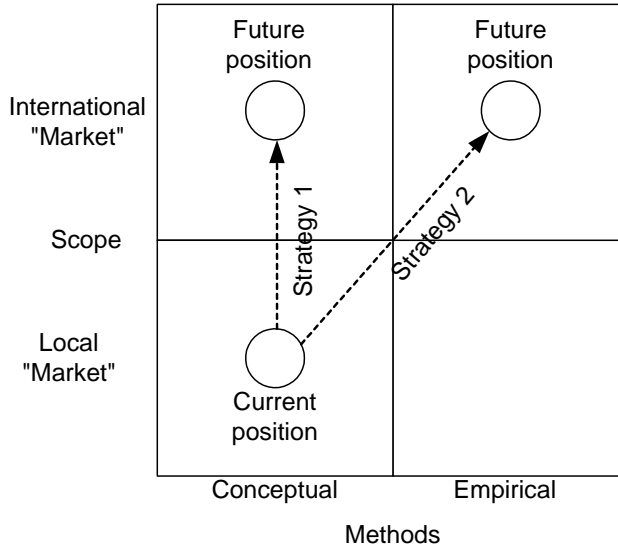


Fig. 2. Position of German research in Strategic Management

**Conclusions**

In this paper we analyzed the current issues and problems of research in Strategic Management. We identified the following characteristics:

- Preference for broad issues
- Preference for conceptual work
- Lack of international integration
- Lack of publications in international journals.

Together, these factors result in a very low international attention and influence of German research output. Figure 3 visualizes the key problems.

Barrier 1 leads to sparse communication and a one-way information flow, i.e. the one from the international scientific community to German researchers. Barrier 2 makes it very difficult to get published in international journals, which are dominated by the American empirical, quantitative approach. Barrier 3 necessitates that German researchers publish their work in English. Editors of German journals could for example try to encourage authors to publish their work in English. Or, conversely, journals should be encouraged to exclusively publish in English as practiced by the leading German economic journals (e.g. *Kyklos*, *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft – Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv – Review of Economics*). At the beginning of 2000 the "*Zeitschrift für betriebswirtschaftliche Forschung*" (*ZfbF*) launched the *Schmalenbach Business Review* appearing quarterly in English.

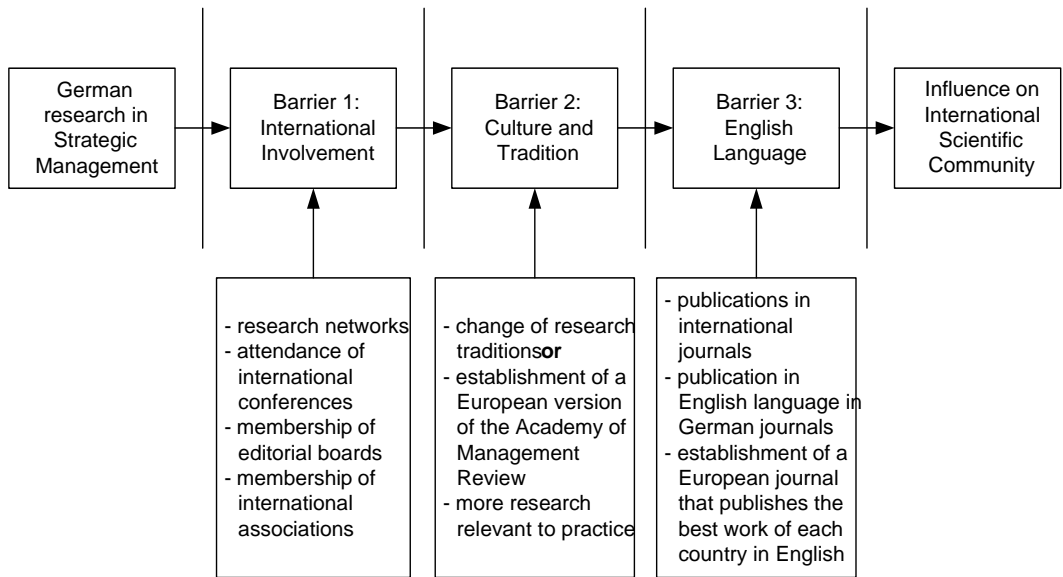


Fig. 3. Barriers to international influence

Finally, as suffering from scarce international recognition is not limited to the German-speaking countries, a promising approach could be to establish a European Journal that selects the best articles of European non-English journals and publishes them in English.

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