TOPIC: BUSINESS

The Myth of ‘Too Academic’: The Lack of Rigor in Business is a Real Problem

In business, few phrases shut down a conversation faster than: “That’s too academic.” I’ve heard it at boardroom tables, whispered in brainstorms, tossed off at conferences. It has become a corporate reflex, shorthand for “that won’t work here” or “that sounds too theoretical.” But here’s the truth: business doesn’t suffer from being too academic. It suffers from being nowhere near academic enough.

What “Academic” Actually Means

In corporate shorthand, “academic” means impractical, abstract, or detached from reality. But that is a misconception. “Academic” doesn’t mean irrelevant. It means rigorous. It means tested. It means evidence that survives skepticism, replication, and peer review. Academic research is designed to separate signal from noise. It doesn’t just describe what happened in one company or one leader’s favorite success story. It identifies what tends to happen across contexts, time, and populations.

In other words: academic methods are how we tell the difference between opinion and fact. And that is exactly what business needs more of today.

BY DR. YASMEEN J. CONING

BUSINESS SCHOLAR & FOUNDER OF EMBER™

Why Business Dismisses Academia

Executives often resist academic research not because they’re lazy, but because they assume it isn’t applicable to the “real world.” They picture ivory towers solving abstract puzzles. The irony is that business research is rarely abstract. The best studies examine real companies, real employees, real leadership dilemmas — often in far more detail than any corporate survey or white paper.

The problem isn’t that academic work lacks relevance. It’s that business culture doesn’t know how to use it. Leaders are trained to prize speed over rigor, anecdotes over data, charisma over proof. That’s why decisions so often rest on flimsy “insights” from a consultant’s casebook or a catchy line from a glossy magazine. These ideas spread because they’re easy to digest, not because they’re accurate.

Compare two sources:

- Commercial research is the business version of clickbait: digestible, rarely verified, and quick to disappear.
- Academic research is painstaking, peer-reviewed, replicated, and built to last.

When executives dismiss something as “too academic,” they’re not rejecting irrelevance. They’re rejecting rigor, which is the very thing that protects us from mistaking opinion for fact.

The Cost of Skipping Rigor

The consequences of skipping rigor are enormous. Entire industries have chased management slogans that never had strong empirical support.

Take a few classics:

- “People don’t leave companies, they leave managers.”
- “The customer is always right.”
- “Employee engagement drives financial performance.”

They sound persuasive. They show up in PowerPoints. They circulate in leadership seminars. But when examined through peer-reviewed research, each proves shaky:

- Turnover is influenced by far more than managers — including pay equity, job design, and organizational identification.
- Customers are not always right; service management studies show that prioritizing difficult or abusive customers increases burnout, turnover, and financial losses.
- Engagement does correlate with performance, but correlation is not causation; in many longitudinal studies, high performance actually predicts higher engagement, not the other way around. The relationship is reciprocal, not one-way.

They’re opinions that masquerade as facts.

By contrast:

- Fact: 1 + 1 = 2. That’s proven mathematics.
- Fact: If I drop a pencil, gravity pulls it down. That’s tested physics.
- Opinion: Hybrid work kills culture.
- Opinion: Gen Z doesn’t want to work hard.

Without rigor, business can’t tell the difference.

What Real Research Looks Like

The best business studies in the world aren’t in glossy magazines or consultant decks. They’re in academic journals, and they’re about real problems in real companies with real stakes. Studies of how teams make decisions under pressure. Research on how leadership styles shape retention. Analyses of how collective identity influences brand strength.

These aren't abstract puzzles for scholars. They're the empirical foundation for practical strategy. And the bar is high: representative samples, validated measures, replication across contexts. Compare that to the "survey" in your inbox asking ten HR leaders what they think is working, written up as if it were scientific fact.
If you want leadership fads, pick up a management magazine. If you want truth, open Google Scholar.

Scholar–Practitioners: The Missing Bridge

This is where the scholar–practitioner comes in. I live in both worlds, across research and practice. Academia provides the compass; practice provides the terrain. One without the other is incomplete. Too often, practitioners dismiss scholarship as irrelevant, and scholars dismiss practice as messy. But the translation is where progress happens.

Businesses need people who can read a regression table and explain what it means for hiring policy. People who can interpret a peer-reviewed study and turn it into a strategy, not a slogan.
This isn't indulgence. It's survival.

How to Spot Fact vs. Fiction

So how do you tell if what you're hearing is evidence or just a story? Ask three questions:
1. Has it been replicated? One company's success doesn't make a universal rule.
2. Was the sample representative? Ten CEOs in one industry don't stand in for the workforce.
3. Does it separate correlation from causation? Just because engagement and performance move together doesn't mean one drives the other.

These are basic research principles. They should also be basic business principles.

Where to Look for the Gold

Executives should stop pretending the only relevant sources are TED Talks, airport books, or glossy magazines. The real gold lies where they rarely look:

- Google Scholar > a free portal to millions of peer-reviewed studies.
- RAND and NBER > institutions that test policy and strategy with rigor.
- Top journals like Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Applied Psychology, Strategic Management Journal.

They aren't easy to skim. But that's the point. Good research isn't designed to be viral. It's designed to be true.

What's at Stake

Without rigor, businesses waste billions chasing unproven fads. They follow charismatic leaders into dead ends. They measure what's easy instead of what matters. With rigor, they gain durable frameworks that predict and explain. They learn which behaviors really drive performance, which investments really pay off, which leadership approaches really retain talent.

This isn't about slowing business down with theory. It's about speeding it up with truth.

Stop Hiding Behind the Phrase

The next time someone says, “That’s too academic,” I’ll hear it for what it is: a refusal to distinguish opinion from fact. Because the real risk in business isn’t being too academic. The real risk is being too comfortable with untested ideas dressed up as strategy. If I drop a pencil, gravity will pull it down. That’s a fact, proven and replicable.

If I say your employees are engaged, is that a fact, or just an opinion propped up by a colorful dashboard? Until business embraces rigor, it won’t know the difference. And knowing the difference is the only thing that separates strategy from wishful thinking.