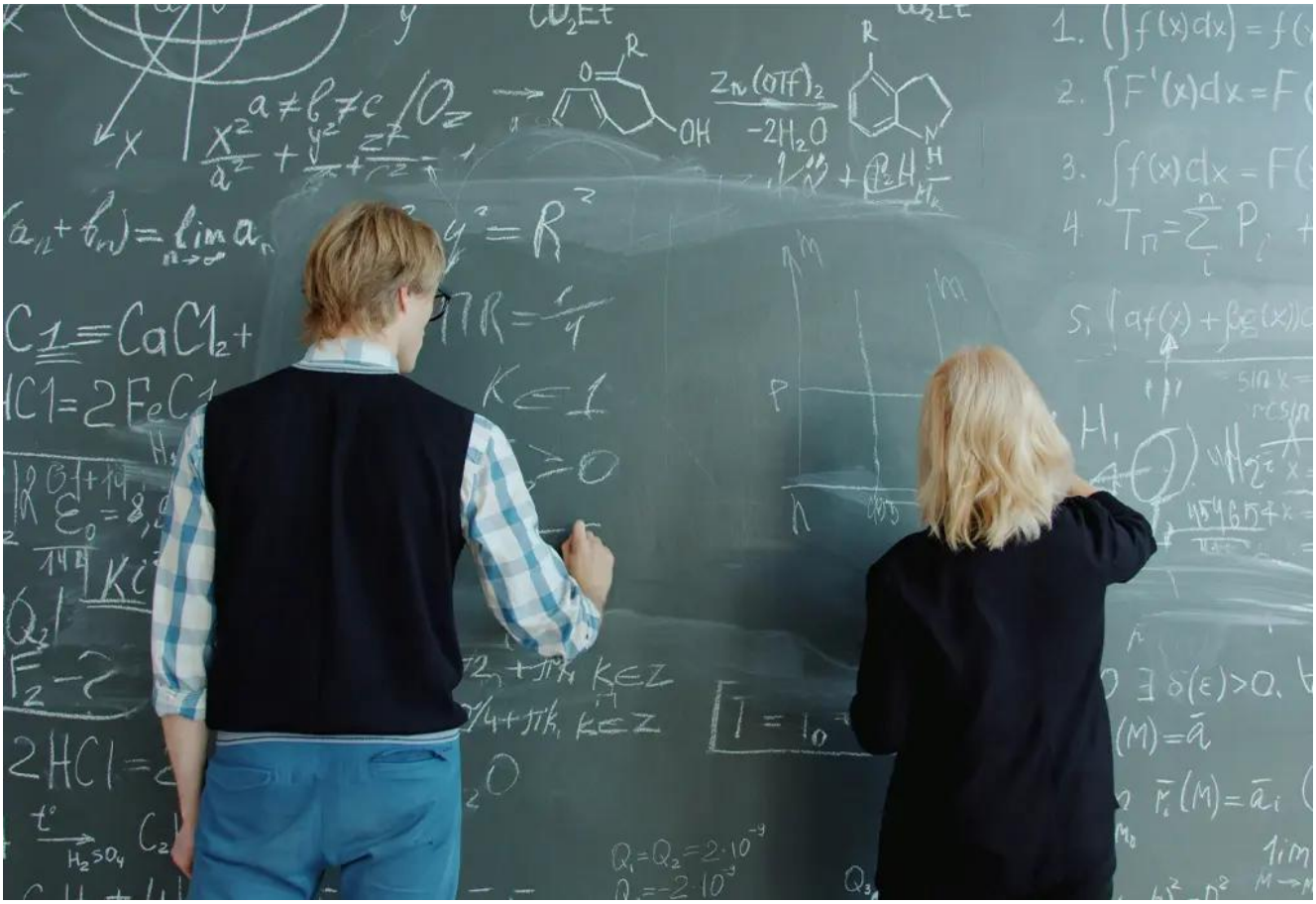
Why corporations partnering with academics is good business

Collaboration between business and academia can offer lasting organizational learning, if you follow these three pointers.



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By [Christoph Loch]

When a business needs outside advice, the first port of call is usually a consultant. Managers

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are under pressure and need to deliver results, and consultants have track records and scalability claims, though their solutions can sometimes feel prepackaged.

Another source of collaboration can be between companies and academic researchers. This isn't always the first choice for executives spending organizational resources, as it's often seen as knowledge for its own sake — but it can be effective.

The benefits were on display during the COVID-19 crisis, when companies were desperately searching for ways to manage the extreme upheaval, proving that academic collaboration can be operations-oriented.

Indeed, my paper "Working with practitioners in operations management," co-authored with Haijian Si (Cambridge Judge Business School) and Meng Li (University of Houston), looks at how to manage collaborations between researchers and practitioners in operations management for mutual benefit, in order to help bridge the gap between theory and real-world application.

Researchers, even early-career faculty, can bring specialized expertise, analytical frameworks and an outsider perspective — and sometimes also real and hard-won experience. In exchange, they can gain access, learning and the chance to ground their research in real-life business scenarios.

This happens more often than many executives realize. Faculty regularly receive requests from companies through personal contacts: former students, now working as company managers, who remember a helpful conversation they once had in class and so reach out to their alma mater for advice or collaboration.

Here are a few pointers to help craft these joint efforts into productive partnerships.

1. Build trust through small wins

Companies often need to see immediate results. Researchers want to produce publicly available knowledge with long-term impact. Practitioners may not want their internal workings made public to potential competitors.

While there's an inherent tension in these incentives, the key is to start small.

In an executive education class, a member of a family-owned SME may notice misalignment between operations and strategy in their own business and approach their instructor. If the

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collaboration results in real value, both sides benefit from keeping in touch and looking out for further opportunities. It becomes a professional relationship based on trust.

With proper confidentiality assurances, companies may become more open to sharing data or participating in longer-term research projects. At that point, the organization is typically not asked to invest significant resources — mainly access and context — while still retaining control over sensitive information.

2. Trust is the real currency

Successful research/business collaborations grow rarely from formal procurement processes, but rather from individual relationships.

Trust builds when researchers translate genuine interest in a company's challenges into useful insights, while respecting business constraints.

With that trust, collaboration becomes easier and more productive. Managers know who they are working with, understand how the research will be used and see indirect benefits, such as better decision-making or new perspectives.

These relationships can last for years, as people get promoted, problems evolve and new opportunities arise.

3. Know that academics and consultants provide different kinds of value

Consultants and academics play very different roles:

- **Consultants** deliver quickly and offer proven, standardized approaches that can work well — although they may be cookie-cutter solutions.
- **Academics** are motivated by knowledge. They don't command large teams or produce polished reports, but they do offer research-based concepts, frameworks and insights.

Normally the organization must do the implementation work itself. This means results may not be seen so quickly, but there is an important upside: The company learns. Internal teams build internal capabilities, rather than relying on outside-delivered reports. They develop deeper understanding and become better at solving similar problems in the future. Long-

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term, this may result in higher impact.

How to make research-based collaborations work within the organization

For implementation-heavy projects, internal ownership is critical. A company needs a project manager who clearly owns the work. That person must not feel they are competing with the academic for recognition. The rule is simple: Credit belongs to the internal team. Academic researchers contribute ideas and guidance, but success must be attributed to those executing inside the organization.

Over time, these academic/business collaborations can become some of the most rewarding professional relationships for both sides — practical, respectful and grounded in shared learning.

Also of note: These engagements don't require complex or expensive projects. Sometimes all it takes is a small intervention and a few focused conversations to unlock significant improvements.

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