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The Problem With Efficiency as a Pervasive Principle in Business School Academia, and What a Sufficiency-Based Approach Can Do Better

Stephan M. Schaefer [1] and Christopher Wickert [2]
[1]School of Economics and Management, Lund University, P.O. Box 7080, Lund, 220 07, Sweden [2]School of Business and Economics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, Amsterdam, 1081 HV, The Netherlands
Corresponding author: email: stephan.schaefer@fek.lu.se

Efficiency is a pervasive yet insufficiently challenged managerial principle and an integral part of business school academia. However, while there is compelling evidence that efficiency gains can have severe undesirable social and ecological consequences that reduce overall welfare both in terms of well-being and natural resources, business school academsia remains ill-equipped to adequately understand the origins of these consequences. Furthermore, management education is limited in its critical thinking about potential alternative organizing principles to efficiency. In this conceptual paper, we mobilize literature from resource economics and the so-called 'rebound effect' to show how and where efficiency can produce unintended harmful consequences. We illustrate this dynamic through two prominent cases where efficiency principles are particularly problematic: eco-efficiency and sustainability, as well as digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI). We then explore why efficiency continues to dominate business school academia despite its adverse effects, drawing on the notion of ignorance to explain how dynamics of segmentation, justification and valuation sustain its persistence. Finally, we use a performativity perspective to argue how a sufficiency-based approach as an alternative and complementary organizing principle can come into being to counter the dominance of efficiency. Our aim is to help reorient management education toward a more desirable, socially attuned and ecologically responsible future.

Introduction

Efficiency, the idea of doing more with less, is a pervasive principle for social and economic organization. Some scholars, such as Fligstein (2021, 488), have even claimed that 'one of the most basic questions in organization theory is the degree to which organizations persist because they are efficient'. A review by Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon (2011) of the origins of the most influential theoretical contributions in organizational research shows that approximately one-third of all articles in the field are based on theories rooted in engineering and economics, where efficiency is treated as a central and often primary dependent variable of interest. As a result, efficiency is a pervasive principle of management and organization and prevails in the 'marketplace of ideas' (Ferraro, Pfeffer and Sutton, 2005, p. 8). Some even argue that "efficiency has become hegemonic in the sense that it is so universal, so internalized by nearly everyone in nearly all realms of life, that one hardly thinks about it, let alone questions it" (Princen, 2005, 13). In consequence, much of mainstream business school academia, including management education, treats efficiency as a legitimate managerial goal that is so widely accepted 'that textbooks just assert it, rather than argue for it' (Sundaram and Inkpen, 2004, 350; see also Fotaki and Prasad, 2015; Laasch, 2024).

Of course, efficiency as an organizing principle is not inherently undesirable. However, it becomes problematic when turning into an unquestioned behavioural principle that guides actions such that potential alternatives are either ruled out or ignored. In such cases, the efficiency logic underlying mainstream management theories can create a reality in which the maximization of output and the minimization of input are considered the most desirable social and

economic goal while adverse and undesirable consequences that arise *because* efficiency principles are pursued are not considered. Surprisingly, such ignorance occurs despite well-documented evidence of efficiency's harmful consequences in areas such as eco-efficiency, sustainability, digitalization, and artificial intelligence (AI) (Herring, Sorrell and Elliott, 2009; Polimeni *et al.*, 2009; York, Adua and Clark, 2022). Nevertheless, the "gospel of efficiency" continues to dominate academia particularly in business schools, and it is taught uncritically in management education and pedagogy (Alcott, 2005). This makes efficiency not merely an abstract managerial principle but one that is repetitively 'conventionalized' as a social norm guiding actions and decisions (Cabantous and Gond, 2011, 579) through teaching, research, and institutional practice, making business schools themselves a key site where efficiency becomes pervasive.

In business textbooks for instance, efficiency is frequently presented as universally desirable (e.g., González-Tejero et al., 2025; Martin, 2012; Robbins, Coulter and DeCenzo, 2019; Singh and Khatri, 2024), however with little to no attention to the adversarial consequences it can produce. In fact, instead of saving social or material resources by "doing more with less" as efficiency-focussed theories would presume, it often appears that *more* resources are used, and at an aggregate level outcomes become *less* efficient or desirable. This is exactly what resource economists and scholars emphasizing the so-called "rebound effect" have alerted to (Alcott, 2005; Brookes, 1990; Herring, Sorrell and Elliott, 2009; Khazzoom, 1980). Translating these insights to the management domain helps us to critically revisit efficiency's dominance in business school academia to avoid perpetuating what Ghoshal (2005) and Edwards (2017) call 'bad theories' that lead to 'bad practice'. Indeed, undesirable realities in business management, as well as those co-created by managerial practice, have been traced back to paradigmatic management theories that underpin many of the social and environmental problems confronting the world (Ghoshal, 2005), motivating our effort in this paper to revisit efficiency's core principles.

Driven by our interest in exploring how management scholarship, including both research and education, can contribute to more socially and environmentally desirable realities, we examine illustrative cases of efficiency's socially and ecologically harmful consequences through the lens of the rebound effect. Specifically, we focus on eco-efficiency and sustainability, as well as digitalization and AI in the workplace. Then, we offer an explanation why, despite these consequences being widely known, they continue to be either ignored altogether, or remain treated highly uncritically across business schools. Mobilizing research on ignorance, we conceptualize the persistence of efficiency principles as sustained by three mutually reinforcing ignorance dynamics, namely *segmentation*, *justification* and *valuation*. Finally, we provide a more positive outlook and consider how management academia could be steered toward alternative, or at least complementary considerations to efficiency. For doing so, we promote a sufficiency-logic in which principles of 'enoughness' counter efficiency as the dominant organising logic. The performativity literature, and specifically its notion of "progressive performativity" (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015) that has emerged from Critical Management Studies (CMS) provides a theoretical lens for arguing how such logic could find its way into business school academia. Our aim is to outline a prefigurative approach to management scholarship and education that is more reflexive, socially attuned and ecologically desirable.

Undesirable consequences of efficiency: The case of the rebound effect

Countering the prevailing logic of efficiency, resource economists have long argued that efficiency improvements may paradoxically increase, rather than decrease, overall resource use. Khazzoom and Brookes (see Saunders, 1992) advanced this argument in what came to be known as the Khazzoom–Brookes postulate, echoing the earlier insights of British economist William Stanley Jevons (1865). Writing about the coal economy, Jevons noted that technological advances in steam engines did not reduce coal consumption but instead accelerated it: "it is wholly a confusion of ideas to suppose that the economical use of fuel is equivalent to a diminished consumption. The very contrary is the truth…every…improvement of the engine, when effected, does but accelerate anew the consumption of coal" (pp. 140, 152–53). This phenomenon, now widely known as the *Jevons paradox*, was later elaborated in resource economics under the concept of the *rebound effect* (Alcott, 2005; Brookes, 1990; Herring, Sorrell and Elliott, 2009; Khazzoom, 1980). The rebound effect describes how efficiency gains lower the effective cost of using a resource, stimulating behavioural and systemic responses that increase overall consumption. Sometimes the offset is partial (up to 25% according to Berkhout, Muskens and W. Velthuijsen, 2000; Schipper and Grubb, 2000), but in some cases a complete 'backfire' occurs, where efficiency gains lead to more than 100% offset of the original savings (Hanley et al., 2009; Holm and Englund, 2009; Saunders, 2000). Examples include rising energy use in transportation (Polimeni et al., 2009), refrigeration (A. Greening, Greene and Difiglio, 2000) and information technology (Saunders, 2000).

Consider the following: in 1960s, for example, only 12% of American homes had air conditioning systems because they simply consumed excessive amounts of

energy. When air conditioning became more energy efficient, its use exploded. Increasing numbers of families could afford it, cars were equipped with it, and whole office complexes became chilled. By 2005, 84% of households had air conditioning. Over this period, however, the initial gains in air conditioners' energy efficiency were offset by a total increase in energy consumption that was generated by excessive demand for air conditioning: as "the ability to efficiently and inexpensively chill things has grown, so have opportunities to buy chilled things—a potent positive-feedback loop" (Owen, 2010, 6). Similar dynamics also surged in domestic life. Burkeman (2016, 1) illustrates that "the spread of 'labour-saving' devices transformed the lives of housewives and domestic servants [at] the end of the 19th century." The invention of vacuum cleaners, for example, meant that household chores became simpler and less time consuming. While the seemingly positive consequences of increased efficiency seem initially evident, Burkeman points to gradually emerging counterintuitive outcomes. Citing historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1983), he argues that rather than leading to increased leisure time, the efficiency of housework led to different cleanliness standards. Now that carpets could be cleaned in minutes, they must be perfectly clean all the time. Efficient household devices, he claims, led to an *increase in work rather than a decrease*. Again, the initial efficiency gains were offset.

As these examples show, the rebound effect conceptually differs from negative externalities. While the rebound effect, such as externalities, points to a gap between the intended effect and the actual outcome of an economic activity, the two notions are fundamentally different. Externalities refer to (positive or negative) side effects of economic activities that are not priced by the market (or reflected in price), whereas the rebound effect captures the way economic actors adjust their behaviour in response to efficiency gains in ways that may offset the expected gains of these improvements, and which depend on the social, institutional and cultural contexts where efficiency-focussed practices are enacted. The major problem is that efficiency-focussed theories rest on the premise that doing more with less reduces overall resource use, *ceteris paribus*. However, this assumption of 'all else being equal' creates a condition that enables ignorance. Although analytically necessary in many cases social actors are often unaware of how decisive the ceteris paribus condition is for predictions based on efficiency gains. As a consequence, this assumption obscures rebound effects precisely because in the empirical realm 'all else' rarely remains equal. Rebound effects capture these dynamics and demonstrate how efficiency gains can stimulate behavioural and systemic responses that *increase* aggregate consumption *elsewhere*, as the example we cited above of the household devices and 'more work for mother' demonstrates.

Although widely debated in resource economics and with plentiful examples from quotidian life, the rebound effect has received surprisingly little attention in business school academia. This is problematic because efficiency continues to be hailed by many as a solution to ecological crises, even as evidence shows its problematic consequences. For management scholarship and education this underscores that efficiency cannot be treated as a neutral or universally beneficial principle but must be critically examined for the conditions under which it produces undesirable outcomes.

In what follows, we demonstrate two illustrative cases situated closer to business and management contexts. The first concerns notions eco-efficiency and sustainability, which are frequently presented as "win–win" solutions to societal grand challenges and climate change. The second involves new communication and information technologies, focussing on digital and AI tools in workplace arrangements. Both are popular in research and are common in business school academia, yet both reveal how efficiency principles, when enacted uncritically, can generate practices that initially appear desirable but ultimately lead to undesirable outcomes.

Eco-efficiency and sustainability

One of the key principles assumed to contribute to sustainable development is eco-efficiency (Korhonen and Seager, 2008; Whiteman, Walker and Perego, 2013). In 1997 report to the Club of Rome, von Weizsäcker and Lovins and Lovins (1997, xxi) raised concerns regarding the sustainability of our planet's resources, yet proposed that '[t]he cure is using resources efficiently, doing more with less'. Their observation underscores the belief that efficiency is one of the key solutions to the world's ecological problems and the creation of a more desirable future. However, the connections between businesses and cumulative, systemic environmental problems remain poorly understood (Wickert, 2021), while management scholarship largely 'continues to rely on piecemeal approaches that rarely deal with the global picture on environmental science' (Edwards, Alcaraz and Cornell, 2018, 28). This is because management scholars have insufficiently acknowledged the consequences of the rebound effect in their theorizing (Herring, Sorrell and Elliott, 2009; Whiteman, Walker and Perego, 2013). Alcott (2005, 9) expressed his concern about the 'gospel of efficiency' in this discourse, stating that "ecologically-oriented economists and practically all governments, green political parties and NGOs [and business schools] believe that efficiency gains lower consumption and negative environmental impact" but pay little or no attention to potential rebound and backfire effects.

Few management scholars have acknowledged these concerns that have been raised outside of business school research. Whiteman, Walker and Perego (2013,

307) admitted "that management research on corporate sustainability faces a paradox: on the one hand, sustainability is no longer a fringe topic and corporations routinely invest in eco-efficiency measures. On the other hand, data from ecological analyses indicate a worsening, and in some cases, alarming state of affairs" (see also Rockström et al., 2023). These authors have questioned this disconnect and have emphasized that "[w]e simply do not know to what extent corporate greening actually contributes to ecological sustainability or whether it does at all" (Kallio and Nordberg, 2006, 447, see similarly Montgomery, Lyon and Barg, 2024; Williams, Perego and Whiteman, 2025).

The aviation industry offers a striking example of how following eco-efficiency principles can become ecologically undesirable by undermining its very own premises. Low-cost carriers such as easyJet and Ryanair emphasize their energy-efficient operations that are aimed to shape new desirable realities through the application of eco-efficiency principles. For instance, Ryanair has claimed on its website to be "Europe's greenest and cleanest airline"[1]. Regardless, while average fuel consumption in the aviation industry and thus CO2 emissions per passenger mile flown have decreased by more than 40% since 1975, overall fuel consumption (and relatedly, that of aluminium and other materials used to construct planes, or the sealing of soil to build airports) has risen by 150% due to lower and thus more affordable ticket prices; higher demand, especially on certain low-cost routes; and substitution from the paradoxically more eco-efficient trains (e.g., Devezas, 2020; Rubin and Tal, 2007). Other industries, such as the automotive industry, have reported similar effects (Polimeni et al., 2009), which led Rubin and Tal (2007, 5) to proclaim that "energy usage has risen fastest where energy efficiency gains have been the greatest."

Despite substantial evidence of rebound effects, business schools have been slow to engage critically with eco-efficiency principles and the undesirable realities these may shape. In the classroom, management educators often present eco-efficiency as a 'win–win' solution to grand challenges, positioning it as a core principle of corporate sustainability as evidenced for instance by numerous case studies about 'Creating Shared Value' or more recently the 'double materiality' principle[2]. At the same time, textbooks are often downplaying if not ignoring altogether the systemic backfire effects demonstrated in sectors such as aviation and automotive. The problem, then, is not that efficiency is inherently misguided, but that it is enacted as an unquestioned cure for ecological crises, with little acknowledgement of how it can undermine its own promises.

[1]https://corporate.ryanair.com/sustainability/; accessed 17 December 2024

[2]See for example https://www.thecasecentre.org/

Digitalization and AI

Another critical and widely discussed issue prone to rebound effects is the presumed efficiency potential of digitalization and, of late, the adoption of AI in organizational and managerial contexts (e.g., von Krogh, Roberson and Gruber, 2023; see critically: Lindebaum and Fleming, 2024). Scholars have called this, perhaps not surprisingly, digital rebound, which refers to "rebound effects resulting from…digitally-enabled efficiency gains" (Kunkel and Tyfield, 2021, 3). The crucial resources of concern in the digital rebound are data and information, which are more efficiently transmitted, stored, retrieved, and combined via digital means (Hilbert and López, 2011). Based on this capability, a common contention is that digitalization supports a more efficient structuring of business processes and work practices, which are driven by value-adding and value-neutral digital technologies (e.g., Kellogg, Valentine and Christin, 2020). Scholars have claimed that adopting digital technology will lead to better operational and financial performance through improved customer- and supplier-related activities that reduce transaction costs (Barua et al., 2004; Lanzolla et al., 2020). Researchers have highlighted the benefits of internal communication systems (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017) as well as the latest developments in AI and algorithmic decision-making as a decisive factor for increased efficiency (Berente et al., 2021; Lindebaum, Vesa and den Hond, 2020) in areas such as medicine, judicial decisions and welfare systems. These positive effects of efficiency in relation to digital technology are mainstream in many business school curricula.

However, despite the broad acceptance of the efficiency potential of digitalization and AI, scholars since 1980s have been puzzled by the apparent lack of increased productivity amid technological advancements which is known as the 'productivity paradox' (Brynjolfsson, 1993). In fact, multiple reasons have been suggested for the productivity paradox. Some scholars believe that productivity should be redefined in different terms because of macroeconomic measurement problems (Brynjolfsson, 1993). Others attribute the paradox to the actual management and adoption of ICT in organizations by arguing that efficiency gains are determined not by altering productivity statistics but by analysing how ICT has been deployed and used in an organization (Pinsonneault and Rivard, 1998). Karr-Wisniewski and Lu (2010, 1) examined such behavioural dimensions of the ICT productivity paradox, arguing that "increased usage of technology tools does not always lead to increased work productivity; rather, sometimes it actually can be counterproductive".

?Similarly, with a view on the dark side of digitalization, Trittin-Ulbrich et al. (2021, 18) posited, regarding public organizations, "that the digital transformation of

organizations may ultimately be less efficient as desired and ultimately potentially harmful for the public good". In a recent overview of AI in organizations, scholars have observed that while 'AI technologies offer many positive benefits to organizations, their introduction often creates significant unintended (or intended) consequence[s] for individuals and organizations' (Benbya, Pachidi and Jarvenpaa, 2021, 282). Indeed, digital technology's efficiency potential is far from clear-cut if we understand it as a 'human-machine assemblage' (Bader and Kaiser, 2019) in which social and technical aspects are inextricably intertwined with the deployment and use of digital technologies by humans (see Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Prasad, 1993; Wang, Liu and Parker, 2020).

One consequence is that 'techno-overload, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, techno-uncertainty and techno-invasion' contributes to what scholars refer to as technostress (Dragano and Lunau, 2020, 408). Generally, technostress is 'caused by an individual's attempts to deal with constantly evolving ICTs and the changing physical, social and cognitive responses demanded by their use', which can lead to effects such as 'perceived work overload, demoralized and frustrated users, information fatigue, loss of motivation and dissatisfaction at work' (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008, 418). For example, scholars have found that AI and algorithmic decision-making oftentimes create confusion and tension in the workplace, leading to uncertainties among users (Möhlmann, Salge and Marabelli, 2023). This, in turn, often creates inefficient work practices, resistance, and a decrease in productivity. Lammi (2021) illustrated that the implementation of automation tools in a Swedish government agency led to 'subversive organizing' and worker resistance; employees successfully prevented the work standardization and its potential efficiency gains, leading instead to decreased efficiency in work processes.

In sum, cases abound where the pursuit of efficiency principles generates multiple unintended and often undesirable social and ecological consequences, as illustrated in the contexts of eco-efficiency and sustainability as well as digitalization and AI in the workplace. Conceptually, those efficiency-focussed theories assume that doing more with less will reduce overall resource use or increase productivity, yet rebound effects reveal how their enactment often contradicts these very assumptions. While we do not deny that efficiency can in many cases help shape more desirable realities, the generalized view on efficiency's positive potential seems to crowd out more critical views of the problems we have highlighted above. This neglect points to a deeper issue: business school academia not only reproduces but also legitimizes the persistence of efficiency principles, even when its harmful consequences are empirically validated. To understand why efficiency remains so pervasive despite this evidence, we turn to the literature on ignorance.

Explaining the Persistence of Efficiency Principles: Insights from Ignorance

A possible explanation for the persistence of efficiency, despite rebound effects, lies in the social, cultural, political, and institutional conditions that enable and sustain it (Randles and Laasch, 2016). In what follows, we draw attention to an important, yet thus far underappreciated, dynamic and its multiple forms that sustain the pervasiveness of efficiency, namely *ignorance*. This perspective might not be the sole explanation yet, by focussing on ignorance and concomitant literature, we deliberately shift analytical attention from commonly employed institutional perspectives to ignorance as a more dynamic and socially-embedded practice (Alvesson, Einola and Schaefer, 2022; Schaefer, 2019). Hence, rather than treating the persistence of efficiency primarily as the outcome of institutionalized norms or institutional inertia, we foreground how actors may not want to know or may be structurally discouraged from knowing. We, therefore, argue that ignorance, as a theoretical lens, offers a particularly fruitful and hitherto underutilized explanation, because it foregrounds epistemic dynamics that institutional perspectives address only marginally, especially the practices through which actors come to not know, actively avoid knowing, or fail to engage with available counter-knowledge. Focussing on ignorance thus allows us to explain not only why efficiency remains legitimate, but how its limitations are systematically bracketed in everyday academic practices such as research prioritization, curriculum design and academic siloing. Ignorance-based perspectives thus complement but also go beyond institutional explanations by illuminating social and motivational practices that sustain the reproduction of efficiency principles.

Moreover, we consider ignorance in a technical sense as developed in prior research on knowledge and non-knowledge, where it is understood not simply as an individual shortcoming but as a socially constructed and institutionally embedded process and state that can serve strategic, political or cultural functions (see for example Alvesson, Einola and Schaefer, 2022; Schaefer, 2019). This perspective directs attention primarily to structural and systemic patterns that enable the persistence of certain performative principles (Cabantous and Gond, 2011). At the same time, these patterns are enacted and reproduced through the decisions and practices of individuals, which means that both individual and collective forms of ignorance are interwoven. In this sense, ignorance is a useful lens to explore how academics' conscious or unconscious assumptions might

thwart progress toward more desirable realities and reinforce problematic management orthodoxies.

Ungar (2008, 301) reminds us that "ignorance among individuals, as well as experts and organizations, is a serious social problem" but "remains relatively unrecognized since it has major liabilities as a marketable issue." As Smithson (1985) observed, the production of knowledge and ignorance is socially constructed. This means that actors may deliberately or unintentionally bring up or suppress certain issues and their potential adverse consequences (Schaefer, 2019), and that sedimented societal norms and practices can facilitate the maintenance of ignorance (Ungar, 2008). We argue that the persistence of efficiency in management education is sustained by the interplay between individual and systemic forms of ignorance, which, in our analysis, operate through three interrelated dynamics: *segmentation, justification and evaluation.*

Segmentation

Regarding segmentation, Bauer (1996) suggested a 'knowledge–ignorance paradox' to capture how the growth of specialized knowledge implies a simultaneous increase in systemic ignorance. This is because modern knowledge societies are characterized by strict division of labour and hence functionally separated domains of knowledge. Knowledge is typically attributed to specialized professional, expert, or occupational roles, such as lawyers, physicians and managers. While members of such groups are commonly expected to possess knowledge associated with their respective positions, research shows that these areas of specialization are increasingly concealed from each other (Ungar, 2008). Because of increasing numbers of sub-disciplines, which focus on active knowledge production relevant to their own fields, there is also 'an increased reluctance to pursue additional information and a concomitant decline in the stock of general knowledge' (Ungar, 2008, 312). The need to keep up with the increasing specialized knowledge in one's own field thus comes at the cost of reducing the time and memory available to learn other seemingly unrelated or irrelevant information. This means that while, paradoxically, scholars produce more knowledge, the level of general functional knowledge that crosses disciplinary boundaries declines. Resource economists and other scholars might indeed have repeatedly been pointing out the rebound effects but as we have argued above this knowledge has seldomly entered business school academia and too many management scholars continue to research and teach about seemingly desirable practices such as eco-efficiency as they are unaware of knowledge in other domains.

In fact, temporarily breaking disciplinary boundaries was the initial trigger for our deeper engagement, as management scholars, with the rebound effect. One of the authors participated in a compulsory, university-wide teaching course that brought together faculty from across disciplines. During an informal conversation in a break, a discussion on critical management studies emerged with a colleague from a sustainability institute. In this exchange, the colleague introduced the Jevons paradox and recommended Thomas Princen's work on sufficiency, which planted the seed for a more systematic engagement with the issue and its subsequent incorporation into lectures and seminars. That such a foundational critique of efficiency entered our understanding through an incidental encounter rather than established disciplinary channels highlights how epistemic segmentation can sustain ignorance even among engaged teachers, and points to the need for more structured cross-disciplinary exchanges.

Justification

There is also intentional avoidance of seeking knowledge and incorporating that knowledge into established practices within one's domain. This is what Schaefer (2019) referred to as "wilful ignorance" (see also Alvesson, Einola and Schaefer, 2022). Management scholars may be aware of the adverse consequences of efficiency and *could* incorporate that into their thinking but many actively choose to ignore it. A possible force that fuels wilful ignorance is *system justification,* which refers to how individuals are inclined to justify and rationalize the status quo in their societal systems (Jost and Hunyady, 2003; Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004). System justification theory stresses the accommodation and rationalization of the status quo and the general difficulty of people imagining 'cognitive alternatives' (Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004, 887). The starting point of system justification theory is the commonplace assertion that powerful social systems and concomitant institutionalized behavioural norms exert great control over the lives of individuals, whereas individuals feel that they have little or no control over these systems.

Management scholars are embedded in a global system of business schools whose number and influence have been growing during the last decades. Most business school research agendas and teaching curricula are still dominated by 'economically oriented managerialist approaches' (Lounsbury and Gehman, 2024, 3; Davis and DeWitt, 2025) based on a mainstream business model and its "assumptions about efficiency-maximization" (Randles and Laasch, 2016, 54). Already 20 years ago, Gioia and Corley (2002) warned that rankings encourage business schools to prioritize image-building over substantive improvements in teaching, suggesting that 'resources are shifted away from substantive teaching improvements (e.g., course development, classroom facilities, educational infrastructure) to image management enterprises (e.g., PR depart-

ments, image consultants, responding to media)'. While their observations were anecdotal, they reflect a broader pattern in which rankings shape institutional priorities and reward structures. In what Jones and colleagues (2020) et al. (2020) call the "performativity university", the "transmission of knowledge has increasingly become attuned to the needs of business and society as a form of 'mercantilization of knowledge' (Lyotard, 1984, 51)", which tends to channel faculty time and attention toward research productivity, reputation management, and external visibility. As a result, substantive and innovative developments of teaching curricula often receive less institutional attention and support, despite their importance for prefiguring more socially and environmentally desirable business management realities (e.g., Gümüsay and Reinecke, 2022; Laasch, Ryazanova and Wright, 2022; Zanoni et al., 2017).

Powerful institutional and ideological environment of business schools can even intimidate management scholars, who feel that they have little or no control over these systems and do not dare to challenge the influential and powerful managerial elites that govern them (Fleming, 2021). According to system justification theory, individuals commonly assert that powerful and hard-to-change systems are arbitrary, or flawed, and they experience psychological threats, stress and anxiety about such situations (Jost and Hunyady, 2005; Proudfoot and Kay, 2014). System justification can thus have a 'palliative function', in the sense that endorsing a social system allows people to alleviate negative emotional states and reduce emotional distress such as moral outrage, guilt, frustration and uncertainty (Wakslak et al., 2007). Preserving the status quo means that people maintain what is familiar and reject the uncertain prospect of social change (Jost and Hunyady, 2005). 'People engage in system justification in an attempt to cope with circumstances that they cannot change' (Jost and Hunyady, 2003, p. 148). Management scholars may therefore be cynical and aware of alternative knowledge but nonetheless justify and perpetuate existing power relations in the business school (Contu, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

Valuation

Lastly, wilful ignorance may be driven by a need for personal *valuation* that is distinct from merely justifying the established system and obeying its premises while cynically distancing from it. The philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2015) argued that we are no longer simply 'obedience subjects' but instead have turned into 'achievement subjects'. Achievement subjects do not feel subjugated by the system and forced to obey. Rather, they feel a sense of absolute freedom in a world where it is allegedly possible to achieve anything they desire. The subject then turns into a project to be optimized and wilfully ignores anything that does not contribute to showing achievements and entrepreneurial spirit for the sake of a positive valuation. While teaching ability does play a role in hiring especially for early-career scholars entering temporary teaching-focussed roles the highest valuation potential in most business schools still lies in research achievements. Publications in highly ranked journals, grant income and citation metrics continue to dominate promotion and tenure decisions, while quality teaching and curriculum innovation often receive comparatively marginal attention (Lund Dean et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020). This disproportionate emphasis on research does not mean that teaching excellence is irrelevant, but it can disincentivize management educators from investing time and energy in developing and critically reflecting on their teaching content.

Harland and Wald (2018) capture this dynamic well with a concept that they aptly call '*vanilla teaching*'. Vanilla teaching is competent, safe and compliant, but deliberately unambitious once a threshold of acceptability has been reached. Participants in their study emphasize that teaching quality only needed to be good enough to satisfy evaluation requirements, after which further pedagogical development was seen as irrational given the higher career returns associated with research productivity. Importantly, this orientation was not experienced as external coercion, but as a self-management strategy in a system where publications, grants, and research visibility were publicly celebrated and linked to promotion, while innovative or critical teaching received little institutional recognition. *Vanilla teaching* is an example of wilful ignorance whereby educators knowingly forego deeper engagement with complex or disruptive knowledge when it does not contribute to personal valuation within the academic achievement regime. The continued teaching of efficiency-oriented solutions can be understood as a paradigmatic form of vanilla teaching: conceptually familiar, institutionally safe, and unlikely to jeopardize evaluations, while more disruptive critiques such as rebound effects or sufficiency remain marginalized and not appropriately valued by the educational system.

Taken together, this diagnosis on ignorance raises a critical question: if the persistence of efficiency in business school academia is sustained not only by institutional arrangements but also by ignorance dynamics that marginalize alternative organizing principles, how might these dynamics be productively unsettled? Addressing this question requires moving beyond explanation toward intervention and prescription (Wickert, 2024). In the following section, we therefore turn to the literature on critical and progressive performativity to explore how management education might become a site for incrementally challenging efficiency

principles and opening spaces for alternatives such as sufficiency.

How Progressive Performativity Can Help Steer Management Education Toward Sufficiency

We have shown above that efficiency principles remain pervasive in business school academia and are widely taught particularly when it comes to the 'positive' potentials of eco-efficiency in the sustainability debate, and the opportunities associated with digitalization and AI at the workplace. Further we have argued that the notion of ignorance offers an alternative perspective for understanding why this persistence of efficiency is so deeply ingrained in our thinking. Yet, potential alternatives do exist, and insights from Critical Management Studies (CMS) provide conceptual resources for imagining how to move beyond teaching efficiency and suggesting alternative or at least complementary organizing principles.

Specifically, principles of 'critical performativity' (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009) and 'progressive performativity' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015) as well as their further elaborations in the CMS literature (see e.g., Cabantous et al., 2015; Contu, 2020; Edwards, 2017; Parker and Parker, 2017; Schaefer and Wickert, 2016) provide ideas for re-designing and enacting business school education. Inspired by those debates, here we specifically zoom in on the notion of progressive performativity, as it 'involves processes of resignification (i.e. meanings that are open to re-interpretation) that guide managerial behaviour in different and possibly more reflexive directions' (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015, 109). Importantly, this notion reflects an optimistic stance and assumes that actors are willing and able to work toward a more desirable future, based on their moral capacity (see Watson, 1994), their sufficient degree of empowerment to recognize and react to unfavourable social conditions, and their ability to achieve 'small wins' that may lead to incremental social change (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015, 109). Enacting such changes in education through resignification ultimately falls to us as management educators, who are called upon to embody the transformations we wish to see in our institutions and classrooms, engaging in what Göpel (2016) calls 'radical incremental transformation', a notion which speaks directly to Wickert and Schaefer's (2015, 107) concept of progressive performativity.

More specifically, progressive performativity argues for inducing 'incremental, rather than radical, changes' in behaviour, based on two interrelated process that are particularly well suited for application in educational contexts: micro-engagement and reflexive conscientization. The first principle, micro-engagement, focuses on identifying like-minded others, such as progressively oriented students, and supporting their role as change agents who critically debate more desirable realities. Progressive performativity thus assumes that a target group, in our case students as well as educators working toward a collective goal, exercises agency as a necessary step toward thinking about more desirable perspectives.

Second, with a view to the critical thinking processes to be triggered, Wickert and Schaefer's notion of 'reflexive conscientization'—originating from the work of Brazilian pedagogue and educational theorist Paulo Freire and his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)—refers to "a dialogic process (…) that aims to gradually raise the critical consciousness of actors in order to provide spaces in which new practices can be 'talked into existence' through the performative effects of language" (p. 107). Reflexive conscientization, we argue, speaks directly to the problems of ignorance discussed above and provides a conceptual anchor for engaging with the current state of being (i.e., efficiency and its harmful consequences) and for contemplating potentially more desirable alternatives (i.e., sufficiency).

For stimulating progressive performativity, it is essential to acknowledge that alternative futures are not static endpoints but dynamic and political processes (Contu, 2020; Parker and Parker, 2017). As Dahlman et al. (2022, emphasis added) argue, alternativity is an ongoing struggle that 'implies a shift away from (the study of) alternative principles and practices and toward the process of negotiating the tensions of maintaining and breaking patterns'. For us this means that rather than channelling all our energy into designing radical new business school curricula for instance by developing entirely new programmes that, as we know, typically face strong institutional resistance and political contestation, it might be more effective to focus on creating spaces and everyday practices that chip away at the justificatory and valuation logics of ignorance, gradually embedding alternative organising principles and making a creative 'incremental radical difference' each day (Schaefer, 2023). For instance, this can happen by adding new assignments, readings and case studies to an existing course, paired with elements of counterfactual reasoning, stimulation of 'what if' questions and alternative scenarios to not overwhelm students with too radical ideas, but gradually trigger their curiosity.

In the business school context, this means unsettling the dominant efficiency logic by exposing its problematic effects and questioning the segmentation ignorance dynamics that sustain it. To enable such critical conversations in which reflexive conscientization can surface, management educators should make a concerted effort to bridge disciplinary divides and synthesize their knowledge. Practically, and inspired by the principle of micro-engagement of progressive performativity, this could be achieved by incorporating literature from

adjacent fields such as resource economics into management courses, inviting guest speakers from other faculties, and designing courses or programmes co-taught with faculty from different disciplines. These cross-disciplinary encounters prompt management educators to question their individual teaching frames and develop critical thinking capacities. For example, a diverse group consisting of management educators, resource economists, and engineers could engage in discussions about their respective conceptions of efficiency, its aims, and its effects. Confronting diverse knowledge in this way can stimulate 'productive dissonance' (Schaefer, 2023) and 'creative synthesis' (Harvey, 2014), which means finding common ground across diverse knowledge domains and then integrating disciplinary knowledge dialectically, using the outcome as a guiding framework for producing novel teaching content in one's discipline.

An important aim of reflexive conscientization would then be 'to engender spaces of intellectual openness and inquiry, demonstrating how certain management practices we take for granted are neither natural nor inevitable' (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016, 269). Ideally, this encourages interdisciplinary management educators to transcend 'either/or' in favour of 'both/and' templates (Smith and Lewis, 2011). We do acknowledge that cross-disciplinary collaboration can be logistically challenging and does not guarantee more reflexive thinking about efficiency. However, if we allow pragmatic constraints alone to determine what is possible, we continually reinforce the very norms and structures that sustain efficiency as an unquestioned principle. Even if interdisciplinary initiatives cannot be scaled or sustained immediately, creating micro-engagement in the form of small experimental spaces for cross-disciplinary engagement can signal that alternative ways of progressive thinking are legitimate and possible. These exploratory efforts may not solve entrenched problems overnight, but without them, little is likely to change.

A useful educational practice in this regard suggested by Parker and Parker (2017) is to establish a library of alternative case studies that highlight the complexity and ambiguity of organising differently as a point of departure for critical discussions with students. These cases would ideally be designed to be shared and co-used across disciplinary boundaries. By confronting students and educators with alternative ways of organizing such cases can generate the kind of cognitive tension that drives productive dissonance and provide fertile ground for creative synthesis. Enabling productive dissonance and creative synthesis through such alternative interdisciplinary cases can help overcome ignorance and raise awareness about the unintended consequences of efficiency (as well as its potential benefits). Management educators may then resist the tendencies of becoming 'Brotgelehrte'[3], actors who cling to their knowledge and career paths, and instead develop a 'philosophical mind' that seeks to expand their skills and knowledge (Alvesson, Einola and Schaefer, 2022) and, as progressive performativity principles would purport, a 'reflexive understanding and full assumption of the responsibility involved in academic praxis' (Contu, 2020).

While micro-engagement and reflexive conscientization provide anchor points to discuss harmful consequences of efficiency and understand its persistence, progressive performativity explicitly aims to devise potential alternatives to the status quo. Rather, it requires actively recombining new perspectives into alternative interpretive schemes that reorder priorities, highlight previously neglected relationships, and open new pathways for practice. Once assumptions about efficiency are surfaced and unsettled through micro-engagement and reflexive conscientization, the same principles can channel thinking about alternatives.

Toward sufficiency as an alternative organizing principle

We argue that the idea of sufficiency is an especially promising overarching guiding principle which can act as a counter pole to the dominance of efficiency in management education. Sufficiency has been discussed extensively by resource economists who share the scepticism that efficiency can truly reduce carbon emissions and other forms of environmental degradation (e.g., Herring, Sorrell and Elliott, 2009; Princen, 2005), and has been discussed with increasing intensity outside of our field in highly-ranked journals such as *Environmental Politics* (e.g., Spengler, 2016), *Ecological Economics* (e.g., Alcott, 2008; Jungell-Michelsson and Heikkurinen, 2022), and *Nature Sustainability* (e.g., O'Neill *et al.*, 2018).

Sufficiency directly challenges the 'more is better' logic underpinning efficiency by asking instead 'how much is enough?' and thus emphasizes restraint and moderation in organized behaviour and invites reflection on what counts as excessive, whose interests are served, and what risks emerge for both present and future stakeholders. It 'begins as a simple idea and, under certain conditions, especially ecological constraint, can lead to major social organizing principles, ones that rival, indeed, compete with cooperation and efficiency' (Princen, 2005, 43). Sufficiency thus means having enough rather than aiming to have more or be faster (Princen, 2005).

[3] *Brotgelehrte* is a German term literally translated as 'bread-fed scholar', used by the German poet Friedrich Schiller (1789) to describe academics who approach their scholarship instrumentally, prioritizing income, status and career security over intellectual curiosity.

Table 1. Pathways for Introducing Sufficiency into Management Education Through Progressive Performativity

Principles	Micro-engagement	Reflexive conscientization
Layer I: Curriculum development	Collaborate with colleagues from other disciplines to design selected modules or sessions that problematize efficiency assumptions. Establish interdisciplinary teaching groups which continually develop content related to sufficiency	Adapt curriculum learning objectives such that they include elements of critical thinking to open the space for reflexive conscientization. Embed reflexive practices across courses where students revisit efficiency-focussed concepts considering critical perspectives, i.e., sufficiency perspectives.
Layer II: Course Design	Include sufficiency-related readings and cases as add-ons to existing efficiency-oriented courses Develop a collection of alternative case studies	Include learning outcomes that invite students to critically reflect on the assumptions, boundaries, and consequences of efficiency. Design courses with spaces for reflection on efficiency and sufficiency
Layer III: In class action	Use case discussion or student projects to explore sufficiency and alternative principles. Invite guest speakers from other faculties or even organizations Let students find examples of the negative effects of efficiency and discuss alternatives	Dialogic classroom discussions on efficiency in cases, textbooks, or other text Counterfactuals 'what if' questions (to stimulate critical reflection. Reflective assignments (e.g., reflection journals, essays) that prompt students to articulate tensions between efficiency and sufficiency and to experiment with alternative interpretive frames.

Conceptually, 'sufficiency is understood as both an end in itself and a means for bringing consumption and production within ecological limits' (Jungell-Michelsson and Heikkurinen, 2022: 1)—considering that ecological footprints vary across contexts between, for example, the Global North and Global South (Sandberg, 2021; Wickert et al., 2024). Sufficiency in this sense requires changes in consumption and production patterns, especially for the high-consuming classes, including, but not limited to, reductions in absolute consumption levels. Researchers have argued that sufficiency principles further require modal shifts (e.g., shifting from one mode of consumption (such as cars) to another (such as bikes) while retaining the same mobility level), product longevity, and sharing practices (e.g., Sandberg, 2021). Regarding production, Jungell-Michelsson and Heikkurinen (2022: 2) suggest that 'sufficiency is manifested in calls for a paradigm shift in business logic and alternative imaginaries to organize human activity in society' that depart from ever-increasing human wants toward meeting human needs, akin to what scholars have been discussing regarding de-growth and non-material-growth-based measures of progress (e.g., happiness, quality, non-material satisfaction).

Bringing sufficiency into management education as an overarching principle means deliberately creating spaces to experiment with sufficiency-based thinking in teaching with the aim to induce incremental, rather than radical change. For example, in sustainability courses, eco-efficiency can be used not just to highlight short-term 'win–win' outcomes but also to prompt students to consider when efficiency gains drive rebound effects and why, where and when sufficiency might provide a more robust guiding frame for managerial and organizational practices. As Princen (2005: 9) posits, 'by asking how much is enough and how much is too much, one necessarily asks what is excessive, what the risks are, not just risks in the short term and for immediate beneficiaries, but risks to those unlikely to realize the benefits, both for the immediate and the long term'. In strategy or HR courses, discussions of AI and digitalization can be reframed to show how efficiency-driven applications may boost short-term productivity yet generate longer-term risks such as technostress, surveillance, or declining job quality and to explore whether sufficiency-oriented approaches might offer better working conditions and satisfaction. More broadly, sufficiency could inform business school curricula to prompt students to evaluate cases not only for profitability or growth potential but also for their alignment with sufficiency thinking, which may positively affect ecological and social boundaries, equity, and well-being. To make these ideas more concrete, Table 1 illustrates how principles of progressive performativity can be applied across different layers of business school teaching, namely curriculum development, course design, and concrete in-class teaching practices and outlines illustrative examples.

While sufficiency offers positive potential, some precautions are warranted that should also become part of classroom discussions. First, sufficiency-oriented approaches face competitive pressures. Firms that voluntarily restrain efficiency-driven growth may be penalized in the short term by financial markets, shareholders, or consumers, particularly in highly competitive and financialized environments. Acknowledging these pressures underscores that sufficiency cannot be treated as an individual firm-level choice alone, but depends on

supportive institutional and regulatory conditions. Moreover, like any other management concept, sufficiency is a normatively infused and politically charged organizing principle based on the notion that we should consume less. As such, it could be abused to justify inequality in access to resources or undemocratic decisions about resource use (Alcott, 2008; Princen, 2005). To prevent sufficiency from becoming a new taken-for-granted orthodoxy, its teaching should itself be accompanied by processes of reflexive conscientization. This means that students should be encouraged to surface and interrogate its assumptions, boundaries and potential blind spots, asking who benefits, who bears the costs, and under what conditions it remains appropriate. In other words, sufficiency teaching needs to be embedded in broader conversations about power, equity and justice, and explicitly framed as primarily targeting overconsumption in affluent Global North contexts rather than imposing new burdens on already resource-constrained groups.

Pedagogically, this means approaching the move from efficiency to sufficiency not as a linear replacement of one principle with another, but as an iterative cycle in which new ideas such as sufficiency are continually exposed to existing ones such as efficiency. This ongoing interplay keeps critical inquiry alive, preventing any single principle from becoming unquestionable while allowing students to experiment with and adapt alternative logics. Building on the steps of progressive performativity we outlined above to counteract ignorance dynamics and for positioning sufficiency as a central, yet always contestable principle can open space for questioning the dominance of efficiency and for exploring more balanced principles. We acknowledge that this will be challenging given efficiency's entrenched status in business school curricula, yet such constraints must not be a reason to maintain teaching practices that reinforce unsustainable economic and organizational logics. The ecological and social costs of continuing along the current trajectory far outweigh the difficulties of rethinking priorities. As Princen (2005, 11) noted, "it will be very difficult to define sufficiency and build the concept of sufficiency into…theory and practice. But…it will prove far more difficult to continue to operate as if there is no such thing as enough." Tables 1 provides additional illustrative examples of how progressive performativity can be leveraged to rethink pervasive efficiency principles and to envisage sufficiency as a more desirable basis for business school academia and teaching practice.

Conclusion

We have explored why efficiency, despite its well-documented problematic consequences, continues to dominate as a pervasive principle in business school academia, shaping undesirable social realities and hindering the emergence of more sustainable ones. To illustrate our points, we analysed rebound effects in eco-efficiency and digitalization/AI, and we showed how structural and individual forms of ignorance help shield these dynamics from scrutiny. To move beyond this impasse, we have mobilized principles of progressive performativity, namely micro-engagement aimed for incremental change "in the classroom" paired with reflexive conscientization to raise critical awareness, to provide a conceptual anchor for thinking about sufficiency as an alternative organizing principle that can counterbalance efficiency's dominance.

Overall, we aim to contribute to using progressive performativity not only to diagnose how problematic practices and behaviours persist but also to imagine and enact more desirable futures. Doing so helps answer the call to explore both the mechanisms that stabilize entrenched realities and the potential of alternatives such as sufficiency are forces for emancipatory change. With our interdisciplinary focus on rebound effects related to social and ecological sustainability, we help advance a better understanding of how management scholarship can assume a proactive stance (Callahan and Elliott, 2020; Contu, 2020; Grosser, 2021) in realising more desirable management theories and assumptions particularly related to questions of de-growth, humanism, and circularity, as well as in potentially de-realizing problematic ones such as the growth primacy, or treating humans as resources. While sufficiency is no panacea, engaging with it invites critical reflection on the limits of efficiency as a universal principle and helps equip future managers to recognize its shortcomings. Continuing to operate as if there is no such thing as 'enough' will only deepen the problems management scholarship seeks to address; integrating sufficiency into business school academia can help redirect its performativity toward more socially and ecologically desirable futures.

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Stephan M. Schaefer is an Associate Professor at Lund School of Economics and Management in Sweden. His research interest focuses mainly on creativity, craft, ignorance and digitalization and has been published in *Human Relations, Organization Studies, Work Employment & Society, Organization and Journal of Management Inquiry*. His recent book *"Organizing Creativity"* was published 2023 by *Oxford University Press*.

Christopher Wickert is a Full Professor in Corporate Social Responsibility at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Director of the VU Business & Society Knowledge Hub. His research examines CSR and the broader relationship between business and society. Christopher's research has published in *Academy of Management Discoveries, Business & Society, Human Relations, International Journal of Management Reviews, Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Organization & Environment, and Organization Studies*. He has been General Editor of the Journal of Management Studies from 2023 to 2025.