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Business benefits from a more disciplined approach

Inspiration for the new generation of business gurus comes from unlikely sources, says



Stuart Crainer

The latest ranking of business gurus, the Thinkers 50, published exclusively in The Times last November, reported that C. K. Prahalad was the leading business thinker in the world today. The result marked a change in business thinking, as it ousted Michael Porter, of Harvard Business School, from the top spot.

A new generation of business thinkers is emerging, with women now joining their ranks, and their testing ground can be found in the world's MBA classrooms. Just off the thought-leadership radar they may be, but this group of up and coming thinkers will make their mark in the next few years.

Hungarian-born Monika Hamori, of Spain's Instituto de Empresa, studied at Wharton in America and now teaches on MBA programmes in Madrid. With a three-year Marie Curie International ReIntegration research grant from the European Commission, Hamori is collecting data on the careers of 14,000 executives from the European financial services industry. "It is an ambitious project but it is important because I will fill a gap in the existing research."

Among the emerging gurus is a clutch of Indian-born business thinkers. They include Rakesh Khurana, of Harvard, and a fast emerging group based at other major business schools. Among them are Nirmalya Kumar, of London Business School, and Ranjay Gulati, of the Kellogg Graduate School of Management, Northwestern University, Illinois. Gulati teaches strategy implementation and managing organisations in dynamic markets on the Kellogg MBA programme.

Another trend is for the business world to seek inspiration from other disciplines. Courses are now as likely to involve zoologists and biologists as economists. One of the most popular electives on Saïd Business School's MBA programme is on complex systems and is run by Felix Reed-Tsochas, a theoretical physicist. Elsewhere, Nicholas Epley, assistant professor of behavioural science at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, brings psychology into the MBA classroom. "Most people are intuitive psychologists in their daily lives, wondering why people think or behave as they do. I just happened to find a profession that enables me to answer these questions for a living," he explains.

Other potential stars of the future include Alf Rehn, who holds the chair of management and organisation at Finland's Åbo Akademi University and is a professor of entrepreneurship and innovation at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. Rehn was a professor in his early thirties and has a different take on organisational life. His research focuses on novel ways to understand management, organisation and economy.

The world of the business guru has traditionally been a male preserve. This is changing. Already, female thinkers, such as Lynda Gratton, of London Business School, and Renée Mauborgne, of Insead, have made an impact. More are likely to follow. Elisabeth Kelan is championing women business leaders at London Business School's Lehman Brothers Centre for Women in Business. And at Saïd Business School, Linda Scott, formerly with the University of Illinois, is doing interesting research into advertising and consumption.

At Durham Business School, senior tutor Dinah Bennett has a long track record of involvement in support of local business initiatives. She is director of Women Into the Network and a passionate advocate of business education embracing practical experience in the business world. She talks of "pracademics", Renaissance men and women who combine practical experience with academic rigour. Sceptics find it hard to have faith in the cult of celebrity WHO needs gurus anyway? Managerial theorising is no longer a world of timid academics and obscure journals, Stuart Crainer writes.

"Gurus are not teams; they are stars. And like other stars their reputation and success is built upon their personal performance," say Timothy Clark, of Durham Business School, and Graeme Salaman, of the Open University Business School. "Gurus perform, and the power of their performance justifies their appearance fees, reverential treatment and influence."

Management, the universal science, has become populist. It is theory with attitude. The skyline is crowded with an array of thinkers and gurus, each armed with a magic potion to cure all known corporate ills.

And, inevitably, there are critics aplenty. "I think it is a packaged goods business," says Richard Pascale, the author of *Managing on the Edge*.

"There is an unquenchable thirst. If you take the premise, as I do, that corporations are the dominant social institutions of our age, you have to reckon with the fact that corporations are very influential. Certain trappings go with the party; a whole group of jesters like me."

"It is part of the fanfare surrounding these institutions. With that comes a constant churn of material for corporate chieftains to feed on. Because of their prominence in society, this is always going to be with us."

Oliver Westall, director of the full-time MBA programme at Lancaster University Management School, links the perceived importance of business gurus to the cult of celebrity.

"Ideas, processes and experiential learning are what we are about," Westall says.

"We are a laboratory for ideas; we want people to think critically and seriously about ideas rather than focusing on personalities."

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