Will you cite me? The emerging strategy of academic publishing

Michael Segalla

Department of Management and Human Resources,
HEC School of Management,
Paris, 78351 Jouy en Josas, France
Email: segalla@hec.fr

Abstract: This article introduces the research studies of 11, mostly young, European academics. Then it poses the question, will the work of these excellent young researchers be cited? In speculating about the future of their work, the wider question of using citation frequency to evaluate the performance of business school professors is discussed. Empirical data of published articles between 1990 and 2007 in the top five general management journals is analysed. The results of this examination suggest that (1) a dissemination bottleneck is being formed that slows down the exchange of research findings in a timely manner, (2) most articles published in the top five journals are not highly cited (median = 24, mean = 74, mode = 1), and (3) articles may need at least ten years after publication before reaching their maximum citation frequency.

Keywords: academic publishing; management research; journal quality; citation analysis; promotion and tenure criteria.

Biographical notes: Michael Segalla is Professor of Management at HEC School of Management. In 1991, he received a Franco-American Commission for an Education Exchange Inter-foundation Grant. In 2001, he won the AESC Best Management Research Award for his article entitled 'Making cross-cultural research relevant to European corporate integration' (Segalla et al., 2000). In 2003, he created, in partnership with Ernst&Young – France, the Best in France Annual Prize. The prize rewards HEC students who prepare case studies examining how foreign companies adapt to the French legal, tax and cultural environment. In 2009, he started a regular blog on the Harvard Business Review website, discussing cross-culture management research.

One of the great pleasures of editing a special issue for a journal is the opportunity to collect in a single volume the most interesting work on a specific theme. This provides a useful service for academic researchers and practitioners who certainly appreciate having a collection conveniently presented for easy discovery and citation. This publication does not stray from this benefit. But instead of selecting articles on a specific topic we are presenting research by a specific set of authors.

The authors featured in this special issue are all young, European scholars mostly at the start of their careers.[1] They hail from Austria, England, France, Germany, Slovenia and Spain. Their collective work is directed towards the theme of strategic human resources but their topics, scientific methodologies and research settings differ. They

discuss issues of sustainable human resources ['Sustainability and human resource management reasoning and applications on corporate websites' (Ehnert, 2009)], the strategic role of employee competencies ['What companies pay for: the strategic role of employee competencies' (Díaz-Fernández et al., 2009)], whether the status of HR departments will decline if the profession is feminised ['Departmental status in light of a growing proportion of female staff: the case of human resource departments' (Reichel et al., 2009)], if employee groups can be effectively classified by their human capital and structural positions in knowledge networks ['Human capital and structural position in knowledge networks as determinants when classifying employee groups for strategic human resource management purposes' (Kaše and Zupan, 2009)], and whether national public sector HRM is moving from performance appraisal to performance management ['Public sector human resource management reform across countries: from performance appraisal to performance steering?' (Waxin and Bateman, 2009)]. Their work is excellent and destined to add ideas and information to the academic body of literature in the field of human resource management. These researchers are well on the road to becoming leading academics in the European Union and beyond. But will their work be cited?

This is not an idle question in modern academia. Increasingly, business school deans and promotion and tenure committees, even journalists, are asking about the relevance of academic research in management. Furthermore, promotion and tenure committees, desiring new tools to evaluate the competence and visibility of professors, may begin to use citation frequency in their deliberations. Government research institutes in France (and perhaps elsewhere) are also mulling over the use of citation frequency as a performance criterion.

This 'citation demand' by the aforementioned actors sits uneasily alongside 'citation competitors' for many researchers. Management scholars are more productive than ever (Segalla, 2008).[2] Since 1990, the annual number of academic journal articles published on the principal subjects of management increased fourfold (Figure 1). Therefore, just as market conditions are pushing researchers to make their work relevant and useful enough to be cited they face a slew of competitors.

This professorial corps is encouraged to publish its work by deans wanting their schools to be favourably ranked by various journalistic publications purporting to measure the quality of business schools. In response, the professorial corps is flooding the research outlet marketplace with abundant ideas and information, making any accurate assessment of article relevance or quality a difficult task. This doubtlessly encouraged the development of journal quality lists under the assumption that more relevant and higher quality articles will be published by higher quality journals.[3] So publishing a paper in a highly ranked (typically generalist) journal should certainly improve its citation rate.

The demand, then, to publish in the leading journals is high, even for very narrowly focused research studies without much general appeal. Unfortunately for researchers, the available collective space in the principal, top-level, generalist management journals[4] declined significantly over the last decade (Figure 2). If citation frequency is going to be one of the factors used to evaluate professors then what can academics do to get themselves read and cited by their peers? The best strategy, of course, is to produce and submit only highly relevant, high-quality research. But for many reasons this may not always be possible nor is it an absolute guarantee that a paper will be accepted and published. But if a paper is accepted for inclusion in a top management journal is it virtually guaranteed to be cited?

Will you cite me?

Figure 1 Frequency (log) of management articles across 3700 peer-reviewed journals
(light grey) and the five top management journals (dark grey)[*]
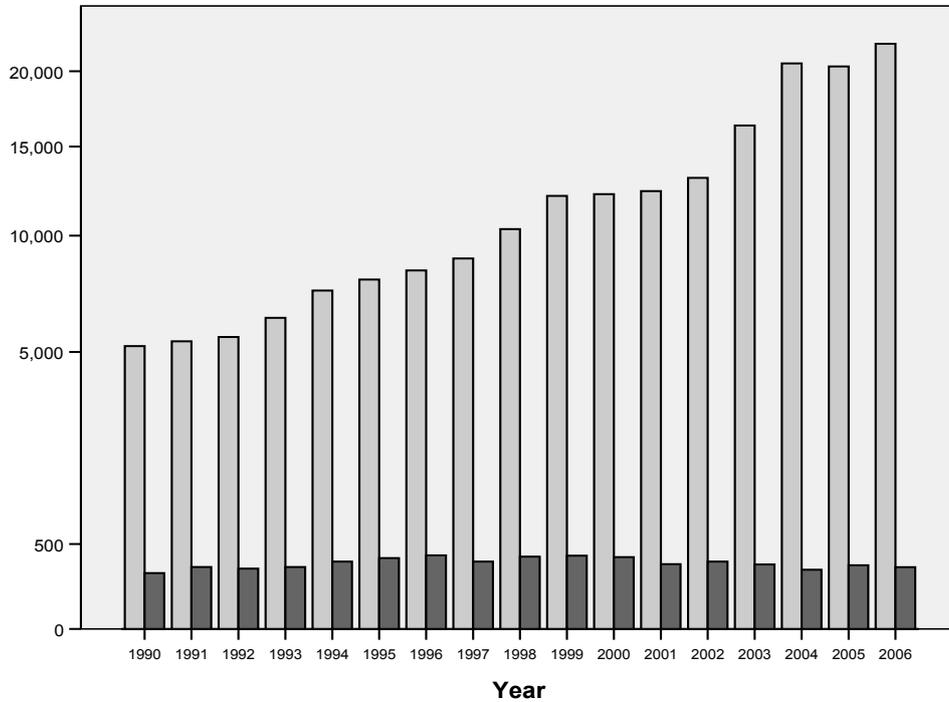
This would seem likely given the rigorous review process that evaluates a paper's relevance and quality. To empirically examine this assertion, a citation dataset was assembled using Harzing's Publish or Perish (PoP) software and Google Scholar.[5] The PoP program is designed to identify academic citations, measure author impact, and measure the impact of academic journals. It queries Google Scholar and returns what it finds in a user-friendly format. The search parameters were limited to articles published between the years 1990 and 2007 in the top five, peer-reviewed, general management, academic journals.[6] Nearly 10,000 cited documents were initially returned. This data was cleaned of as many extraneous, undated, garbled, or clearly subordinate documents (e.g. editorials, book reviews, special issue introductions, etc.) as possible. A total of 7518 documents were eventually retained for further analysis. Among these, between 1987 and 2213 were apparent duplicates, each with a separate citation count.[7] The most common causes of these duplications were misspelled author names, reversed order of authors, incomplete authorship information, incomplete or partial article titles, and, more often than one may suspect, the wrong year or journal of publication. Using the most stringent duplicate identification algorithm the citation counts of the documents were aggregated, leaving 5530 articles for further analysis. This may overstate the actual total of 4274 articles published during this period[8] but is consistent with the returns of other citation databases such as ISI Thomson Web of Science.[9]

Figure 2   Annual number of articles published in the top five general management journals
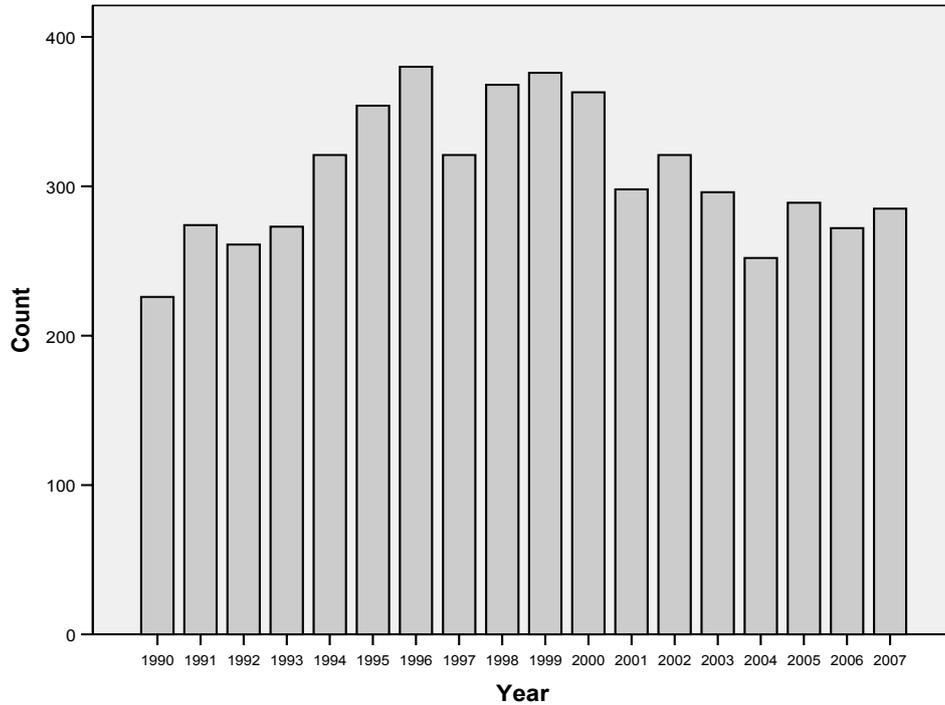
Many articles in the dataset are never or very rarely cited. The distribution of citations over the last 17 years is presented in Figure 3. Given the extreme skewing of the data, a log of the citations was computed and graphed.[10] Thirty five percent of all articles were cited five times or fewer (including self-citations). Eight percent of the articles were cited 200 times or more, and nearly 8% were never cited. Incidentally, the most cited article is by Wesley M. Cohen and Daniel A. Levinthal (1990). Their article was cited 5441 times. Most researchers do not have this type of impact on their field. The numerical average is nearly 74 citations per article, but this comes with a large standard deviation of 170. The median, however, is probably a more appropriate statistic to use for most researchers. Half of all the papers published in the five top general management journals over the period of 1990–2007 were cited fewer than 24 times (Table 1).

Citation search tools will certainly continue to evolve and improve in scope and accuracy. Will this be sufficient to fairly estimate the contribution of a researcher within the typical timeframe required by the tenure process? Probably not, since it may take time to recognise the important contribution of some ideas. Peter Drucker is widely acknowledged as the inventor of the term 'knowledge worker' nearly 50 years ago. In the decade after he introduced the idea there were only seven recorded citations of his concept. The second decade added fewer than 50 new citations, and the 1980s boosted awareness with another 200 references. It was only at the start of the 1990s that Drucker's idea reached a thousand citations. By 2007 the number was well over 15,000.[11] The lesson one can draw from this study is that even great ideas may take a long time to be acknowledged. Unfortunately, few among us will have the luxury of a 70-year career to help ensure that our ideas are noticed.[12]

Figure 3 Frequency distribution of article citations (log)

Mean =1.0289
Std. Dev. =1.17578
N =5,530
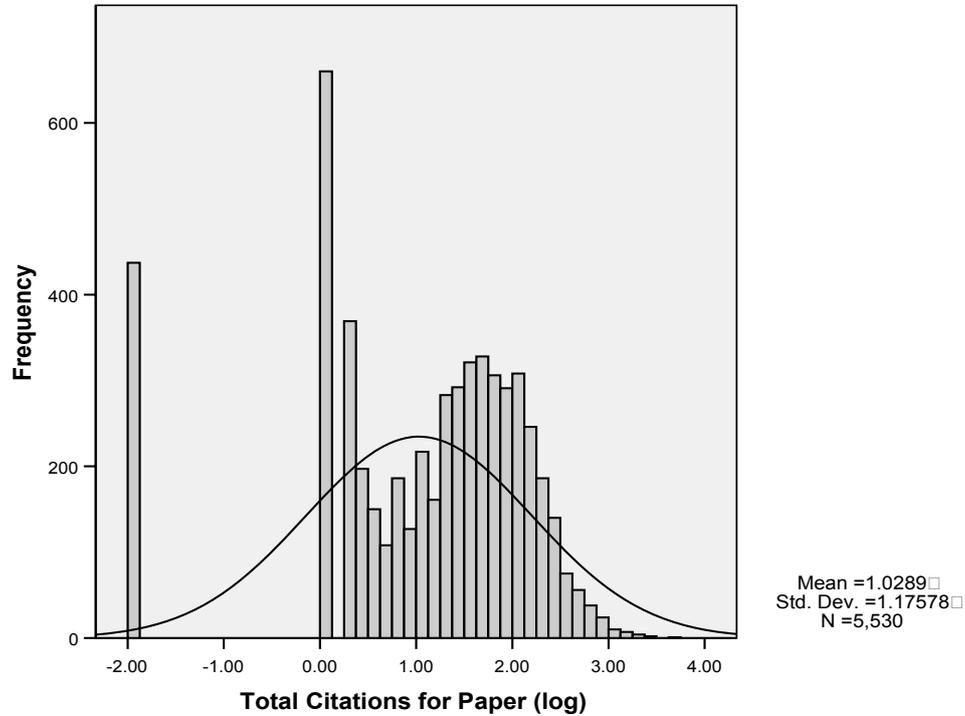
Table 1 Citation statistics for papers in the dataset

N	Valid	5245
	Missing	0
Mean		73.79
Median		24.00
Mode		1.00
Std deviation		170.74
Variance		29151.68
Skewness		10.91
Std. error of skewness		.03
Kurtosis		235.27
Std error of kurtosis		.07

Returning to the citation dataset of the top five management journals, it is clear that being cited takes time. The peak number of academic citations occurred in 1996, over ten years from the date of the analysis. Whether this signifies that an average article needs ten years to be fully diffused or that articles published in 1996 were particularly interesting cannot be answered by this analysis. But the pattern is highly suggestive of a

lag time built into a publishing system (Figure 4). This lag may be the natural result of the growing delay between article submission and acceptance (typically 1–3 years) and subsequent publication (1 or 2 years). But this is pure conjecture at this point. However, it must be a concern for schools and especially for young academics seeking tenure. If promotion and tenure committees are strongly influenced by citation frequency then there may not be enough time for tenure seekers to establish an impressive citation reputation.

Figure 4   Total annual citations for all papers published in the top five general management journals
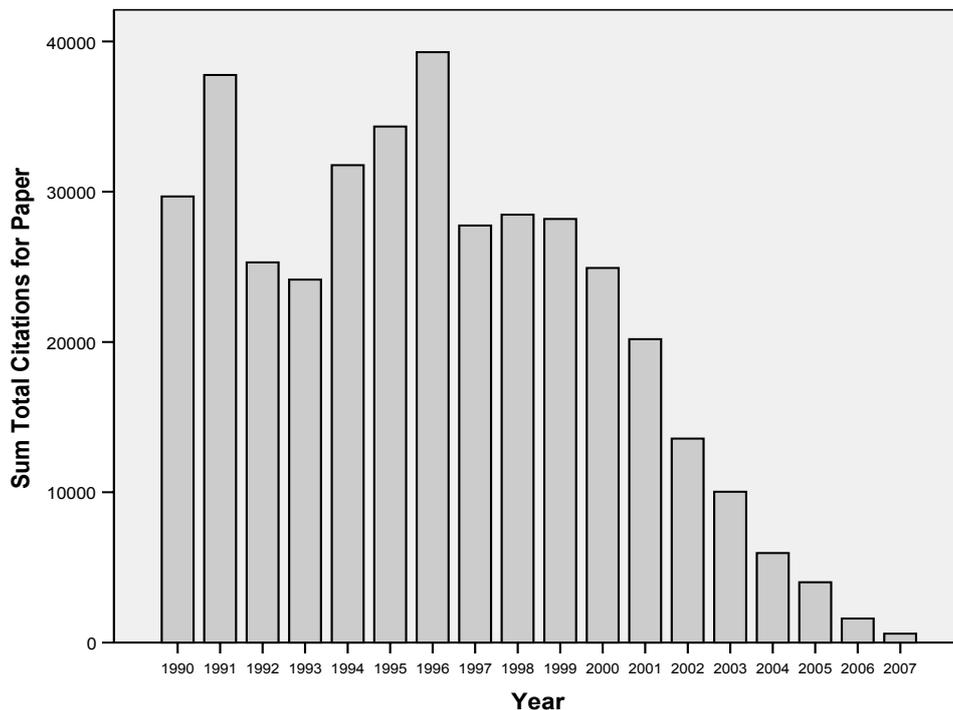
Given this dismal prognostic, perhaps other strategies to build citation frequency are needed. A time-honoured strategy to get noticed and cited is self-promotion. Widely distributing preliminary papers at conferences, posting them on specialised websites, or emailing them to lots of peers are tempting methods of getting a specific piece of research effectively known. This may circumnavigate the double-blind review process but can also be used positively to improve the paper through informal feedback. Used indiscriminately it might lead to a form of academic demagogy where effective self-promotion replaces detailed but dreary scholarship. It also favours richer schools willing to spend heavily on conference attendance. If this strategy succeeds in assisting the researcher to get a paper accepted by a top tier journal it may also help get it cited more quickly and more often. Everyone ends up happy, except perhaps other academics competing for the limited pages of a top journal.

Will you cite me?

Perhaps the future of academic dissemination and evaluation – particularly well suited to the internet age of information management led by Google, Wikipedia, SpamPal, and others – is to encourage crowd sourcing. This essentially seeks collective judgement to rate the quality of information. Ask enough people whether the sky is blue, so the theory goes, and you will be able to have a definitive, correct answer. No objectivity, no rigorous methodology, no statistics, no review, simply a show of electronic hands tabulated into a single neat number of hits. This is an academic auction of ideas and information with the currency tabulated in the number of citations an article receives. The most citations go to the most relevant and most useful, if not always the highest quality, articles. Acclamation by one's peers, rather than three anonymous reviewers, may help break through the logjam blocking effective dissemination of intellectual activity. Paper-based journals, with artificial limits on capacity, should embrace the internet and move online. It will always be important that articles be effectively screened for quality before ending up on asq.com, but without page limits and publication schedules they can end up onsite much faster. Feedback boxes will help encourage debate and clarifications. Datasets can be made more accessible for additional analyses. Access statistics and eventual citation counts will be more accurate reflections of an article's acclaim. The marketplace for ideas and information would be democratised and transparent. Academic research can move forward and be more timely, relevant and useful.

It is up to us to create this future.

References

Cohen, W.M. and Daniel, A.L. (1990) 'Absorptive capacity: a new perspective on learning and innovation', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 1, pp.128–152.

Díaz-Fernández, M., López-Cabrales, A. and Valle-Cabrera, R. (2009) 'What companies pay for: the strategic role of employee competencies', *European J. International Management*, Vol. X, No. Y, pp.xxx–xxx.

Ehnert, I. (2009) 'Sustainability and human resource management: reasoning and applications on corporate websites', *European J. International Management*, Vol. X, No. Y, pp.xxx–xxx.

Harzing, A-W. (2008) 'On becoming a high impact journal in international business and management', *European Journal of International Management*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp.115–118.

Kaše, R. and Zupan, N. (2009) 'Human capital and structural position in knowledge networks as determinants when classifying employee groups for strategic human resource management purposes', *European J. International Management*, Vol. X, No. Y, pp.xxx–xxx.

Reichel, A., Brandl, J. and Mayrhofer, W. (2009) 'Departmental status in light of a growing proportion of female staff: the case of human resource management', *European J. International Management*, Vol. X, No. Y, pp.xxx–xxx.

Segalla, M. (2008) 'Publishing in the right place or publishing the right thing: journal targeting and citations' strategies for promotion and tenure committees', *European Journal of International Management*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp.122–127.

Segalla, M., Fischer, L. and Sandner, K. (2000) 'Making cross-cultural research relevant to European corporate integration: can a new approach to an old problem help your company?', *European Management Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp.38–51.

Waxin, M-F. and Bateman, R. (2009) 'Public sector human resource management reform across countries: from performance appraisal to performance steering?', *European J. International Management*, Vol. X, No. Y, pp.xxx–xxx.

Notes

1   They are accompanied in some cases by more senior academics.

2   I thank the *European Journal of International Management* for graciously allowing me to use parts of this article in this paper.

3   For more information about various journal quality lists see Harzing (2008).

4   *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science* and *Strategic Management Journal*.

5   Harzing (2007), Publish or Perish, version 2.4.2894. To overcome the Google Scholar imposed search limit of 1000 returned items 17 searches were made each limited to a one year period.

6   The period was chosen to correspond with the SOM – University of Texas at Dallas dataset of top journal articles and because Harzing's PoP cites evidence that pre-1990 web searches are more often erroneous compared to post-1990 searches. The journals are: *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science* and *Strategic Management Journal*.

7   Three matching criteria were used separately or in combination: a text segment of the title, year of publication, and journal where the article was published.

8   The School of Management, University of Texas at Dallas, maintains a database of all articles published in the 24 top management journals since 1990 (see http://citm.utdallas.edu/utdrankings/rankingbydate.aspx).

9   I thank Anne-Wil Harzing for adding this clarifying explanation of discrepancy error.

10   To correctly compute the figure any zero citation was set to .01 to conform to the requirements of non-zero numbers for log computation. The minus two bar is therefore the visual representation of zero citations.

11   This analysis was conducted using Harzing's Publish or Perish but without making any attempt to clean the data or aggregate duplicates.

12   Peter Drucker's first book was published in 1932 and his last in 2005.