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Janus and the Delphi Oracle: Entering the new world of international business research

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Abstract

Globalization and other dramatic, world-changing developments have all too frequently taken academic researchers by surprise. Within this dynamic, turbulent environment, international business (IB) researchers must comprehend increasingly complex, multicultural, cross-border activities and organizing systems while providing relevant results to the field. To build and sustain relevance, the international research paradigm must expand to incorporate not only the analysis of historical trends and events but also research frameworks and methods geared to investigation of the future. With this expanded research ‘tool kit’, we will be better able to anticipate and address the ‘Big Questions’ confronting global business operations in the twenty-first century.

This paper examines the capabilities of the Delphi Method of scientific inquiry as one such tool which is responsive to the challenging demands of our discipline and describes recent innovations that enhance the Delphi’s application to international management research. As this paper demonstrates, the Delphi Method is particularly well-suited to emerging research themes that call on IB researchers to interpret intricate sets of entities, activities, and relationships. Based on conclusions drawn from a summary of recent Delphi studies, recommendations are offered for maximizing the benefits of this method for international research. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Like Janus, the two-faced god of beginnings, endings and transitions, international management (IM) researchers and their first cousins in international business (IB) are poised on the threshold of the twenty-first century with one face gazing backward over the accomplishments of the past forty years and the other face looking forward toward a new world of global business activity that is fundamentally different and unknown. The locus of IM research over the past decades has been the international firm (Boddewyn, 1999); likewise, the IB research paradigm of the past has placed the multinational enterprise (MNE) squarely in the center of legitimate research activity as the accepted unit of analysis (Toyne, 1997).¹ Even today there are those who envision the ‘Big Question’ in international research as unchanged, i.e., “What determines the international success and failure of firms?” (Peng, 2004, p. 106). In contrast, a growing chorus views this constrained research paradigm as too narrow if researchers are to offer relevant results and deeper understandings of global business activity (Boddewyn, 1997, 1999; Sullivan, 1998; Toyne, 1997). Still others propose that the ‘Big Questions’ for international research have shifted toward inclusion of contextual factors that have been viewed historically as coincidental to the field, such as inquiries focused on cultural convergence and divergence (Leung et al., 2005), globalization (Buckley, 2002; Eden and Lenway, 2001), expanding roles of political players, and global business transformations due to information technologies (Eden and Lenway, 2001), global demographics, migration and development patterns (Zander, 2003). The *Journal of International Business Studies* (JIBS) special issue on “Multinationals: The Janus Face of Globalization” marked a turning point toward a broader research agenda, as the IB community intensified its debate about what the ‘Big Questions’ are or should be (Eden and Lenway, 2001). Lewin acknowledged this dramatic shift in international research focus, remarking that a key responsibility of JIBS is its leading role in “defining international business studies” and the current challenge is to extend their intellectual reach, bridging disciplines and breaking-out of “single-theme research silos” (Lewin, 2003, p. 1).

The problem these new horizons create for international researchers is twofold: first, consensus on the ‘Big Questions’ eludes the academic community; and second, it appears unlikely that sole reliance on traditionally accepted research methods drawn from the logico-deductive tradition will be sufficient by themselves to answer the significant ‘Big Questions’ now emerging. Since the 1960s, the international research community has strived to achieve academic legitimacy, using the field of economics as the cornerstone for theory building (Toyne, 1997) and relying on quantitative methods as the accepted tool kit for rigorous analysis (Bjorkegren, 1993). However, ‘Solutions’ to the ‘Big Questions’ of the twenty-first century are not likely to be found by looking for the “next big empirical phenomenon” (Shenkar, 2004, p. 167). Future international research inquiries must transcend traditional boundaries. This paper offers one means of doing so.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the capabilities of the Delphi Method. This research process, although generally ignored by IB researchers, has a proven track record in global forecasting, public policy and strategic planning (Gordon, 2004a). Its utility is increased through recent enhancements, e.g. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Cross-Impact Analysis and Trend Impact Analysis.

This article is organized around four questions regarding the Delphi Method and its potential applications to international business management research: 1) What are the major characteristics

¹ While the IB and IM disciplines are not identical, for the purposes of this paper they will be subsumed under the IB acronym unless otherwise indicated.

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