

## FROM THE EDITORS

### Special Research Forums: Past, Present, and Future

Most readers of the *Academy of Management Journal (AMJ)* are probably aware that every so often, special research forums (SRFs) are published in the *Journal*. However, even avid readers probably know relatively little about the origins, objectives, and selection procedures for SRFs. For example, until very recently, there were no explicit instructions on the *AMJ* Web site as to how to submit an SRF proposal, or guidelines defining the criteria by which proposals are evaluated. Given that the first special research forum appeared in *AMJ* almost a decade ago, it seems time to take stock of the history of SRFs and to have a look at where they are now and where they might be going.

The first two special research forums were published in December 1993, when Michael Hitt was editor. The first, "Configurational Approaches to Organization," was guest-edited by Alan Meyer, Anne Tsui, and C. R. Hinings. The second, "Methodological Issues in Management Research," was guest-edited by Jean Bartunek, Philip Bobko, and N. Venkatraman. Since then, there have been 18 more *AMJ* special research forums:

- "Intra- and Interorganizational Cooperation" (guest editors Ken G. Smith, Stephen Carroll, and Susan Ashford, February 1995)
- "International and Intercultural Management Research" (P. Christopher Earley and Harbir Singh, April 1995)
- "Human Resource Management and Organizational Performance" (Brian Becker and Barry Gerhart, August 1996)
- "Innovation and Organizations" (Robert Drazin and Claudia Bird Schoonhoven, October 1996)
- "Alliances and Networks" (Richard Osborn and John Hagedoorn, April 1997)
- "Organizational Ecology" (Terry Amburgey and Hayagreeva Rao, October 1997)
- "Teaching Effectiveness in the Organizational Sciences" (Peter Frost and Cynthia Fukami, December 1997)
- "Managerial Compensation and Firm Performance" (Harry Barkema and Luis Gomez-Mejia, April 1998)
- "Stakeholders, Social Responsibility, and Performance" (Jeffrey Harrison and R. Edward Freeman, October 1999)
- "Emerging Economies" (Robert Hoskisson, Lorraine Eden, Chung Ming Lau, and Mike Wright, June 2000)
- "The Management of Organizations in the Natural Environment" (Mark Starik, Alfred Marcus, and Anne Ilinitch, August 2000)
- "Managing in the New Millennium" (guest-edited by one member from each Academy division, December 2000)
- "International Entrepreneurship" (Patricia Phillips McDougall and Benjamin Oviatt, October 2000)
- "Knowledge Transfer between Academics and Practitioners" (Sara Rynes, Jean Bartunek, and Richard Daft, April 2001)
- "Change and Development Journeys into a Pluralistic World" (Richard Woodman, Kim Cameron, Herminia Ibarra, and Andrew Pettigrew, August 2001)
- "New and Evolving Organizational Forms" (John Child and Rita Gunther McGrath, December 2001)
- "Institutional Theory and Institutional Change" (M. Tina Dacin, Jerry Goodstein, and W. Richard Scott, February 2002)
- "A New Time" (Harry Barkema, Joel Baum, and Elizabeth Mannix, October 2002)
- "Governance through Ownership" (Catherine Daily, Dan Dalton, and Nandini Rajagopalan, April 2003)

According to Mike Hitt, there were two reasons for deciding to solicit SRF proposals for *AMJ*. The first was to encourage high-quality manuscripts in areas of growing importance whose authors might not normally think of *AMJ* as a receptive outlet. In addition to attracting research that was already under way, SRFs were designed to stimulate additional *new* research that otherwise might not have been undertaken without the express encouragement conferred by SRF designation. The second (and related) objective was to make *AMJ* a more interesting journal for readers by supporting increased coverage of emerging areas of cutting-edge research and practice.

Before soliciting the first SRF proposal, Mike Hitt and his associate editors discussed the possibility with their editorial review board, with former *AMJ* editors, and with the Academy of Management's

Board of Governors. For the most part, the response was strongly in favor of moving ahead with SRFs. However, one issue that drew considerable debate from the initial discussions involved how to ensure that *AMJ*'s traditionally high standards would be maintained in the SRFs. In response to this concern, proposals for the first few SRFs were solicited only from *AMJ* board members (although non-board members could be included on guest editorial teams). In addition, Mike Hitt was personally involved in every editorial decision made in the first two SRF proposals.

Over the years, the procedures have changed. For example, SRF proposals are now accepted from all members of the Academy. In addition, the bulk of the editorial decision making for SRFs has now passed to the guest editorial teams, although either the editor or an associate editor acts as advisor to every guest team. Moreover, the process of reviewing proposals for SRFs has changed as well. Initially, the editor made a decision after consulting informally with the associate editors. At present, two groups provide input to the editor: the associate editors (currently Don Bergh, Dov Eden, Marshall Schminke, and me) and *AMJ*'s Advisory Board (currently consisting of chair Dave Harrison and members Dick Blackburn, Amy Hillman, Ken Law, Michael Pratt, Richard Priem, and Kathleen Sutcliffe). However, the final decision still rests with the editor.

### PROS AND CONS OF SPECIAL FORUMS

To gain some background information for this column, I asked prior *AMJ* editors who had accepted or published SRFs what they saw as their advantages and disadvantages. All four of these previous editors (Michael Hitt, Angelo DeNisi, Anne Tsui, and Greg Northcraft) felt the major benefits were the introduction of important new topics to *AMJ*, the stimulation of new research streams through the legitimacy provided by SRF status, and the attraction of new readers to *AMJ* through the introduction of cutting-edge subject matter. Several of the editors also saw SRFs as a way to showcase work from smaller divisions of the Academy (such as Social Issues in Management, and Entrepreneurship) and to signal to prospective authors that *AMJ* was receptive to SRF topics that had not appeared frequently in prior issues of the *Journal*. Additionally, SRFs have become a training ground for prospective editors—a chance for those who might be interested in editorship to gain a “realistic job preview” before signing on to a larger commitment.

Clearly, prior editors hoped that by introducing SRFs, they could “get ahead of the curve” on im-

portant emerging issues in the field. To obtain some cursory information about the impact of SRFs on subsequent academic inquiry, I conducted a citation count on all full-length articles appearing in SRFs between 1993 and 1999 (subsequent SRFs are too recent for reliable citation counts) and compared them with full-length articles from the same years that were not part of an SRF. Research notes were excluded from both data sets, as were articles published in 1994 (when there were no SRFs).

Over this period, there were 11 special research forums containing 62 full-length articles. On the average, these 62 SRF articles garnered 37.9 citations (s.d. = 38.2), while non-SRF articles published in those same years garnered an average of 29.3 citations (s.d. = 31.1; difference significant at  $p < .01$ ). In other words, the typical SRF article appears to have had a greater impact on subsequent research than the typical “traditional” *AMJ* article. Although this is admittedly a crude analysis, it at least suggests that quality standards have not been eroded for SRFs, as some initially feared.

The higher citation rate of SRF articles may occur for several reasons. For example, it may be that packaging multiple articles with a related theme into a single issue, complete with a unifying introductory and/or concluding statement, has a greater impact than scattering such articles across multiple issues or journals. Alternatively, SRFs may be an effective mechanism for identifying the most up-and-coming research streams and interesting larger numbers of authors in pursuing them.

Another measure of the success of SRFs is that in their first nine years, they were responsible for producing three of *AMJ*'s annual Best Paper Award winners: “Fit, Equifinality and Organizational Effectiveness: A Test of Two Configurational Theories,” by D. Harold Doty, William Glick, and George Huber, 1993; “International Expansion by New Venture Firms: International Diversity, Mode of Market Entry, Technological Learning, and Performance,” by Shaker Zahra, Duane Ireland, and Michael Hitt, 2000, and “Institutional Change in Large Law Firms: A Resource Dependency and Institutional Perspective,” by Peter Sherer and Kyungmook Lee, 2002.

Although each of the former editors felt that SRFs were, on balance, a positive development, they also noted some challenges associated with SRF production. One such challenge is produced by the onslaught of manuscripts (usually 50–80) typically received over only a few weeks. This creates a very steep learning curve for guest editors, many of whom have never before performed in an editorial role. In addition, some guest editors place a higher priority on managing the SRF process than others,

with the result that a small number of SRFs have run considerably behind schedule. Obviously, this is a highly undesirable outcome for a journal that prides itself on the speed, as well as the quality, of its reviews.

### SPECIAL RESEARCH FORUMS TODAY

For those of you who might be thinking about submitting an SRF proposal, the present SRF process is as follows: Proposals are submitted to the editor, currently Tom Lee, at *AMJTLEE@u.washington.edu*. Proposals are drafted in the form of a "Call for Papers," such as the one written by Anil Gupta, Ken Smith, and Christina Shalley and published at the end of this issue. Because the reputation of prospective guest editors is one of the primary criteria the regular editorial team uses to judge a proposal, the selection of guest co-editors is an important one. The curricula vitae of proposed guest editors should be submitted along with an initial proposal. All else being equal, proposals will receive more favorable consideration when the guest editors have excellent scholarly reputations. Other desirable characteristics of a guest editorial team include extensive reviewing experience, a variety of university affiliations, inclusion of at least one current *AMJ* editorial board member, and diversity of scholarly approaches and perspectives within the team.

The most important basis for selection, however, is the perceived merit of a proposed topic and its likely contribution to management theory, research, and practice. At the broadest level, the editorial team's objective is to insure that special research forums are indeed "special." This means that proposals are more likely to be accepted if the topics involved have not already been extensively covered in *AMJ*. In addition, proposals that appear to have the greatest potential to produce important theoretical or empirical advances, to engage multiple methodologies, and to stimulate multilevel or multidisciplinary research are also most likely to receive favorable consideration. The extent to which a large segment of *AMJ*'s readership is likely to be interested in the subject matter of the proposed forum is another criterion for evaluation. Finally, it is expected that SRF proposals will represent aspiration to the same general standard that other *AMJ* submissions are held to—that is, making

a significant contribution to management theory, research, and practice.

Examples of previous SRFs that have clearly emerged as something "special" include the 1993 forum on configurational approaches to organizations, the 1995 forum on intra- and interorganizational cooperation, and the 1996 forum on human resource management and firm performance. Each of these SRFs has been cited a large number of times by subsequent researchers (328, 631, and 451, respectively, as of June 2003). In each case, the editors selected a topic that was increasing in importance owing to shifts in the competitive environment or in researchers' and managers' understanding of potentially crucial sources of future progress or advantage.

For example, the SRF on configurational approaches took advantage of theoretical developments in contingency theory and the resource-based view of the firm to produce important empirical findings about the relationships between various organizational configurations and firm performance. The SRF on intra- and interorganizational cooperation emerged in response to changing structural forms based on cooperation (network organizations and virtual corporations, for example), new market models (such as total quality management and supply chain management), and new organizational metaphors (comparisons between organizations and brains or families). Similarly, the SRF on strategic human resource management extended an emerging trend to examine the impact of HR policies at the macro (firm) level of analysis rather than the more typical individual level.

At present, two special research forums are in progress. The first of these, "Building Effective Networks," is currently in the manuscript review process. The second, "Managing Exploration and Exploitation Processes," is being newly announced in this issue. Looking to the future, the *Journal's* editors will continue to welcome other proposals that might stimulate exemplary empirical research around important themes, as well as any other creative ideas you might have for producing truly special future issues of *AMJ*.

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